

THE RIGHT TO READ AND THE NATION'S LIBRARIES

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RIGHT TO READ IN A PUBLIC LIBRARY

by Dem Polacheck and Sara Lee Donze

Two local school superintendents were recently subjected to an informal two-question inquiry: (1) What impact has your system's Right to Read program had on the public in your community? and (2) Do you think that the Right to Read effort in your community would have been improved if public libraries and schools had worked together?

Superintendent A replied to number one: "Our community has shown some feedback from the publicity engendered by the Right to Read program in our schools. The man on the street knew, at the time, that there was a reading program, an effort to teach nonreaders how to read, going on."

He replied to number two: "Schools and libraries should have been working hand-in-glove on the Right to Read program. It's too bad that it didn't happen."

Superintendent B had this response to the first question: "The impact of the Right to Read program in this system has not been felt in the community, but in our staff. The fact that two of the committee members of the state body are also on the local staff has some bearing . . ."

He replied to number two: "A cooperative effort would be bound to have better success."

Both of these school officials knew that there was, in fact, little or no cooperative effort. In fact, in that instance, the public libraries were frozen out in their attempts to help in Right to Read programs in the schools. Public librarians were unable to wangle invitations to planning sessions of the Right to Read Council. Public librarians were told of such meetings after they had been held. Public librarians were not even poor relations; since they did not receive any of the federal

Dem Polacheck is Head of Adult Services for Stark County District Library, Canton, Ohio; Sara Lee Donze is Coordinator of Children's Services for the same library.

cash to pay for the programs, they must be bankrupt of ideas as well.

Faced with such a situation, and with the demise of the National Reading Center as well, the aspirations for Right to Read in the public library could easily fall somewhat lower than oceanic detritus.

We are convinced, though, that the public library Right to Read program should bloom as the center of action on the local level. It has the resources, the atmosphere, and the year-round program of service to all ages that is necessary.

In an effort to reverse a negative situation and to keep the Right to Read idea alive over the summer months, the children's departments (main library and seven branches) of the Stark County District Library last year attempted a "Reading Friends" program.

Teachers were contacted. Names of children who needed reading practice were sent to the library. An invitation was sent to each child. At the beginning of summer, meetings were held at each branch, at which time "readers" and "listeners" were paired.

Of course, many fell by the wayside owing to vacations, illnesses, or lack of parental interest. However, a good number did meet each week through the long, hot season. Each child was given a membership card. They read together, looked at books, talked about reading, and found friends. Some of the lists of books read were, creatively, made into flowers, ladders, trains, and the like. These the children could show to their teachers when they returned to school.

Among the promotional techniques employed, two are worth mention; sometimes the simplest idea creates the biggest impact. The simple idea was: feet. Paper feet in gay colors were stuck on walls, doors, windows, cupboards, railings, catalogs, and ceilings. Waterproof feet led from the sidewalk to the front door of the Children's Department. Feet with tennis shoes, horseshoes, shoes for tiny feet and big feet--even bare feet led to books, books, and more books.*

The theme--"Right to Read--Pass it on"--was the result of combining the Children's Book Council theme, "Read--Pass it on," and the national Right to Read theme. It had been planned that this theme would be printed by the children on the feet, three words to a foot. But before this could be implemented, it was found that the feet caused their own comments from readers and passers-by. Our feet spoke volumes.

Another promotion: one branch reshelfed its books for the program under the headings, "I'm trying to read . . .," "I'm getting better . . .," and "WOW! CAN I READ!!!" Tickets corresponding to the respective headings were given out, and each time a child read a book, a punch was made in the ticket.

*The Adult Department still calls attention to library hours with a large, bare foot next to the sign on the front door!

The public schools' library consultant was in on the preparation, as well as a representative from the parochial schools. Response from individual teachers was quite good. Final evaluation resulted in a "mixed results" verdict.

Whether such cooperative efforts will succeed in the future remains to be seen. They will be sought by some public librarians, and by some teachers and school librarians, with an optimism tempered by experience.