



The Claren Group

LLC

Alphapalooza! How One Wild Reading Contest Is Turning Elementary Kids Into Lifelong Book Lovers

Let's be honest. Getting kids to *want* to read — not because they have to, not because it's Tuesday and the worksheet says so — is the holy grail of elementary education. Every librarian, teacher, and exhausted parent has heard the advice: "Just find the *right* book." The right book is everything. But here's what nobody puts on the motivational poster: sometimes the right book needs a little backup. Sometimes it needs a party.

And maybe some Skittles.

In eighteen years as a media specialist, I have learned many things. I've learned students need to go to the bathroom before they sit down for a story. I've learned that staplers will always jam at the worst possible moment. Perhaps most importantly, I've learned that even the most reserved, quietly-sitting-in-the-corner student will absolutely, 100%, move mountains for a piece of candy. Competition helps too, even when it's just a kid racing against their own previous best. Put those two forces together and you have something powerful.

You have the foundation for Alphapalooza.

What on Earth Is Alphapalooza?

Picture this: it's just after Labor Day. Summer is over, the new backpacks still smell like rubber and ambition, and your media center is about to become the most exciting place in the school. That's when we launch Alphapalooza — our signature reading challenge for kindergarten through second grade students.

The premise is beautifully simple and delightfully maddening: **read 26 books in 6 weeks, one for every letter of the alphabet.**

Each student gets a pre-printed reading log listing A through Z. For every book they read, they write down the title, the author, and the date — and check off the letter it starts with. Sounds straightforward, right? Mostly it is, except for those tricky outliers like X and Q, where we give a little grace. Nobody needs to track down *Xander's Xylophone Xperience* just to prove they love reading.

We also adjust the challenge by grade level, because one-size-fits-all is fine for hats and terrible for literacy programs. Kindergartners and first graders stick to picture books, and they're allowed to read aloud with a mentor — a parent, a teacher, a classroom aide, an older sibling who owes them a favor. Second graders get the same challenge but with a twist: at least five of their 26 books need to be at their independent reading level. A little stretch, a little accountability, a whole lot of growth.

Here's the rule that makes everyone slightly nervous: **all 26 letters have to be completed.** Every single one. Twenty-four is not the goal. Twenty-five is not a win. It's 26 or bust, and we mean it.

The Secret Sauce: The Party

You may be wondering what motivates a seven-year-old to track down a book that starts with the letter U when they could be watching YouTube. The answer, dear reader, is the party.

Every student who completes the challenge gets invited to a celebration, and we go all out. We've hosted dance parties with playlists that would make a DJ jealous. We've set up ice cream sundae bars where toppings were basically limited only by our own self-control. We've done movie themes complete with popcorn, craft stations where kids made bookmarks and mini-masterpieces, and more. The party changes every year,

which keeps the excitement fresh and gives returning students something new to look forward to.

The key is the *anticipation*. From the moment we kick off Alphapalooza, students know what's waiting at the end of the road — and that knowledge is motivating in a way that even the most beautifully written reading log cannot replicate on its own.

The Frenzy Is Real (and It's Glorious)

Here's what nobody tells you when you design a reading contest: the energy it creates takes on a life of its own.

The media center becomes a hive of delightful chaos. Students are scanning shelves with the focus of little detectives. "Do we have anything that starts with V?" "Is *Zany Zoo* a real book?" Kids who previously wandered in looking vaguely confused suddenly have a *mission*. They know what they're looking for, and they want it now.

The parents get involved too. Before school, after school, hovering near the book drop, they're asking questions, helping their kids strategize, making sure their student is not going to be the one who misses out on the big event. FOMO is a powerful force at any age, and Alphapalooza has a way of making reading feel like the coolest club in school — because for six weeks, it genuinely is.

The Kick-Off: Make It a Moment

None of this magic happens without a proper launch. We treat the Alphapalooza kick-off like an event, because it is one. During our fixed library time, we share books we love — books that excite us, books that made us laugh, books that surprised us. We bring the energy of a book carnival to that first session, because how you introduce something sets the tone for everything that follows.

When kids see the adults in their lives genuinely lit up about books, something shifts. Reading stops being a chore and starts being a thing that cool people do. Suddenly, that 26-book mountain doesn't look so impossible — it looks like an adventure.

Why It Works

Alphapalooza works because it meets kids where they are. It's structured without being rigid. It's challenging without being discouraging. It celebrates completion, not perfection. It creates community around books — in the media center, in classrooms, at kitchen tables at 8pm when a kid is desperately searching for something that starts with J.

Most importantly, it plants a seed. Not every child who completes Alphapalooza will grow up to be a voracious reader by next Tuesday. But they'll remember the year they read 26 books. They'll remember the party. They'll remember that books took them somewhere exciting — and that the library was the place where it all began.

That spark? That's what we're here for.

Have questions about setting up Alphapalooza at your school or want to see our reading log template? Drop a comment below — we'd love to help you bring the palooza to your library!
