

# Reading: More Than an Academic Issue

By Rhonda H. Lauer

**F**or over 30 years, I have worked alongside dedicated educators, community members, and civic leaders to help the nation's most vulnerable children learn to read. Early literacy is closely linked with both academic and lifetime success: Numerous studies show that a child who reads at grade level by 3rd grade is more likely to graduate from high school, go to college, and secure a living-wage job.

Yet despite such knowledge, far too many children and youth in the United States fail to achieve this crucial milestone, and even those who do achieve it can quickly backslide unless literacy remains a priority. One reason for this shortfall may be that, as a nation, we persist in believing that reading is an academic issue only, the responsibility of schools and school districts, legislators and education departments.

**B**ut reading is also a socioeconomic issue, particularly for the 14 million American youth under age 18 living in poverty. (That's 19 percent of all children in this country.) Unlike their more privileged peers, young people in poor families face a host of nonacademic obstacles that can impede their ability to learn. For these children, high-quality classroom instruction is essential and provides a solid foundation for learning, but without additional supports, it is not nearly enough.

Approximately one in 10 kindergartners and 1st graders miss 10 percent or more of school each year -- equivalent to a full month. And such chronic absenteeism is more prevalent among children living in poverty. For each absent child, we must determine the reason for missing school and implement a practical solution. In some cases, this means providing reliable transportation, arranging for before-school care, or making sure a child has a clean

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uniform to wear. Because, no matter how good our schools are, if we can't get students in the front door, they won't learn a thing.

Inadequate health care also prevents many poor children from reaching early reading milestones, because sick children are inefficient learners. For them, reading success may hinge on a new pair of eyeglasses, so they can see the chalkboard clearly, a trip to the dentist to fix a persistent toothache, or a checkup that reveals a previously undiscovered hearing problem.

Children of all socioeconomic classes also read less as they move through the grades. According to one study, the top two reasons kids give for not reading more are that they can't find books that interest them and they would rather do other things (like watch television, play video games, or text their friends). Another study notes that nearly half of all dropouts say that boredom is a major reason they dropped out of school. And we are all too familiar with the other problems boredom can lead to, such as criminal behavior, drug use, and teenage pregnancy.

One of the greatest gifts we can give children is to instill in them a love of reading -- not just because being able to read leads to academic success, but also because reading allows young people to explore other cultures and countries, travel vicariously to imaginary and historic worlds, and pursue areas of personal interest. Let's discover the types of books children like best, put those books in front of them, and, most importantly, provide

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time for them to read every day. For students who are bored or disengaged, let's move beyond traditional subjects taught in traditional ways and provide them with stimulating, hands-on learning experiences in history, science, art, technology, and music.

**A**s Congress and the Obama administration prepare to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, currently known as No Child Left Behind, we need to acknowledge that obstacles to learning come in a variety of forms, particularly for children from low-income families. If we truly desire widespread literacy in this country, we must address the social, economic, physical, and behavioral factors that prevent our most vulnerable citizens from learning how to read.

Caring adults -- not just teachers, but also community members, business people, parents, and everyone -- must work side by side to evaluate students individually and holistically and give them the personalized attention they need to learn to read early, learn to read well, and learn to read for a lifetime of enjoyment and success.

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