

# Should Public Libraries Help To Improve Literacy in North Carolina?

Viewpoint

by

H. K. Griggs, Sr.

## The Problems

"Illiteracy in this country is turning into a blight that won't go away. While the United States has the highest proportion of its young people in college than any other nation, it has not figured out how to teach tens of millions of its citizens to fill out job applications, balance a check book, or write a simple letter",<sup>1</sup> was "the theme of an editorial by editor Marvin Sowe about a year ago",<sup>2</sup> as reported by John H. Sweet, chairman of the team which prepared "Ahead: A Nation Of Illiterates," and published in *U.S. News & World Report* on May 17, 1982. According to this report, "Today a staggering 23 million Americans (ages 16 and over) 1 in 5 adults, lack the reading and writing abilities needed to handle the minimal demands of daily living. An additional 30 million are only marginally capable of being productive workers. Thirteen per cent of high school students graduate with reading and writing skills of sixth graders".<sup>3</sup> This same report states that "the number of illiterates is steadily mounting, swelled by nearly 1 million dropouts a year and also by immigrants from Latin America and Asia, many unable to read or write English or their own native languages".<sup>4</sup> This study by the *U.S. News & World Report*, states further "These functional illiterates exact a high national price. One estimate places the yearly cost in welfare programs and unemployment compensation due to illiteracy at 6 billion dollars. An additional 237 billion a year in unrealized earnings is forfeited by persons who lack basic learning, according to Literacy Volunteers of America". This study quotes Barbara Bush (wife of Vice President Bush) "most people don't know we spend 66 billion dollars a year to keep 750,000 illiterates in jail. I'm trying to remind people there is a correlation between crime and illiteracy, between illiteracy and unemployment." Many school officials fear this illiteracy problem "could worsen in wake of Reagan administration proposals to curtail federal efforts in teaching basics, including a sharp cut in adult education funds."<sup>5</sup>

## The Response

The cut in federal, state, county and local funds for schools, community colleges, and technical institutes, colleges and universities caused some national business volunteers, and public leaders recently to form an alliance to help focus attention on the problem of adult illiteracy in America. This group met in December, 1981 to form the "Coalition for Literacy".<sup>6</sup> On May 26, 1982 at a meeting in Chicago, American Library Association Executive Director, Robert Wedgeworth, introduced a small group of business, library and educational leaders to the Coalition for Literacy, whose purpose was to focus national

## Viewpoint

attention and resources on adult illiteracy. Director Wedgeworth and coalition members expressed a hope that such leaders would "help promote a three year public awareness campaign to identify the illiteracy problem for all Americans and how what must be done to overcome it". A few of the background items given by Director Wedgeworth were (A) one out of 5 adults in our country is illiterate; (b) more than 50 million Americans have never finished high school and 26 million have not finished the ninth grade; (C) illiteracy costs American people five or six billion annually". He reported further that "functional illiteracy is the most curable problem facing our society". He cited "many national programs already in place to provide basic literacy: Lauback Literacy International, which has tutors for 30,000 students; Literacy Volunteers of America, which provides tutorial programs for approximately 13,000 students; Adult Basic Education programs, in which 2.4 million adults have been served; and A.L.A. training for librarians to educate their peers in providing literacy programs in libraries."<sup>7</sup>

In addition, the above four organizations working in the coalition for Literacy are assisted by Contact, Inc., International Reading Association, National Advisory Council on Adult Education, National Commission on Libraries and Information Science, B. Dalton Book Seller, American Association for Adult and Continuing Education, and American Association of Advertising Agencies which publishes *The Written Word* to promote communications in the field of functional illiteracy. Telephone number for Contact, Inc. is 402/464-0602 for further information.

Bob Purcell, a coalition representative, declared "our whole society is hurt by the fact that 23 million American adults can't read at functional level".<sup>8</sup> He added "America's economic, military strength demands a literate populace. We want folks to know that illiteracy hurts all of us and the people who care can do something about this problem".<sup>9</sup>

*The Written Word* (June 1982) reports that the campaign of the coalition will generate public awareness through television, radio, newspapers, magazines, and other media.<sup>10</sup> *The Key* (newsletter of the Adult Literacy Project in the New Castle District Library Center (Penn.), July 1982, reports that both ABC's "20/20" and CBS' "60 Minutes" will broadcast about illiteracy this fall. The ABC show will focus on the needs of non-reading adults in the midwest. CBS will report about law suits filed by non-readers against school districts.<sup>11</sup>

## Libraries Can Help

In a recent publication *Literacy - Libraries Can Make It Happen* published by the ALA Office for Library Outreach Services, the question is asked "why should libraries lead the fight against functional illiteracy?"<sup>12</sup> The answer is given: "Because the public library is the local alternative educational resource in every community".<sup>13</sup> The reasons given are

1. "The library is local. The network of 8,000 public libraries can unite and strengthen the actions of all literacy organizations and put American people to work on a problem that can be solved."<sup>14</sup>

2. "Also, the library is an alternative. Local libraries are in an ideal position to deal with the illiterate adult who associates his inability to read with unfortunate experiences in school. The library can provide a non-threatening learning environment free from the stigma of a social service agency. The library is a place where people from all economic and ethnic backgrounds come and go, not just those who need help."<sup>15</sup>
3. "Further, the library is an educational resource. Libraries have traditionally been involved in development of reading skills, stimulation of reading and dissemination of information about educational opportunities in the community. As a neutral agency, the library can work with and coordinate activities of other literary programs, sponsored by educational institutions, governmental agencies, or private organizations. And by working with other groups, libraries can avoid a duplication of efforts and can help other literacy groups deliver their services. Librarians have the training to identify, find and even produce the written materials that can be matched with various levels of skills, etc."<sup>16</sup>

This ALA publication also offers some suggestions on how public libraries may get involved:

1. Focus total attention on the problems of illiteracy in the community.
2. Collection of special materials for beginning adult new readers that may be used or borrowed by agencies for use by new readers or individuals.
3. Develop information and referral service which refer people to other agencies where they may receive assistance for learning.
4. Provide services to new readers such as counseling or learners advisory/independent learner assistance.
5. Provide library sponsored tutorial programs in libraries-coordinated by librarian or volunteer for other agencies-providing in tutorial techniques or in collection development.
6. Developing collaborative or cooperative tutorial/learning programs with other agencies.<sup>17</sup>

### The Library's Historical Role

It was Melissa R. Forinash, Reader Development Program of The Free Library of Philadelphia, who wrote in the *Opening Doors for Adult New Readers*<sup>18</sup> that "for decades public libraries have been providing guidance to adult learners. The forms of these services has changed over the years as the needs of adults have changed. In the 1960's it became evident to librarians and educators, as well as to governmental officials, that a large number of previously overlooked adult Americans had difficulties with reading. Since then several research projects have focused upon the reading skills needed by adults. While research was being done, libraries were doing something about it. Some provided materials; some started tutorial programs for the adults in the communities where none had existed before; some cooperated in research related to adult learning. The experience of these libraries provided information and impetus for yet other libraries to begin service in more communities."

Dr. Helen H. Lyman, literacy expert, writing in the preface of the same book, notes that 'providing materials for adult new readers is an important responsibility of librarians. The development of such collections serves a large and growing group of users.'<sup>19</sup> Further, she wrote, "the development of collections for adult new readers is a unique and basic function of libraries of all types — academic, school, public and special. Collections meet current definitives of literacy and needs of the learner/user where they include: a variety of media formats from multiple sources, a range of skill levels, and useful and meaningful content and appeal to potential users."<sup>20</sup>

Linda Bayley writing in her *Opening Doors for Adult New Readers* states "Traditionally, the educated middle class has been the mainstay of the public libraries. Now, more and more libraries are trying to expand their capabilities to provide service to other segments of the community, including the adult new reader. Who is the adult new reader? This is not an easy question to answer, most new readers do not wear labels. Chances are that their inability to read has been a well kept secret."<sup>21</sup> Further, she states "Organized Adult Basic Education Classes may be provided by local school systems or community colleges. Job training programs may have classes in basic skills. In some communities volunteer groups provide tutoring for adult new users."<sup>22</sup> By working with these adult education programs you can identify some adult new readers or potential users of the library. Another way to identify new readers is to use the census or planning commission data. Often low income, unemployment or underemployment and minority group status, accompany poor reading skills. This is by no means always the case. There are people with comfortable incomes and good jobs who read poorly or not at all, and certainly the inability to read transcends all ethnic groups."<sup>23</sup>

It was Marguerite Yates, Chairman of the American Library Trustee Association Task Force on Literacy, who wrote of "American Library Trustees' Cursade Against Illiteracy" in the summer edition of *American Public Librarians* — 1978. "The fact that 20% of our population is functionally illiterate should be disturbing to our entire literate community. Illiteracy, therefore, must be a responsibility for library service is the symbol of literacy in each community, large and small. Further, she says "Functional illiteracy exists in all types of communities (urban or rural), among all strata (lower, middle or upper) among all nationalities and races. It is truly a national problem. Next to the educational system, the library network seems the focal point for a concerted attack on illiteracy in America. It reflects the community more than any other institution. It can act as a catalyst in the lot of the unserved." She closed this news release with an appeal: "We ask your help in spreading the word and corralling the forces in your community against functional illiteracy."<sup>24</sup>

### The Problem in North Carolina

With over 1 million illiterates in North Carolina among those persons not in school (over age 16) according to the 20% national average, the need for



special illiteracy programs is absolutely necessary. The question of illiteracy programs for public libraries in this state was raised with a former chairman of the Public Library Section. The answer was that this responsibility really belongs to the educational agencies and institutions of this state where the educational dollars go. This librarian educator felt that the library schools do not train librarians to do such a job in illiteracy. To do such work for illiterates requires a special expertise be developed by the right type of training which most public librarians do not have. Most public libraries do not have funds to employ skilled personnel for such work nor to purchase or produce such materials as are needed in such a program. The special illiteracy programs were started with L.S.C.A. funds and dropped when these funds were "cut off".

The Governor, the former Lieutenant Governor, the head of the Department of Cultural Resources, the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, some members of the State Board of Education, some members of the Board of Higher Education, the heads of community colleges and 2 year technical colleges, and many other educational, business, industrial and other civic and political leaders in North Carolina seemed to have been unaware of this serious mammoth problem among us.

According to an Associated Press Report on Illiteracy in the Greensboro Daily News of September 8, 1982, "illiteracy caused North Carolina to lose its bid for high technology jobs, indicates a two month literacy study."<sup>25</sup>

"The 945,000 Tar Heel adults who cannot read at the eighth grade level lose as much as 1 billion dollars a year in personal income," the study shows.<sup>26</sup>

Also, George Trevor, Director of the Charlotte area Literacy League, reported in the same release "if a person cannot read as well as the sixth grader, he is generally considered a functional illiterate. That means he cannot take a written driver's test, complete a Social Security Application, fill out a tax form or a job application."<sup>27</sup> Using the national 20% average means that there are over 1 million in our state.

Thus the billions of dollars in welfare, health care, prisoner upkeep, because of no jobs, etc. are losses which could be reduced tremendously if we had an effective massive literacy program.

### **North Carolina's Response**

The public libraries of this state could help as an important ally if adequate funds were made available from the state, counties and cities. But the job is too big for libraries even with more funds. The libraries are already helping with literacy programs. Special reading programs which sometimes include whole families are helping with literacy programs; taking books to home centers are some of the other ways the librarians are helping to improve the literacy level. There was not enough enthusiasm, vision of the immensity of illiteracy, and concern for the over 1,000,000 adults of our state educational, civic, political, industrial and business leaders did not put forth some effort to form a state coalition for literacy in order to develop an awareness of the problem and make

plans for improving the literacy rate in the state. The state must use every agency possible — private and public to produce an effective program.

The Post Conference on Illiteracy after the A.L.A. Conference<sup>28</sup> in Philadelphia provided an opportunity for public librarians, trustees, tutors, or state educational leaders to learn more about literacy programs for the illiterates. Three representatives from the Rockingham County Public Library and one from the Durham County Public Library were in attendance. There were representatives from many states, as well as Mexico and India. The workshop on illiteracy brought to our attention the staggering amount of information being done by public libraries, state agencies, volunteer organizations to improve literacy in many states and Canada. It also focused attention on so little being done by many state educational institutions and agencies and public libraries in many states. No other North Carolina state agencies sought to take advantage of this training to help work with some of the 1 million illiterates in North Carolina. In such cases, the public libraries would become a special learning center for those who could not use the community college, technical institutions or other private agencies. Retired teachers, students and others in those communities in New York, New Jersey, Florida, Connecticut where public libraries have sponsored literacy programs. Let us tap these resources in North Carolina to help improve the literacy level.

### **The Need For Concerted Effort**

The need for some overall state concern to promote and monitor the direction of programs to work toward lowering the illiteracy rate is apparent. The critical need for funds is a must for all agencies to help improve literacy for the 1 million adults in this state or we must continue to pay the terrific price of having deprived persons as illiterate. The need for a coalition for literacy should be supported by every agency which is concerned about the low literacy level in this state and how much it costs the state.

It was Barbara Bush (wife of Vice President Bush) who said in the meeting of the National Affiliation for Literacy Advance, held in the Smoky Mountains of North Carolina in June, 1982,<sup>29</sup> "Sometimes I get discouraged by the overwhelming number of functional illiterates we hear about. When I get really discouraged, I remember Helen Keller, who said that literature kept her from being 'disenfranchised from life'. Somebody taught deaf and blind Helen Keller to read, and somebody taught her what disenfranchised means. If someone could teach her, surely we can teach some able hearing and seeing people to read."<sup>30</sup>

What are we doing North Carolinians (library trustees, librarians, library friends, state legislative leaders, state administrative leaders, state superintendent of schools, Governor, Lt. Governor, State Board of Education, State Board of Higher Education, industrial and business leaders) to help reduce illiteracy level? What kind of coalition against illiteracy should be formed to help reduce this 1,000,000 illiteracy level? This coalition should be formed to focus awareness enough to be concerned about this problem and to provide plans and resources

to get the job done. A state which in a short time can develop plans and raise a \$25,000,000 fund to build a student center in Chapel Hill, could also form a coalition to develop awareness and develop plans and secure resources to reduce the catastrophic effect of the 1,000,000 illiterates in this state.

H. K. Griggs, Sr. is the retired Reidsville Senior High School Principal; Chairman, Rockingham County Public Library Trustee Board; Immediate Past Chairman, North Carolina Library Trustee Section, N.C.L.A.; Secretary, Southeastern Library Trustee-Library Friends Association; and Member of the American Library Trustee Association's Task Force on Illiteracy (new ALTA — Committee on Service to Specialized Clientele — 1982-84).

### References

1. A Reprint from U. S. News and World Report, 1982 — *Ahead: A Nation of Illiterates?* taken from May 17, 1982 edition. "A Memo to our Readers," Welborn, Stanley N.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. *American Libraries*, Vol. 13, No. 7 (July/August 1982), p. 481.
7. Ibid.
8. Bob Purcel, Coalition Representative, writing in *The Written Word* (June 1982), p. 1.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. *The Key: Newsletter of the Adult Literacy Project*. New Castle, [Pa.], August 1982, p. 2.
12. American Library Association Office for Library Outreach Services. *Literacy — Libraries Can Make It Happen*. Chicago: ALA [1974].
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. *Opening Doors for Adult New Readers* (Syracuse, N.Y.: New Readers Press, 1980). Introduction written by Melissa R. Forinash.
19. Lyman, Helen R., Professor Emeritus, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wis.
20. Baylor, Linda. A Consultant with Dennison who supervised the publication of *Opening Doors for New Readers* by the Readers Press, Syracuse, N.Y. 1980.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. Yates, Marguerite, "ALTA's," *Public Librarian* p. 17 (1978), 10.
25. *Greensboro Daily News*, September 8, 1982, p. B6.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. Office for Library Outreach Services. American Library Association. *Libraries and Literacy: Closing The Education Gap*. (Chicago: American Library Association, 1981.)
29. *The Key: Newsletter of the Adult Literacy Project* (New Castle [Pa.] July 1982, pp. 1-2.
30. Northeastern Region, Lauback Literacy, volume 6, no. 1 — Summer 1982.