

Literacy is a National Priority

By Kaye West

Literacy is a national priority.

We are no longer shying away from the fact that illiteracy in this country is a major national problem which influences many other of our social problems. Some estimates indicate that 20% of adults in America are illiterate, and an even larger percentage are *aliterate* (they know how to read, but they don't). Recent studies show that one-third of all incoming university freshmen require remedial reading (with percentages much higher – up to and over 50 per cent in some places).

It is fast becoming recognized that helping to develop literacy is not the responsibility of only teachers, but is everyone's responsibility. After all, parents are children's first (and most important) teachers. And community members can do their part in being active members of the community of learners in their neighborhoods to help our citizens know that reading and writing are as natural and normal as breathing!

The key to developing lifelong readers is ***finding books which people want to read!*** This is where various literacy organizations come in as they help identify excellent literature for people reading at virtually any level and on any topic of interest. But identifying great books is only *half* of the battle! We must broadcast this information widely and get it into the hands of everyone! And we need to be supportive and encouraging to those whose literacy skills are underdeveloped so that they will have the heart to keep practicing and developing this extremely important skill (which becomes more refined with practice through one's entire life).

To reach everyone, we need lots of partners: people who love literacy who will commit to do *something* to help in their families, in their local communities, in their organizations, and in their schools and libraries. What can one person do? Many things. If everyone does *something* positive, then our collective work will have a tremendous impact, just as billions of drops of water can be a mighty power indeed, though one small drop by itself may seem insignificant.

Here are some ideas:

1. Actively read and write yourself, and let others (especially younger people) see you do it. You are *modeling* that literacy is a vital and enjoyable skill.
2. Buy books for special people in your life. ***Notable Books for a Global Society*** and ***Social Justice Literature Award*** are two lists of books which they might like to read or have read to them.
3. Talk about books, what you have learned from them, and how they have influenced your life.

Literacy is a National Priority

By Kaye West

4. Give gift certificates to publications such as *The Dragon Lode* to parents, teachers, and librarians.
5. Tell everyone you know about helpful booklists. Help to make these lists widely known.
6. Read to young children to help them be 1,000-book children *before* they begin school – that is the head start that every child needs.
7. Host gatherings (small informal ones or huge events) to help others know about some of the outstanding books that are available (perhaps share some of the books, invite an author to speak, etc.). Consider using the event as a fund-raiser for purchasing *Dragon Lode* subscriptions or good books for a children's library (many of our nation's school libraries are very *badly* out of date).
8. Use your influence to share information about literacy and good books with others (word of mouth, articles in various publications, reproducing and distributing flyers targeted to specific audiences) and to encourage others to likewise get involved in various aspects of this literacy crusade.
9. Find others with similar desires to network and share ideas and projects.
10. Contact leaders in various literacy organizations and share your ideas of projects which can help develop literacy.

Revised from an article first published in 1998.