

Book a haircut - Barbershop Books is a cut above the rest

Posted by [Alan Van Wormer](#) On 08/22/2018

Chase Deen-Turay, a first grader, reads while barber James Green cuts his hair. Green's shop, Jagr's Barbershop in White Plains, is one of the locations where Barbershop Books has set up a library featuring books that will appeal to young boys.

WHITE PLAINS, Md. - The talk in area barbershops may soon veer from sports, cars and other topics to the latest adventures of Captain Underpants and what some wimpy kid is writing in his diary.

The Title I office of Charles County Public Schools (CCPS) is working with Barbershop Books to bring compact, boy-focused libraries and reading spaces into local barbershops.

Title I staff and parent liaisons attended a U.S. Department of Education Engaging Families forum over the summer and were inspired to increase engagement of fathers and father figures in schools. The DADvisory Council, made up of fathers with children attending Title I schools, was formed and once the group learned of Barbershop Books, plans moved forward. The dads gave Title I staff a list of the barbershops in their communities and visited the shops to pitch the library idea. Seven shops signed up.

Alvin Irby, a former elementary school teacher, founded Barbershop Books in an effort to get more African-American boys reading. The nonprofit focuses on connecting boys between ages 4 to 8 with books in a male-centered space and involving men in a boy's early reading experiences.

Irby visited Charles County Aug. 6 to meet with CCPS staff members, interested barbers, DADvisory members and parent liaisons. Irby set up his first library in a Harlem barbershop in 2014. Now 100 reading spaces are in 30 cities in 20 states.

Getting barbers on board seemed like a natural choice for Irby. "Barbershops hold such significance in black culture," Irby said. "It's one of the intersections of the black community. All socio-economic backgrounds — everybody comes through the barbershop."

The books, provided by Barbershop Books, are changed out every year and titles are culled from the suggestions of children. Parents shouldn't worry about a child getting bored with a book. "It's developmentally appropriate for kids to read the same book over and over," Irby said. "Think of it as a playlist. You have your go-to playlist." Anyone who has read a story to a child knows that most have a "go-to" book, Irby said. The books are high energy and boy-centric with Irby suggesting the barbers read the books too in order to discuss them when it's time for the youngster to hop into his chair.

"It can entice kids to read if you know the story," Irby said. If a child doesn't want to read, Irby said barbers can talk about their favorite books or stories. "Talk to boys about reading," he said. "It's important that boys know a man in their life values reading and thinks they should read."

Title I staff is placing extra titles to the Barbershop Books library for more advanced and older readers. Extra copies of the books are stowed at participating barbershops to allow kids to take it home if they can't put it down.

For children who are too young to read, shop staff can encourage parents to grab a book to share with their children. "Let the adults know, it's never too early to read," Irby said.

Tia Turey of Waldorf takes her sons, Anthoni, a seventh grader at Mattawoman Middle School, and Berry Elementary School first grader Chase, to James Green's Jagr's Barbershop in White Plains. Green attended Irby's presentation and signed up for Barbershop Books. He said his clients are like family, supporting a program to enhance children's education was a natural fit. Parents appreciate it too. "It's a nice option, and a distraction from the cell phones and the games," Turey said. While Chase went for "Lego City: Fight this Fire," Anthoni chose a graphic novel. "Reading makes you smarter," he said.

"It's going to be a great program," said Jennifer Bowling, a parent liaison for CCPS. "There's nothing else like it."