

Miami, Florida

Kids: ‘Hooray for punctuation!’

By HANNAH SAMPSON

Pity those poor punctuation marks: the oft-ignored semicolon, the misplaced apostrophe, the overused exclamation point.

On Thursday—a day known to English teachers, copy editors and other grammarians as National Punctuation Day—those beleaguered writing tools finally got some attention.

“You express my strong emotion,” begins a love letter to the exclamation point written by Flanagan High School sophomore Anna Parnham.

In the letter, Anna describes the excitement and happiness that the punctuation mark brings to her life. It ends: “I love you.”

For people who love punctuation, Sept. 24 has been a special day since 2004, when former newspaperman Jeff Rubin created National Punctuation Day. He got the holiday listed in Chase’s Calendar of Events, published by McGraw-Hill.

“It gets bigger and bigger every year,” said Rubin, 59, now a newsletter publisher in California. “I hear from more schools every year. I hear from more business people.”

At Flanagan High in Pembroke Pines, teacher Cindy Gomez had the students in her yearbook class write odes to their favorite punctuation mark in honor of the day. Students delivered with dramatic readings of haiku, love letters, verse and stories.

Commas, colons, periods and question marks hung from the ceiling to remind the students, Gomez said, that “we don’t want to leave anything dangling.”

‘SUBTLE, BUT POTENT’

Kids at the Pembroke Pines high school also performed “punctuation interventions,” picking a punctuation mark-decorated cookie to correct errors in sentences.

Peace Nwagbo, 14, wrote a haiku about the question mark: “A curious shape/with definite inquiry/subtle, but potent.”



Flanagan High School sophomore Anna Parnham holds her love letter. Photo by Charles Trainor Jr., of the Miami Herald staff.

“It was fun,” Peace said about the day’s activities. “I didn’t even know today was Punctuation Day. It’s, like, really cool that we got to do something like this today.”

BAKING CONTEST

For the first time, Rubin has attached a baking contest to the day’s festivities, asking people to send in recipes, samples and photos of baked goods in the shape of a punctuation mark.

English teacher Sandy Melillo baked up what she called “inside outside cookies” for students at Pompano Beach High to reinforce where punctuation goes when used in a quote.

“We’ve been hammering quotation marks,” she said. “Put your punctuation inside the quotation marks.”

She cut up all the words of a sentence and threw in some extra punctuation marks, assigning groups to put the sentence together with correct punctuation. Kids in another class brought in baked goods in different punctuation-related shapes.

’THEIR ... LANGUAGE’

Shezette Blue-Small, curriculum specialist for elementary language arts in Broward, said a day devoted to punctuation was a great idea because kids tend to neglect punctuation when they send text messages.

While it’s fine that kids have their own way of speaking to each other, schools still must make sure students know how to write and punctuate properly, said Karen Spigler, administrative director of language arts and reading for Miami-Dade public schools.

“We haven’t given up on teaching the correct usage as well as recognizing that when they’re talking to each other, they’ve created their own language and their own language system,” Spigler said.

BAD RAP

Kids might actually be policing their own punctuation more as a result of social networking and e-mailing, said Paula Gillespie, director for the Center for Excellence in Writing at Florida International University.

She said they realize that they can be easily misunderstood if they don’t write clearly.

“If you put the comma in the wrong place, you’ve said the wrong thing,” Gillespie said. “And I think they’re much more aware of language usage and maybe even of punctuation.”

Too often, punctuation gets a bad rap, said Elyse Eidman-Aadahl, director of national programs and site development for the National Writing Project.

“The bad rap is that the thing to know about punctuation is whether you’ve done it right or not,” she said.

“As opposed to the thing to know about punctuation is it’s a tool for you to use to communicate with. It’s a great gift of print.”