

# Courtney Johnson

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My name is Courtney Johnson, and I have been teaching English for 14 years in Columbus City Schools. Two years ago, I joined the Columbus Area Writing Project. At CAWP, we were a community of readers and writers. I learned so much in that space that I decided to make my classroom that kind of space. It was also at CAWP that a friend recommended Penny Kittle's *Book Love* to me. I am not exaggerating when I say that *Book Love* changed my life and subsequently the lives of my students.

Choice reading has always been a piece of my English classes over the last ten years. In fact, when I started working at my current school, the first thing I did was expand the summer reading list to include almost a limitless list of books. Now, choice reading is not just a piece but a cornerstone of my philosophy of education and my classroom curriculum. One thing I know for sure is that when kids choose their own books, they become readers.

Since last year, I have worked tirelessly to build my classroom library. Many of my students do not have access to books any other way. Our school library hasn't received monies for new books in years. While our public library system is top-notch, many of my students cannot walk from their homes to their neighborhood libraries for fear of violence. Spending money at a bookstore is a virtual impossibility for most of my students' families. It is not an exaggeration when I say my classroom library saves lives. Yes, I spend my own money on books for my classroom. No, I am not a wealthy person. But the reward I get on those dollars spent is greater than any other investment I could make with that money. Those dollars are my mutual fund because I am investing in young people. I am providing windows and mirrors for them, windows and mirrors that many of them didn't know existed within the pages of a book.

I love words, but I don't have appropriate ones to describe what The Book Love Foundation grant has meant to my students and to me. Oprah has a list of feelings for which no words exist to accurately describe them; #693 is "the hope at the sight of teenagers reading." There are no words to describe how that feels, and I get to feel that every day. Thank you, Book Love Foundation, from the bottom of our book-loving hearts.

