Wanted—Readers in South Carolina

Report of the Committee on Promotion of Reading of the South Carolina Teachers Association

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Reprinted, by permission, from South Carolina Education, May 1931.

CHICAGO
AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION
1931
OUR problem is "What can we do toward making South Carolinians a reading people?"

I. IS IT IMPORTANT THAT THEY BE A READING PEOPLE?

We submit that, next to the immediate task of helping to reduce the poverty of our people, this is the most important matter of general policy that our schools can undertake.

Every argument for education is an argument for reading, since reading is the almost universal tool of education. Reciprocally, schooling is a preparation for the reading habit, and the preparation is largely wasted if it is not employed.

Reading is now an indispensable tool in life outside the school.

Reading is in itself an enriched life.

The habit of independent reading helps to free the mind from the tyranny of the locality and of the institution, including the school.

This habit could have positive economic value. For our economic advancement nothing is more needed than the breaking loose from unreasonable and outworn tradition. Nothing will do more for this process than the reading of matter of various and conflicting points of view. Some years ago, a leading agricultural paper, in trying to advance the economic condition of the South, used constantly to repeat, "A reading people is a leading people."

"Let me choose the pleasure-books of a people, and I will do more toward shaping their lives and destinies than the makers of their laws and of their text-books."

We shall do well to adopt the motto of the American Library Association: "The best reading for the largest number at the least cost."

We have not forgotten that theoretically there is such a thing as too great bookishness; but we submit that, at present, South Carolina is in about as great danger from this disease as from over-prosperity.

II. WHAT ARE THE FACTS AS TO SOUTH CAROLINIANS' READING HABITS?

In 1925, the News Letter of the University of North Carolina made a careful statistical study of the evidences of reading done in the several
states. We have not space to quote details, but can give only results. The general statement is made: "The South reads less than half as much (we suppose he means 'proportionally') as all the other sections of the United States combined."
The several states were compared in the probable number of books read, leading magazines, class-magazines, women's magazines, and daily papers; and in every case South Carolina stood only one or two places above the lowest rank. Can we claim that we are, comparatively, a reading people?
The Committee believes, however, that already there are encouraging signs of improvement.

III. WHAT ARE THE CAUSES OF OUR DEFICIENCY?

In justice to our good name it should be said that underlying all the specific causes are two great facts: First, our handicapping economic condition of which you need now no description. Second, the fact that we have two races, with all the hindering effects that we feel so keenly.

Of specific causes, we name, first, lack of access to reading material.

We are, it is true, making encouraging progress, both in increase of high-school libraries and in the work of the State Library Board; yet such evidence as we have indicates that we are still far behind.

The second cause is lack of ability to read.

Our low rank in adult literacy is a matter of common knowledge, but the census does not reveal the full significance of the situation. For every person enrolled as illiterate there are probably four or five who are practically illiterate, persons who do not read well enough to render the ability of any practical use.

But, in our schools for children, the weakest point is lack of thoroughness in the fundamentals. Crowds of children go from the elementary schools into the high schools without mastering the mere rudiments of reading. Some of these graduate from the high schools and a few from colleges, still incapable of doing the mere mechanics of reading.

In the higher grades many schools have not sufficiently taught rapid thought-getting.

Because of insufficient time in school, many lack the foundation of information on which to
build comprehension of the broader and higher ideas.

The third cause is absence of inclination to read.

The school (with noble exceptions) has not definitely worked to the end of creating a taste for reading.

Among our people, although there are charming cases of culture, the practice of reading has never become a general custom—a fashion. Is it not true that there seems to be entirely too little intellectual curiosity?

IV. **What Constructive Program Shall We Adopt?**

*First, as to lack of material.*

(a) Establish libraries—school libraries, community libraries, town libraries, county libraries, traveling libraries, Sunday-school libraries, special-group libraries.

Put it into the school law that a collection of children's books, not below a designated standard in number and quality, shall be required of every school, not only high but also elementary.

Get books or money donated to the library of your school or community.

Induce the newspapers to keep the library before the popular mind as one of the great public interests—not merely as propaganda, but as important news.

(b) Bring about closer correlation between the local library and the school library.

(c) Encourage the collection of books in the home.

The parent-teacher association could be of great help. Many parents do not know what books to get for their children and so they buy "sets." These associations could hardly find a greater opportunity for helpfulness than to invite persons who understand children's reading to address them, giving suggestions on the subject.

Arouse in the children a pride in the ownership of nice books. Encourage the owning of personal bookshelves and book-plates. Cultivate a taste for books that are well kept and beautiful. Many children are permitted to grow up blind to the physical beauty of a handsome volume.

(d) Promote the program of the State Library Board. We deem this program one of the most important educational movements now under way.
in South Carolina. Especially is its work for county traveling libraries of tremendous moment.

(e) Lack of school libraries is not sufficient excuse. There are very few schools that cannot manage, by borrowing books, by begging magazines, and by other means, to have some reading that would be suitable for the children. In many houses there are piles of delightful magazines loudly demanding to be given away. It all depends on the zeal and alertness of the teacher.

In the second place the mere placing of books on the shelves is not enough. How shall we meet the lack of ability to read?

Remove it!

(a) Start at the bottom and remove real illiteracy—not mere census illiteracy. We cannot too warmly commend the work that Miss Wil Lou Gray is doing for adults. It is one of the most beautiful of the state's enterprises.

(b) Even more important—prevent illiteracy. We repeat that, in our judgment, the greatest defect in our schools is lack of thoroughness in the fundamentals. (It is not enough to force all the children into the schools. What are you going to do with them when you get them there?) The most important of the intellectual tasks of the school is to teach children to read. The mechanics of reading should be learned by the end of the fourth grade, at latest. While we believe in the modern ideas of curriculum-enrichment, we believe also that reading is indispensable to the success of those ideas themselves. We suggest, therefore, that it would be a most beneficial regulation if the State Board would require that, in the first three grades, at least one-half of each child's recitation-time be devoted to reading.

(c) Of course, if people are to read intelligently we must give them the information which will serve as the foundation of intelligence. They must have something to read with. To meet this need we must look to the enlarging and improving work of our high schools.

(d) But beyond the mere mechanics, we must teach reading in the broader sense of getting the meaning from the printed page, and this is not the job of the elementary schools alone. Training in the ability of rapid comprehension is as important a task of the high school as any one, or perhaps two, of the traditional high-school subjects, even though it may not bring any "credits."
This higher teaching of reading includes training in the ability to use all sorts of books in all sorts of ways for all sorts of information. It is astounding and pitiable how helpless many of our young people are to get desired information, although there may be abundant sources in easy reach.

Third, how shall we deal with the lack of inclination to read?

(a) Let the school adopt the cultivation of a taste for good reading as one of its major objectives. After the fundamentals, nothing is more important—few subjects are as important, as such a taste. But there is no opposition. Outside reading is one of the best means of studying most subjects.

As to the means of attaining these objects, let it be emphasized that, while compulsion is useful in some kinds of teaching, compulsion is out of place in getting people to like things. If a pupil has not a taste for the best, start where he is and lead him to something better. Almost anything that is interesting, provided it contains no poison or filth, is better than nothing.

Begin with the teachers. There is something lacking in the education of a teacher who does not love to read. But the teacher should love especially books that children love. If she cannot sympathize with the child-mind, she lacks the most important element of teaching skill. The teacher should read children's books and cultivate a love for them.

Encourage children to read for the mere pleasure of it.

Begin with the first grade, if the beginning has not already been made in the home.

Expertness in story-telling should be a part of every primary teacher's training, and should be abundantly practised.

Have, in every classroom, a book-table supplied with interesting reading matter, to which children may resort when not busy.

In selecting books, choose, within reasonable limits, not the books that you think children ought to read, but those that they will read.

In classroom, some teachers have been very successful in leading the children on unsuspectingly to talk of what they have read. If adroitly handled, this will excite great interest. Much however, depends on the personality of the teacher.
Let literature be conceived, not primarily as something to be analyzed and recited on, but as something to be loved and enjoyed.

Choose a librarian, not so much for technical expertness, as for ability to rouse enthusiasm for books. The teacher-librarian needs both knowledge of books and sympathetic insight into the child mind; but the latter is vastly the more important.

Give the child great freedom of choice among pleasure books. Never humbug him into reading an uninteresting book because you think it will improve him.

But we should give more than a mere taste for literature, pleasure reading. Teach reading as a means. Let ordinary class work be such as to whet curiosity for the things of life. Especially keep pupils alert as to current events. The reason for state support of the schools is the making of good citizens, and good citizenship depends preeminently on the sound interpretation of the news. Then is not the neglect of it in some schools a matter for marvel?

Use the library as a help in all studies. It is indispensable in geography, history, civics and English; and with its aid even mathematics may be illumined and warmed.

Help pupils to realize how indispensable works of reference are, not merely to high-browed information, but to all classes of interests. Even Bobby Jones is in *Who’s Who in America*.

(b) We must take account also of personal and social agencies. Social suggestions may be made a powerful factor here. While we should scorn to induce a person to read a book merely to win social approval, the unconscious contagion of interest is a perfectly legitimate influence. Every enthusiastic book lover is a center of radiation. Clubs—women’s, service, literary, reading, debating, dramatic, occupational, other organizations, as parent-teacher associations, church circles and so forth, may, as many do, exert a fine influence. Only let it not be handed down as of the intelligentsia, superiority complex type, but in a spirit of comradeship: “Here is something that I enjoyed; possibly you will like it too.”

And finally, the school and the parent-teacher association would do a great work by encouraging the revival of the beautiful old custom of reading aloud in the home for pleasure. To thousands
this has been the first discovery of books as an instrument of delight instead of a source of boredom. It helps to promote a common intellectual life in the home, and intensifies interest by social sympathy. Let reading, like charity, begin at home.

We ask leave to offer the following resolutions:

RESOLVED

(1) That it is the judgment of the South Carolina Teachers' Association that the reading habit should be made one of the major objectives of the school; and that the library—school, or public—is an indispensable part of the apparatus of education, second in importance to the school alone.

(2) That this Association recommend to the State Board of Education that the standard of an approved elementary school shall include the requirement of a collection of books suitable for children's pleasure reading, the minimum number to be defined according to the size of the school.

(3) That this Association give its ardent support to the State Library Board in its work to extend and improve library service, and especially to its endeavor to establish libraries with county-wide service. The Association puts itself on record as favoring the legislation needed to promote this great end.

(4) That this Association respectfully suggest to the State Board of Education that it require, that in the first three grades, at least one-half of each child's recitation time be devoted to reading.

(5) That this report be published for the use of all the educators of the state.

Because this report has more than local significance as a brief for the value of books and libraries, the American Library Association has arranged to have it reprinted for general distribution. This printing has been made possible through the courtesy of the Julius Rosenwald Fund.

For additional copies address American Library Association, Regional Field Agent for the South, 1412 Rhodes-Haverty Bldg., Atlanta, Georgia.