



THE CITIZEN TELEGRAM

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Rifle's Paper for More than 100 Years

"Gus the Bus" makes his stops

Hands out books as part of Re-2's early childhood literacy outreach

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There used to be the Reading Roadster. Now, kids have "Gus the Bus."

"Gus" is a renovated school bus that's part of School District Re-2's early childhood literacy program.

Yendi Nuez, of Rifle, brought her 3-year-old daughter, Eden, to get some books from Gus.

"This should be a lot of fun. It will get my daughter involved with other kids and help her learn how to share," Nuez said.

Parents and children can check out a backpack of three to four books, plus another with educational toys. One or two Spanish books are also in the backpacks. Gus will return to those spots the following Tuesday to pick up the books and toys so they can be redistributed on Thursday.

Jessa Ortega, also from Rifle, and her two daughters, 4-year-old Nieve and 3-year-old Alondra, were there, too.

"This is a good thing for the community," she said. "We plan on being here every

week."

"Gus is designed to reach our 3- to 5-year olds who may not have access to preschool or other academic outlets," said Julie Knowles, director of assessment and special programs. "It's about developing relationships with our families, helping them feel comfortable with the school system and providing resources."

Gus has been in the works for more than two years, and should be a welcome site for parents who have trouble getting their kids into the limited amount of daycare positions available in the Rifle area.

"We understand that there is a child care crisis," said Theresa Hamilton, director of district-wide services. "And we know there are many families in our school district that don't have access to these types of resources, or even transportation during the day. We're trying to reach out to families and children in our district."

The bus makes two stops every Thursday in Rifle: at Cottonwood Park at 9 a.m. and Davidson Park, next to Highland Elementary School, at 10:30 a.m. The district hopes to serve around 40 families each week.

Cindy Gray, Child Find coordinator with Re-2, and Alma

Puga, an early childhood outreach paraprofessional, are on the bus each week to hand out books.

"We know there's some families that could really benefit from 'Gus the Bus,'" Gray said. "Reading opens up a child's mind. If they're exposed to reading at an early age, it'll help them once they get to kindergarten. Ultimately, we want them to be readers throughout their lives."

"This will open a lot of doors for families," Puga said. "Dads, moms and kids, we want to expand their knowledge about the community resources that are available to them. Hopefully, we can make it easier for parents to have an opportunity to talk with us and get more involved with reading to their child."

Gus has been made possible by a partnership with the Aspen Community Foundation and the Raising a Reader literacy program. The foundation provided a \$27,000 grant to be used for a bi-lingual paraprofessional and for books and supplies. Raising a Reader helped with all the backpacks and training for parents. The Raising a Reader program is in all schools to help children with reading, Hamilton said.

Gus is there to help kids just



BARON ZAHURANEC/Citizen Telegram

Four-year old Nieve Ortega knows what backpack full of educational toys she wants while on "Gus the Bus." Alma Puga, an early childhood outreach paraprofessional for School District Re-2, reaches for the bag.

as much as the parents.

"Sometimes parents don't know what they need to have to be successful in reading with their kids," said Julie Walpole, instruction coach at Highland Elementary. "We want to get more parents involved with reading to their kids."

This is the fifth year backpack programs have been sponsored by Raising a Reader and have coverage of 1,500 kids from Aspen all the way to Parachute, said Judy Green, program assistant for Raising a

Reader.

"We're trying to expand to all daycare and preschool situations and would like to be in every center or home that has preschoolers," said Green, a former elementary teacher. "The kids drive the program because they love the books. As a teacher, this is exactly what I wanted for every kid. It gives them a head start."

Interested families can contact Gray at 665-6802 to sign up for the Gus the Bus reading program.