Keystone Prepares for 2012 Conference after Challenging but Successful 2011 Event

by Dale Harper

As the Keystone State Reading Association (KSRA) in Pennsylvania prepares for its 2012 Annual Conference entitled “Read and Shine” to be held in the charming Champion area in the breathtaking Laurel Highlands region outside of Pittsburgh this fall, members look back with fondness and triumph on the bevy of barricades that mounted against them in the autumn of 2011.

On October 27 to 29, 2011, KSRA hosted a successful 44th Annual Reading Conference entitled “Literacy: Share the Passion” in the quaint Pennsylvania Dutch region of Lancaster, PA. After two years of preparation and challenging hurdles, a program of some of the best and most knowledgeable speakers from all over the country was brought together for the three-day conference.

Most presenters spoke about the two hottest topics: Core Standards and RTI. Publishers and vendors came through with incredible support. Visiting authors included two Caldecott winners as well as other award winners. Spirits were high, and President-elect and 2011 Conference Chairperson Dale Harper, Poster Artist Joan Lengel, Editor Angee Cobb, Photographer Christine Kurman, Logo Creator Hank Grasso and the rest of the conference committee worked around the clock to make it a conference to remember.

However, financial, political, and environmental obstacles arose that made success seemingly impossible.

Finances Fizzle
During the 2010-2011 school year, severe budget reductions continued. Stimulus funds were gone. School districts had their budgets cut to bare bones, and districts had to eliminate teaching positions. Many districts told their staff that no school staff would be able to go anywhere, even if they were presenting at a conference.

Politicians Tighten Belts
Professional development was the next hurdle to overcome. Some months before the conference, the Governor of Pennsylvania announced that all five hundred school districts in the state did not have to offer professional development to their staff for two years. This was a tremendous blow to the conference, especially since the conference was offering presenters that were on the national committees for Core Standards and other speakers that are some of the best in their fields. We were concerned that many educators in the state would not be able to experience this level of professional development, even though Core Standards would soon be implemented.

Old Man Winter Arrives Early
On the last day of the conference (Saturday), there were eleven inches of snow with roads closed, trees down, and an incredible amount of accidents. An October snowfall is very rare for this area of Pennsylvania. It was treacherous. Therefore, the teachers that were coming only Saturday—because their school districts would not get substitutes for them during the week—did not come.

Against the Odds
Anything that could go wrong, did! However, the quality and quantity of presenters was so incredibly high that districts sent their staff anyway, and some people paid their own way just so they could experience and learn from these great people.

Irene Fountas, who has it all—research, materials, assessment, and intervention—lived up to her phenomenal reputation. Roger Farr connected his strategies with the Core Standards, and Richard Gentry also spoke about his three big ideas to promote reading success and meet Core Standards. Karen Wixson explained RTI and even sent her PowerPoint for our website. Ellin Keene spoke of New Horizons in Comprehension, and Maureen McLaughlin, IRA’s Vice President, talked about Content Area Literacy. In addition, Victoria Risko, 2011 IRA...
President and national committee member for Core Standards, presented on Comprehension and Core Standards. There were many others that wowed the crowd with their expertise. Their knowledge and energy made their presentations most worthwhile and unforgettable.

In addition to our presentations, we had two lovely Authors’ Teas. Participants had hot beverages and met with the authors as they took turns sharing a little about themselves and their work. Author signatures on the logo mugs made them a collectable favorite to take home. Our author and illustrator line-up was equally as impressive. Jerry Pinkney, 2010 Caldecott winner, received a standing ovation as he shared his talents and treasures. Paul O. Zelinsky, winner of multiple Caldecott Awards, was there as well with his new book. Other award-winning authors included Ralph Masiello, Peter Catalanotto, Kevin O’Malley, Floyd Cooper, Marisa Paolicelli, Sneed B. Collard III, J. Patrick Lewis, and many more.

Our goal was achieved with a “win-win” for everyone! We met the IRA and KSRA goals with the best program we could create and gave it to the largest number of people possible. We wanted to let the sponsors know how much they are appreciated especially during this financial crunch. We gave them as much exposure as possible to thank them for their sponsorship of some the most knowledgeable presenters in the field. Even in these challenging times, everyone benefits if we work together, remain active, participate, and share the passion of promoting literacy.

Dale Harper was the Keystone State Reading Association President-elect and 2011 Conference Chairperson, dgharper1@verizon.net.

IDCC Symposium Panel Members, from left to right: Mr. Saki Malik, Mr. Shaymal Kumar Ghosh, Mr. Mark Nieker, Dr. Luis Crouch, and Mr. Haryo Winarso

The International Development Coordinating Committee Symposium was one of the internationally focused highlights of IRA’s Convention. Dr. Luis Crouch, Education Economist with the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), presented on “Literacy and GPE partnership: the entry point for elusive ‘quality’ goals?” His presentation included key statistics in regards to literacy and education gaps around the world and how partnerships can make a difference. Mark Nieker, President and Chief Executive Officer of the Pearson Foundation, presented on “Innovation and Literacy” with a focus on bringing technological and educational expertise to deliver essential learning materials and professional development around the world. The other panelists were Mr. Shaymal Kumar Ghosh, Director General of Primary Education, Government of Bangladesh and Mr. Haryo Winarso, Attaché for National Education Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia (representing the Minister of Education). Mr. Ghosh presented the Global Literacy Professional Development Network Project (www.glpdn.net) in Bangladesh and its importance in enhancing literacy instruction in Bangladesh. Mr. Winarso also brought the appreciation of the Indonesian Government for IRA’s work in professional development in Indonesia. The presentations were followed by a reception and a sneak-peak of the new “Reading Across Continents” (www.readingacrosscontinents.com/exchange/) documentary which will be released on September 8, 2012 (International Literacy Day).
The 2012 meeting of the International Development in Eurasia Committee (IDEAC) was held in February in Almaty, Kazakhstan. The Committee wanted to use this chance to attract more people from the region as well as to make IRA more visible for educators and other interested parties.

Therefore, the traditional committee meeting was preceded by two events: a leadership workshop led by Sakil Malik, IRA Global Operations Unit Director, and a Reading Conference. These two events built a very productive base for further discussion of regional issues.

Leaders from several Eurasian countries participated in the leadership workshop. Mr. Malik gave an overview of key events in IRA and demonstrated use of the IRA website to learn more about some of the projects and activities. Participants learned about online networking tools, task forces, the IRA President’s blog (Presidential Corner), Teacher’s Inquiry, and Eurasia’s online journal in Russian on the IRA website. Some of the participants said, “Now I see what IRA is all about.” Others commented, “Oh, now I know how to do my leadership work, I know what you expect from me.”

The one-day Reading Conference theme was “Language & Literacy: New Ideas & Insights in Learning and Teaching,” aimed to attract people from different universities, organizations, and the Ministry. The participants included many teachers from Kazakhstan, Georgia, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Representatives from USAID and the Aga Khan Foundation, which has Reading Programs in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, were able to take part in the Conference. Ministry representatives were also invited.

The keynote speech “New Ideas and Insights in Text Comprehension” was presented by Past-President Dr. Victoria Risko. Many participants commented that this presentation deepened their understanding of how to work with text, which demands more detailed understanding, detailed preparation, and attention to many other factors which can be missed when selecting texts or in further work with the text.

At one of the sessions, there was also a good overview of children’s literature presented by Dr. William Teale, IRA Board Member. Prior to the start of the conference, Teale and Risko visited a school in Almaty, Kazakhstan, and were also able to conduct lessons which showed the possibility of pupils’ involvement in reading, having only one book for the class. These lessons showed that the book is a universal method of communication even if the teacher is speaking in a foreign language. Teachers could create an atmosphere during the lessons which allowed them to work with every pupil, despite their level of English knowledge. All pupils could be heard and successful.

Katya Jurina, an English teacher in Karagandy, Kazakhstan, and contributing writer to this article, came to this conclusion after the conference: “From my point of view, the most important idea which I heard during the conference was that a student will be interested when he realizes that it can be used in his everyday life.”

Victoria Risko and Sapargul Mirseitova with attendees at the conference in Kazakhstan

Katya Jurina is a Kazakh English teacher who attended the conference.