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ABSTRACT

U.S. Commissioner of Education Allen, in an address to a group united in their effort to eliminate reading failure in the United States, said that volunteers are needed to sustain the additional person-to-person, specialized help that will determine the ultimate success of the Right to Read program. Brief mention was made of various roles volunteers will play in the program and brief descriptions were given of training programs for volunteers. (NH)

THE RIGHT TO READ: THE ROLE OF THE VOLUNTEER*

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION
& WELFARE

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Address by James E. Allen, Jr.
Assistant Secretary for Education
and
U.S. Commissioner of Education

Last September when I set forth education's moon-shot for the 1970's in a speech before the National Association of State Boards of Education, I hoped that the country would be responsive to my plea for a national commitment to the "Right to Read" -- that it would be generally accepted that the right to learn to read is as fundamental a right as the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

In the ensuing months, I have been more than gratified by the heartwarming response from all segments of society. You are a part of that response and it is indeed a pleasure to welcome you to this conference. This conventional phrase of greeting comes then with special warmth and fervor to this group today because I know that your reason for being here is an active interest in the "Right to Read" effort -- an effort to which I am wholeheartedly dedicated, seeing in it a real hope for solving a problem that has for too long been allowed to sap the strength of our educational system and to deprive too many of a fundamental skill.

*Before Conference "The Right to Read: The Role of the Volunteer" sponsored by the Washington Technical Institute, Empire Room, Shoreham Hotel, Washington, D.C., Monday, March 30, 9:00 a.m.

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There is no need, then, for me to convince you of the need for the "Right to Read" effort. Nor is it necessary for me to go into detail concerning the dimensions of the problem. You are familiar I expect with such statistics as --

- One out of every four students nationwide has significant reading deficiencies.
- In large city school systems, up to half of the students read below expectations.
- There are more than three million illiterates in our adult population.
- Twenty-five million job holders may be denied advancement -- by reading weaknesses.

Furthermore, I imagine that many of you have seen for yourselves the results of reading failures and have had direct experience with attempting to deal with them.

The reasons our schools do not succeed in giving to all students the skill of reading -- and the desire to use their skill -- are as numerous and varied as the inherent differences among individuals, the differences in life patterns and conditions and the incredibly wide range in the character and quality of the school situations across this immense Nation.

Thorough analysis of these reasons and of the situation we now face are, of course, an essential part of evolving a plan for eliminating reading failure. It required only the most superficial consideration, however, to establish the absolute necessity of the help of the volunteer.

Central to the concept of the "Right to Read" effort from the beginning has been an active role for the private, the non-professional, sector of society. So great and difficult a goal as the complete elimination of reading failures demands a full marshalling of the vast resources outside the teaching profession -- parents, other volunteers, youth, business and industry, public and private organizations.

To provide for this kind of partnership a National Reading Council is being established. This will be announced very soon by the President. Mrs. Nixon, with her background as a teacher and her strong interest in volunteerism, has graciously consented to serve as honorary chairman.

The Council will be headed by a Board of Trustees drawn from many segments of our society. It will advise the Office of Education and other Government agencies on priorities in the "Right to Read" effort. Members of the Council will also assume key roles in directing and operating a National Reading Center.

The National Reading Council will include representatives of the education profession, State and local governments, labor unions, business and industry, the scientific community, the communications media, the foundations, youth groups, minorities, religious organizations, volunteer groups, etc., as well as individuals whose experience in such fields as publishing, public relations, advertising, entertainment and the arts may contribute to the achievement of the program's objectives.

The operating arm of the National Reading Council will be the National Reading Center, which will be established with Federal funds outside the official apparatus of Government agencies. Its primary purpose will be to carry out the partnership approach, coordinating the efforts of contributing organizations, organizing the training of citizen volunteers, developing public support, and helping the States to undertake similar programs.

But the ultimate aim of all of these activities is, of course, to provide better opportunities for the individual child to acquire the skill of reading. Given the complexity of the reading problem, it is almost impossible to generalize about its causes -- but if any one cause is universally applicable, it is probably the simple one that help was not available at the time the individual difficulty first appeared.

It would follow, then, that to have such help available must be the cornerstone of corrective efforts. Making it available will not be simple because not only is every aspect of the school involved -- finance, curriculum, staffing, training and all the rest -- but also the entire outside world of the child as well. We know, for example, that what children experience in the years before they enter school affects markedly their ability to learn in school. We know, too, that education is far broader than the curriculum offered within the walls of a school building, that children learn at least as much outside of school as they do in it, and that they learn in many different ways.

But the obviously imperative need in making help available is personnel. Teachers even under improved conditions, with greater support and more effective methods, cannot provide all the necessary help -- and there simply are not enough reading specialists to go around. Training more professional specialists will be an essential part of the overall attack on the national reading problem, but this will take time. Children cannot wait -- the learning time for them is now -- thus we shall have to depend upon volunteers to begin and to sustain the additional person-to-person, specialized help that will determine the ultimate success of the "Right to Read" effort.

Fortunately, providing help in reading is a task particularly well-suited to the volunteer. In the first place, the volunteer already possesses the knowledge that needs to be imparted. Then, too, the wide range of the degree of seriousness of reading difficulties offers opportunity for the use of an equally wide range of technical abilities in providing help.

Fortunate also is the fact that a reading difficulty is something that almost everyone can understand -- a condition that naturally arouses both sympathy and empathy.

Thus there is a tremendous reservoir of volunteer help to be called upon. Our task will not be so much how to arouse interest in helping but rather how best to use the time and talents of those who are willing and eager to take part.

This is the major question that you have been called together to consider. I do not propose to suggest specific plans of volunteer participation. The volunteer effort will range from tutoring, service as teachers' aides, library work, speech therapy assistance, counseling, work with parents, home visits -- to service on local, State and national committees, and individual and organized efforts to gain the necessary financial and moral support, public and private, for the concentrated and concerted attack on the reading problem.

I am sure that you will have many ideas about the role of the volunteer and I hope that this conference will produce the basis for guidelines for the most effective channeling of the vast volunteer potential.

Any consideration of volunteer participation must include attention to training programs. These are the foundation of the volunteer effort and they must be educationally sound and appropriate if volunteer participation is to make the contribution it can and should.

The nature of these programs, their timing, their availability are questions that will vitally affect their usefulness and appeal, and these are questions where your experience and interest can be of great value.

The establishment of sound training programs will be of tremendous help also in overcoming a barrier to the full use of volunteer power. Not all educators or schools welcome outside help. This reluctance stems from pride, fear of interference, honest doubt, inertia and many other reasons. But it must be overcome. The education community cannot remain isolated from outside assistance. Indeed the greatest encouragement for volunteer programs should come from the schools.

This encouragement is being given in many instances, but where it is not, adequate training programs will be reassuring and a powerful argument for convincing the doubtful.

The development of training programs must include provision for their evaluation, which will be a part of the overall assessment of the effectiveness of volunteer participation.

In conclusion, then, let me say that I consider the volunteer effort not only an essential of the "Right to Read" effort, but also one of its most exciting features.

Expanded volunteer participation will, of course, strengthen our schools in terms of the educational services provided. But beyond this, our schools will gain the support of an ever-growing group of people who have the deep interest and understanding born of direct involvement.

This group will also be a tremendous source for the recruitment of talent for the profession -- talent that will bring with it the conviction and motivation that makes for good teachers, reading specialists, counselors, etc.

Volunteer service is always satisfying but the "Right to Read" effort offers an opportunity for volunteer service of especial value and reward both to those who give and those who receive.

The satisfaction of service here has to be measured against the far-reaching, often disastrous, effects of the lack of reading skill.

So it is that the elimination of reading failure must be accepted as a national goal not only by Government but by all the Nation's citizens as well. The primary task of the Federal Government will be supportive, coordinating the effort of marshalling of forces and resources on a nationwide basis and the provision of the technical, administrative and financial assistance required, all done in a spirit of total commitment and determination to succeed.

With the support of the Federal Government, the leadership of and the participation in the "Right to Read" effort will flow from State to local to PERSONAL levels.

Your presence here is testimony of your understanding of the responsibility at the personal level. I hope that all citizens, volunteer and non-volunteer alike, will be aware of a responsibility to be activists in the "Right to Read" program by learning what goes on in their schools in reading, by demanding improvement where necessary, and supporting efforts to achieve it.

If citizens will support Government efforts by accepting this responsibility and pushing unrelentingly for the elimination of reading failure, an irresistible momentum can be generated which will ensure that the end of the 70's will see the realization of the goal of the "Right to Read" effort -- that no child shall be leaving our schools without the skill and the desire necessary to read to the full limits of his capability.