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Fremont Preschoolers are Deputized to Become Readers

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Thirty Fremont preschoolers at Glankler School got a head start in global learning skills last Thursday afternoon via a folk tale from Afghanistan and a visit from a member of Fremont's Police department.

The students enjoyed the story, but most wanted to talk about investigating Officer Michael Gebhardt's police cruiser.

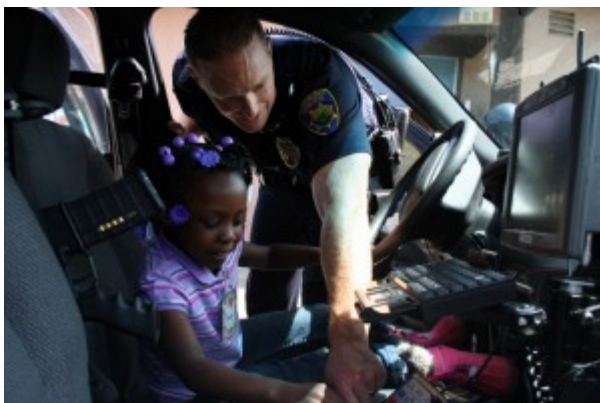


"I liked sitting in the back. It was a hard seat," said Gursharar, while snacking on a - bagel with a cream cheese and grape jam.

The afternoon was courtesy of [Hoopoe Books](#) Share Literacy Program, a non-profit that works with schools to encourage reading skills in students using a tradition from Afghanistan called [teaching stories](#).

Earlier half of the students listened with rapt attention as teacher Joumana Mattar read *The Clever Boy and the Terrible Dangerous Animal* by Idries Shah. Next door Brenda Bethancourt read the Spanish version of the book to the those in the bilingual class.

The story is about a boy in Afghanistan who discovers that the terrible, dangerous animal that is feared by villagers is nothing more than a gigantic watermelon. The point of the story is to encourage children to be inquisitive and not be afraid of things that may be new to them.



While reading the story Mattar paused to ask the children questions.

"Have you ever been afraid of something you've never seen before?" she said.

One girl said she'd never seen a snake, a boy said he'd never seen a dragon.

"Have you ever been attacked by a watermelon?" said Mattar.

"Nooooooooooooooooo!" chimed the class in unison.

Two weeks prior to the event the teachers went through professional literacy strategy training to learn how to read and teach the story more effectively.

"We get the kids to know the story through questions that are factual, and others than ask them to drawn on reason and experience. Then we expose them to what an author and an illustrator does," said Beverly Taub, director of preschool programs for Fremont United School District.

The students had pre-event preparation as well. They were treated to a watermelon party where they got to see one cut up and were able to taste it. They were invited to experience the texture of watermelon and count the seeds. Then they were taught how new watermelons can be grown using seeds.

The watermelon party introduced the students to "the terrible, dangerous, animal" the villagers were afraid before they heard the story.

“That made it more real,” said Taub.

This is the second year the pre-school has worked with Hoopoe Books, which is funded by a grant from the Kaiser foundation, but this was the first time it was paired with a visit from a police officer.

“We wanted to make it a more special event and tie reading into what we do in every day life,” said Taub



Gebhardt was present during the read-along and ready to take the stage when both classes were combined in the playroom.

“We’re going to show you a helper of the community,” said one of the assistants introducing Gebhardt.” He is going to become your friend too.”

Gebhardt had not received any training but quickly got into the spirit of things.

“Why is reading important?” he asked the class. “One of the reasons it’s good is you have to read signs. Like the big red sign that says...”

“Stop!” the students shouted.

He asked the students to think about what happens when they are riding in a car with a grown up and what they do when they see signs. Then he broke it down further to colored signal lights.

“What do they do when they see a yellow light?”

“Slow down,” shouted a boy.

Gebhardt appeared very pleased by that answer.

At the end he asked, “Who wants to be a police officer?”

Half of the hands in the room shot up high.



“If you want to be a police officer you have to know how to read and write. We spend a lot of time reading and writing things down,” he said.

Each child was given a copy of the book paired with an audio CD of the story. Then Gebhardt and the students went outside to explore his car. The students took turns flashing the lights and turning on different sirens. Some climbed into the back seat and peered through the bars like suspects.

As the grand finale Gebhardt gave each child a police badge sticker and a hi-five.