

## Only Boys Allowed

It is well known that boys lag behind girls when it comes to reading. Rob Jones, Reading Champion, has been working to address this “literacy gap” and spark reluctant readers into action. His innovative Only Boys Allowed reading project in the primary schools of the South Wales valleys is about to enter its third year.

The Only Boys Allowed (OBA) reading project was developed in response to consistent evidence that young boys have fallen behind girls with their interest in reading. OBA aims to address this discrepancy by developing the reading interest of boys aged eight to 11 years, and over 650 children at 14 Rhondda and Taff Ely schools have participated so far. The schools involved for 2010/11 are Llwynypia, Cwmclydach, Williamstown, Penygraig, Ysgol yr Eos and Tonyrefail, and in the early part of the academic year, the aim is to build the momentum with a new intake of children. The scheme is aimed at helping boys with basic skills to enforce their abilities, but I have also welcomed any poorer readers who have come on board.

OBA sessions take place with Year 4, 5, and 6 boys in the participating schools once a week. I aim to have no more than eight to 10 boys in a group, so that they can be given individual attention. The boys take out books (up to five a week) and then they have to write about their findings and discuss their reading experiences at the following session. The response of a “mint” or “beast” (the new youthful terms for “good”) is not acceptable; the boys must explain why their text has either enthused or annoyed them. I offer aid to bolster spelling, grammar and comprehension where necessary to compliment educational goals.



**Ysgol Yr Eos OBA**



**Williamstown OBA**



**Llwynypia OBA**



New books are provided to the children on every visit and I have also written a series of well-received poems and stories, which emphasise the importance of reading and the wider world of education and the adult years that lay ahead. These literary efforts also contain moral and ethical messages that point the lads to the path of prosperity rather than the road to ruin.

Incentives have been really effective in the OBA project. The lads have been rewarded for good work with prizes such as free admission to watch wrestling, football and rugby matches plus theme park passes and theatre tickets. Other rewards include books and magazines, meal vouchers, footballs and rugby balls, key rings and a host of other goodies. They have also had visits from exciting guest speakers and male role models including a poet, storyteller, soldier, fireman and policeman. I often act as a friendly ear for the kids who may not have a male role model in their lives. A number of the lads appreciate having someone to talk to because there may not even be a male member of staff in their school.

The success stories of the OBA project have been phenomenal. The boys have benefited from individual focus and the reading materials used in the sessions have been geared towards their interests, whether it is sport, animals, cars, dinosaurs, bikes, or history. The usual male sway towards factual text has been replaced by a voracious appetite for fictional tales and certain publishers, such as Barrington Stoke and Rising Stars, have been major hits. Book series' like Mr Gum and Beast Quest have been very popular, and great authors such as Roald Dahl and Michael Morpurgo still shine through as magnets to young males. Most importantly, many of the boys now realise that reading can be entertaining, enjoyable and educational, and have developed an alternative pastime to the world of computer games!

Of course, all this fantastic activity needs to be funded. Through various channels and with a lot of persistence almost £6,000 has been raised for the scheme. This has involved a lot of work outside school hours, but more money for prizes and resources is still needed to maintain the winning OBA ethos.

Only Boys Allowed has mushroomed and there has been a knock-on effect in several schools, as children outside the OBA groups also want to participate. Younger lads have also got the reading bug, another group entitled Guys and Gals Allowed has sprung up and there is also an Only Girls Allowed group in one school and girls from other schools are demanding a similar group of their own. I am always assessing Only Boys Allowed and the quest to involve more adult males in this exercise is one area I wish to develop. However, it is a case of "another year another challenge" as I fight to extend the life of Only Boys Allowed beyond July 2011. If this can be achieved then OBA can move onwards and upwards, and hopefully the overall literacy levels of the lads will continue to thrive.

**If anyone wishes to help with Only Boys Allowed or Guys and Gals Allowed contact Rob at Williamstown Primary School, Arthur Street, Williamstown CF40 1NZ, or on [robjones901@hotmail.com](mailto:robjones901@hotmail.com).**