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Table of Contents

If you're viewing this document online, you can click any of the topics below to link directly to that section.

The Role of Libraries in Literacy Education. ERIC Digest.....	1
NATIONAL AWARENESS AND SUPPORT.....	2
NEED FOR COMMITMENT.....	2
LIBRARY SERVICES FOR LITERACY.....	3
REFERENCES.....	4



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Illiteracy among Americans, with its social and economic implications, has become a growing concern in recent years. National awareness of problems associated with limited literacy skills has led to legislation, beginning at the federal level, to fund new literacy programs and expand existing programs. Libraries and information centers are

viewed as an important component of this massive educational effort. Accordingly, library and information services for literacy is one of three major themes of the 1991 White House Conference on Library and Information Services to be held in Washington, D.C., July 9-13, 1991.

NATIONAL AWARENESS AND SUPPORT

Generally, literacy is considered to be the ability to read, write, speak, and compute at a certain level. Functional literacy involves skills needed to cope at an adult level in everyday situations, such as reading a newspaper or completing a job application form. People who lack these abilities often are members of populations suffering from poverty, crime, and unemployment. According to 1983 statistics from the U.S. Department of Education, there were 27 million functionally illiterate adults in the country, and 47 million more were having difficulty in some of the domains tested (Davidson, 1988). The current extent of the problem is thought to be much greater than these figures indicate. The need for programs to increase literacy has been acknowledged through support from the federal government, from many organizations in the education and library and information fields, and from business and industry. In 1990 Congress produced two comprehensive pieces of legislation affecting literacy programs: the National Literacy Act passed by the Senate, and Literacy for All Americans, part of an omnibus education bill passed by the House of Representatives. A compromise bill was developed by a joint committee, but was not voted into law in 1990. Separate bills are expected to be introduced again in the House and in the Senate in 1991. Also in 1990, the Library Services and Construction Act (LSCA), which has supported a variety of programs, including literacy programs, for more than 20 years, was reauthorized with new language and suggestions for increased appropriations for 1991. In fiscal year 1989, 214 library literacy programs in 47 states were funded through LSCA Title VI, and in 1990, 237 received support (Humes & Cameron, 1990).

Library literacy programs have also been funded by state and local resources or by individual donations, or coordinated through literacy organizations. In addition, new literacy organizations hold promise for assisting libraries in implementing literacy programs. Two that focus on the needs of special groups are the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy and the National Center for Family Literacy. Both provide funding and training for program development, and information to program providers and government policymakers (Talan, 1990).

NEED FOR COMMITMENT

Quezada (1990) reports on a national forum on literacy for state libraries, held in May 1990, intended to generate recommendations for shaping a national library literacy policy. While some participants initially viewed libraries as playing only a supporting role

to education, a stronger position eventually emerged: that of libraries as lifelong learning centers, with education an essential part of their mission. In this role they must actively commit time and resources to coordinating literacy activities at all levels. "Public, special, academic, and institutional libraries have a responsibility," Quezada says, "to promote literacy among all members of their community, users and nonusers alike" (p. 23). She also notes that "The American Library Association's official position on the role of libraries in the area of literacy encourages library involvement and places no limitation on how libraries should be involved in literacy education" (p. 24). The results of the forum were these priorities for recommendation at the 1991 White House Conference on Library and Information Services:

- * incorporate into existing legislation the concept of the library as an educational agency
- * develop a strategy for more stable funding for literacy
- * continue to improve evaluation, research, and dissemination of library-based literacy efforts by libraries and other literacy providers
- * redirect administrative responsibility for LSCA titles related to literacy directly to the state library agency (p. 24).

In addition to the legislative priorities, at least three challenges are implicit in the call for research and evaluation. One problem is the lack of current data on the extent of illiteracy. Another is the lack of comparable data on the effectiveness of different literacy programs. Finally, there is no agreement on the fundamental meaning of LITERACY. Beyond the definition of literacy as the basic 3 R's skills for adults, some writers include concepts of information or computer skills; others include concepts of family, community, or cultural literacy.

LIBRARY SERVICES FOR LITERACY

Over the years, many libraries have supported literacy education efforts by providing teaching resources, space for tutoring, and information and referral services. Some program sponsors have compiled bibliographies of adult new reader materials--materials that are not too "childish" to appeal to mature learners and that respond to their personal interests, such as getting a driver's license. Others have adopted or developed software programs that provide interactive drills and testing for computer-assisted learning.

A more active approach has been taken by libraries offering literacy classes or one-to-one tutoring programs. Many libraries have outreach programs designed to meet the needs of specific groups of people with limited literacy skills. For example, people for whom English is a second language, who present a diversity of first languages and literacy levels, have been reached through tutoring programs with materials that match their cultures and interests. Appropriate materials have also been distributed to the institutionalized, including those in prisons, hospitals, rehabilitation centers, and group

homes for the elderly and disabled. Intensive prison programs, coordinated under a literacy librarian, have offered specialized software and English-as-a-second-language training (Mathews, Chute, & Cameron, 1986).

In addition, some libraries offer programs for groups at risk for literacy-related problems. Adolescents have been targeted because illiteracy has been associated with other problems including crime, pregnancy, unemployment, drug and alcohol abuse, and school failure. After-school and summer literacy programs have sought to encourage young people to become employable, contributing members of the community and generally to raise their self-esteem. Strategies have included homework help sessions, peer tutoring, and peer-group reading sessions (Davidson, 1988).

Families have been targeted because illiteracy seems to be passed from one generation to the next: children whose parents are functionally illiterate are twice as likely as their peers to be functionally illiterate. In family literacy programs, emphasis is on the parent's role as the child's first teacher. Parents, who may have been inspired to seek literacy training by concern for their children, are taught interactive language activities for use with infants and young children. Some libraries invite entire families to share in reading activities and booktalks, with each member borrowing a book to take home (Talan, 1990).

Many resources exist for libraries interested in literacy education. Project reports, guidance manuals, and bibliographies have emerged from successful library-based literacy programs. Much information is also available through statewide literacy coalitions and various literacy organizations.

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