For the Love of Reading

If you want to know anything about Greek and Roman mythology, just ask Luke, a fourth grader at Lakeview Elementary School.

“There’s Poseidon, the god of the sea, and Chronos, the god of time,” Luke said. “Percy Jackson is a demigod. That means he’s the son of a god, Poseidon, and a mortal.”

Luke developed his expertise by reading the Percy Jackson series of novels that he found in his class, where hundreds of picture books, young adult novels and non-fiction books line the shelves.

A classroom library stocked with high-interest books in a range of reading levels is the bedrock of The Teachers College Reading and Writing Project, which was launched in kindergarten and first grades in the Mahopac schools in 2019. The workshop-style program was added to second and third grades last year and introduced in the fourth and fifth grades this fall. It is now the reading curriculum for all grades in the three elementary schools.

“It was important to align the reading curriculum in all three elementary schools,” said Michael Tromblee, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum, Instruction and Professional Learning. “Mahopac has made a commitment to the Reading and Writing Project. We’ve brought in a literacy coach to work with teachers, given teachers extra time to learn and purchased hundreds of books for each classroom so all students will have access to books that interest and engage them.”

Lakeview teachers Jeanne Russo and Don Triebel unpacked 26 boxes of books last month to line the shelves in their classroom.

“She students are really excited to read,” Russo said. “We teach them how to pick a book that is at their level. We want them to pick a book they will enjoy.”

Instead of using a textbook that contains passages of books that are chosen to illustrate a literary concept, the children read whole books. That doesn’t mean they don’t get instruction.

Reading time starts with a lesson on a topic such as character development or finding the main idea. Then the students read independently -- 20 minutes a day in class and 20 minutes a day at home. Students write about what they have read and teachers conference with students one-on-one to ensure they understand what they are reading. At the end of each book, there is a comprehension test.
At the heart of it all, however, is the freedom to choose their own books.

“This is basically old school, going back to the way people actually read,” said Triebel, who has taught in Mahopac for 26 years. “The students choose a book they are interested in and read the whole thing. Previously, we had textbooks that included bits and pieces from a book, not the whole book. It’s a different experience. This is about teaching the love of reading.”