

## Part of Reading Effort Focuses on Eliminating 'Aliteracy' February 27, 2002

by **Scott DiMauro**

March 2<sup>nd</sup> marks the 98<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of one of the best-known children's authors our country has ever known. While Dr. Seuss (a.k.a. Theodore Geisel) is no longer with us physically, his legacy lives on in the hearts and minds of millions of children of all ages who first experienced the joy of reading through his books. To commemorate his birthday, the Worthington Education Association is joining the National Education Association and our affiliates across the nation this week in marking the fifth annual "Read Across America" celebration. We hope that you will join in this celebration.

Why Read Across America? The importance of literacy in our society is well-documented. History tells us that one of the factors that makes the United States prosperous is our educated population. When waves of immigrants swept across our shores in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the public education system successfully met the monumental challenge of teaching millions of non-English speaking children how to read and write. Without this success, we would never have been able to complete the transition from an agricultural to industrial to post-industrial economy.

Without the basic building blocks of literacy taught to us from a very young age, our survival as citizens in today's world would be extremely limited. Fortunately, we now live in a society in which 99% of the adult population knows how to read and write. Illiteracy is still not eradicated everywhere, and none of us, particularly those of us in the education profession, should become complacent. Judging by our oft-touted test scores, however, the students in Worthington perform well above their peers across the state and across the nation. The war against illiteracy here appears to have been won.

Our challenge isn't so much ensuring that our children know how to read; it's in helping them develop a love for reading that will make them more productive citizens throughout their lifetime. According to Jim Trelease, author of *The Read Aloud Handbook*, the real danger we face isn't illiteracy, it's "aliteracy." As explained in recent column by Linton Weeks of *The Washington Post*, Trelease defines aliterates as "people who can read but choose not to." He warns, "If you don't read much, you really don't know much. You're dangerous."

Aliteracy is in evidence everywhere in our society, from the child who chooses to play video games instead of curling up with a book, to the adult who waits for the movie version rather than reading a best-selling novel. Our children imitate the values and habits they see in their adult role models. When they see us avoid reading, they will too. When they see that we enjoy reading, though, their own interest in reading is likely to be piqued.

Reading is something to celebrate, and the WEA is leading that celebration in a number of ways this week. First, we are pleased that over 50 members of our community are volunteering their time as guest readers in our schools. Legislators, media personalities, school board members, central office administrators, parents, older students, and other friends of education are spreading their own enthusiasm for reading in dozens of classrooms across the district.

The staff and students of the Worthington Schools have also just concluded a collection of hundreds of preschool books to benefit the Children's Hospital "Reach Out and Read" program. Knowing how important it is to give children an early start to reading success, we have teamed with Children's Hospital to provide books to young patients who visit their attending physicians. Proceeds of our book drive are also supporting the "9-11 Book Committee" to comfort children victimized by the September terrorist attacks, as well as the GRADS program to give pregnant and parenting teens books for their newborn babies.

The WEA will also place "A Parent's Guide for Reading with a Young Child" in the hands of all incoming kindergarten parents during the upcoming registration process. As professional educators, one of our primary goals is ensuring that the students who enter our classrooms are given the knowledge and skills necessary to achieve success. Our job is so much easier when parents give their children a head start by reading with them from the time they are born.

You, too, can celebrate Read Across America by making time to read with a child. Be a positive role model. Help combat aliteracy by sharing your own love of reading with your children. As our Parent's Guide suggests, "Get caught reading. Let your child see you reading something for enjoyment." What better way is there to invest in the future?

Dr. Seuss, in *I Can Read with My Eyes Shut!*, puts it quite simply:

"The more that you read,  
the more things you will know.  
The more that you learn,  
the more places you'll go."

Happy Birthday, Dr. Seuss. May your party last all year!

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