

Dear Senate Education Committee,

I am contacting you as a retired rural school librarian with 29 years of experience and the current Delta Junction Community library director. I feel that my perspective is a useful one as you consider the refinement of the Alaska Reads Act Bills.

This bill focuses on much needed reading interventions and screening tools for students with reading deficiencies. However, it does not include any mention of the essential role of books (not text books), libraries and librarians in the equation of improving literacy for the preschool through third grade children.

As a school librarian in rural Alaska, I experienced many young children coming to school without a relationship to books. Their homes had big TVs and gaming systems but little in the way of literary resources. The children were not interested in books and had little experience, if any, with the printed word. Those early learning encounters with literacy such as learning the alphabet, holding pencils, experimental writing, being aware of print such as signs, hearing books read to them and looking at books for fun were not common. I have seen this situation accelerate with the rise of the personal digital device. When these children become old enough to be formally taught, they need to have access to stimulating literary resources, such as interesting and fun books written for children of their age and interest level. Texts and assessments have their role but they cannot function successfully without the essential components of books and libraries.

In my many years as a school librarian, it was extremely gratifying to turn the tide. This means those kids who said, "I don't want to check out a book," when starting school as kindergarteners would, after a month or two, begin to realize the delights of reading and would clamor to take their favorites home. This "light switch" would begin the path to literacy. It is one of my small pleasures as a retired school librarian to hear from former students who are successful adults and remind me of how I developed in them a love of reading. Now I realize it is not necessary for one to LOVE to read but it is important to value reading and have a relationship with good reading resources.

This is where the library and librarians reign supreme. It is one of the librarians many responsibilities to cultivate a collection of resources that will meet the needs of their patrons. This means early reading books, informational texts that are written to capture young reader's interest and resources that will grow with students increasing abilities. This was a challenge to achieve over the years with ever diminishing budgets. I held many fundraisers over the years to provide for funds to develop the collection of the library so that the students would find it not only relevant but exciting. Libraries also provide resources for teachers and work with them as instructional partners.

Finally, in my new role as a community librarian, I have expanded our early literacy programs because I have the opportunity to try to reach out to the families with preschool children. We offer Baby Laptime, Story Hours and a program called 1000 Books before Kindergarten. This last program has resulted in my latest "turning the tide" experience. A mom in our community is raising her second family. Her first two children are now grown with families of their own. They were not raised as "readers". She decided to enroll her four year old daughter in our 1000 Books program. As they progressed through the program, it was a delight to see her daughter go from not really caring about books at all to one of those kids who asks for books to be purchased for them. The child started kindergarten this year with a very positive attitude about learning to read and the pleasures of books. It was yet another lesson to me in the value of libraries as we cultivate good resources and promote them to others.

I must exhort you to include books and libraries as an essential component of any literacy program that you develop for the literacy deficient state of Alaska.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Tiki Levinson
Delta Community Library Director
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