

# Libraries and Literacy: A Tradition Greet's a New Century

By Debra Wilcox Johnson

## MEETING THE LITERACY NEEDS OF ADULTS REMAINS CENTRAL DESPITE NEW MEDIA AND ADVANCED TECHNOLOGY

**W**hat factors are linked to successful library literacy programs? Literature, case studies, and research suggest a number of important ingredients. These success indicators can serve as milestones or benchmarks in literacy program development.

The essential element of success is the integration of literacy efforts into the overall library operations. This "institutionalization" of literacy into the fabric of the library helps to assure its relevance in the community and the Information Age. Among the indicators of success are the following program and library features.

- The library has a philosophy of outreach to the community, recognizing that not all residents can access or make full use of library resources.

- There is a strong link between literacy services and other adult services in the library. The literacy program is seen as part of the overall adult services effort and as a natural outgrowth of other library services.

- The literacy component is part of the library's overall mission.

- A clear rationale for the library's involvement in adult literacy is shared by staff, administration, and community decision makers.

- The presence of the literacy program affects the entire library, resulting in changes in policy and service delivery.

- Literacy services are part of the overall library planning effort and are reflected in a written plan of operation.

- Program decisions are based on knowledge of the community, existing literacy services, and current and potential stakeholders.

- Literacy collections match tutor and student needs and are linked to community literacy efforts.

- The literacy program has a strong collaborative community network, which brings a new set of contacts and leads to co-referral between the library and other organizations and agencies.

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**Delta Kappa Gamma Society volunteer Margaret Meyers presents a "Read to Me" bib to new mom Valerie Pyle and daughter Katie of Escondido, California. The international organization of women educators has helped raise money for the local library's literacy program.**

- Local funds contribute to the operation of the literacy program. Although outside funding provides for improvements and expansion, it carries with it the expectation that activities will continue once the funding period is over.

- Careful attention is given to linking tutors and instructors to library services and resources.

- Learners are involved in program design, activities, and decision-making.

- Learners are using library resources independent of their tutors or instructors.

- Evaluation and documentation of program outcomes are an integral part of the library's literacy efforts.

- The literacy program has moved beyond individual ownership to ownership by the library.

- The library regularly tells the story of its literacy role in the community.

Library involvement in adult literacy traces its roots to the beginning of this century. It is not a new concept for libraries or an unusual aspect of library service. Helping adults improve their literacy skills is a fundamental theme in the library community's commitment to equal access to information.

During the last 30 years, publishing and research about



library literacy efforts have shown a variety of approaches to achieving a literate adult population. These efforts have led to two key roles for libraries: services in support of local literacy efforts and direct instruction of adults.

What is the nature of these two roles for libraries in literacy? In the support role, the library offers a range of services that mesh with other adult services: referral to literacy instructional services, collecting and dispensing information about literacy, building and circulating adult literacy materials in print and nonprint formats, providing a site for tutoring and classes, and working collaboratively with local literacy providers.

The direct instruction role, however, is a more proactive response to the need for literacy services. In this role, the library offers tutoring and/or classes. Staff coordination of tutors, recruitment of volunteers and students, and individual and group instruction are the key features of this role.

For libraries engaged in direct instruction, a full array of services drawn from the support role also complements this activity. In addition, another role is emerging in these libraries: development and production of adult literacy materials, such as student publications, literacy software, and teaching materials. Use of computers is becoming an important aspect of the library's literacy program.



**Cindy Mahaffey and Leslie Massey, librarians at the Clermont County (Ohio) Public Library System, examine literacy training materials for "Family Read-Along," a cooperative effort between the library and Head Start begun in 1995 and aimed at 136 families.**

Libraries that choose to offer direct instruction represent more than one-quarter of the public libraries in the United States. Two factors seem critical to the decision to offer instruction. First, the library perceives a need for literacy instruction in the community. Second, staff believe that the library, as a community educational resource, is a place for literacy instruction.

Library involvement in literacy has grown, particularly during the last two decades. Use of federal and state funds has aided this growth, although increasing amounts of local dollars are being used for literacy efforts. The presence of other community literacy providers does not preclude library literacy activities, especially those in the support role. Staff at libraries that offer direct instruction often find gaps in existing community services and design services to respond to those unmet needs.

Literacy efforts are highly collaborative. Libraries often link activities to other literacy services and work with local agencies and organizations interested in adult literacy. When local literacy coalitions exist, the library is likely to be a member.

Programs exist in all size libraries; they are not just the provenance of the large urban library. As is the case with community-based literacy efforts, volunteers are a fundamental feature of library literacy programs, although the program is generally coordinated by a staff member.

## LIBRARIES, LITERACY, AND THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

By John Y. Cole

SCHOOLS AND LIBRARIES are the only public institutions in this country actively engaged in literacy education. America's more than 15,000 public libraries and branches are part of the basic educational infrastructure, and half of these libraries are already providing literacy services. They are community anchors for literacy that could well be seen as the irreducible backbone of the literacy movement.

Everyone agrees that parents and guardians should be the most important influence in developing a child's reading habit. But, as librarians know, often it is the local or school library that fulfills this vital role, which needs to be kept at the forefront of educational planning. How?

First, we librarians must claim literacy and education as library issues. Then we have to be more aggressive in publicizing the library's educational role. A good first step has been the acceleration in recent years of ALA's public relations campaigns on behalf of libraries, including the ALA-led Born to Read project, the Libraries Change Lives effort, the national Library Advocacy Now! network, Log-on@the Library Day, and, of course, National Library

Week. The Library of Congress, primarily through its Center for the Book (whose mission is to promote books, reading, and libraries), has been part of these efforts.

We see a new educational mission for ourselves at LC. It is both symbolized and being led by two different educational outreach projects: the Center for the Book, established in 1977 by then-Librarian of Congress Daniel J. Boorstin, and the National Digital Library Program, which current Librarian of Congress James H. Billington created in 1990.

Promoting literacy is part of the Center for the Book's job, and it does so through a national network of 31 affiliated state centers (most of them in state libraries or large public library systems) and more than 50 organizations that serve as national reading promotion partners. On March 21 these partners, including ALA, helped us launch "Building a Nation of Readers," which will be the LC's national reading promotion theme until the year 2000, when we celebrate our bicentenary.

The Center for the Book is small (four FTE), catalytic, and dynamic. It also is a pioneering public-private partnership, depending on funds from the private sector or other government agencies to support its meetings, exhibits, publications, and television and radio projects. Its

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In spite of their continued involvement, libraries' contribution to the adult literacy effort is not clearly understood within the profession and has only limited visibility in the literacy field. Telling the story of library contributions is critical for the credibility of libraries seeking funding for their efforts.

Telling that story, however, depends on documenting the impact of library literacy services in both the support and instructional roles. Systematically evaluating learner and program progress is essential to illustrate the value of the publicly funded libraries in the literacy field. This challenge is present for all types of literacy programs, but libraries especially need to document their support role activities. Another important evaluation question is, "What difference does it make that the literacy program lives in the library?"

Although local support for library literacy services has increased, libraries tend to be dependent on outside funding for literacy program start-up and expansion. As priorities in funding change and library literacy services become more mainstream, local budget dollars will be increasingly important for basic program operations. Outside funding will always be part of such services, but the existence of literacy programs cannot be solely dependent on temporary funding.

Family literacy is a logical and expanding extension of the public library's work in adult literacy, outreach services, and

youth services. This service focuses on the adult in need of literacy skills and extends services to the entire family. Libraries are important partners in this approach because of their expertise in serving families with excellent children's collections and programming. Balancing the demand and preference for family literacy activities in light of the need for basic literacy services will require strategic thinking by library staff.



**KCET-TV producer Huell Howser talks with Jill Conner, manager of Glendale (Calif.) Public Library's Brand Library and Art Galleries, about the station's contribution to the library's Families for Literacy Project.**

When examining the development of library literacy programs, a picture emerges of a "true believer" who acted as a catalyst to start or expand the library's literacy endeavors. This is the person who actively pursued funding opportunities, made important links in the community, and carried a broad view of the educational role of the library. While a catalyst is important in program development, the challenge is to move literacy services from this stage to one where the

library staff is made up entirely of true believers who have taken ownership of the literacy component.

Library literacy programs have moved out of the experimental or nontraditional stage. The focus now needs to be on improving these programs and articulating the role of libraries in the national literacy effort. As these services move toward their second century, sustaining and strengthening local literacy efforts and telling the library literacy story are key challenges for the library community and for ALA. ❖

"Library-Museum-Head Start Partnership Project," funded by Head Start and developed in cooperation with ALA, helps bring literacy and reading into the Head Start classroom.

Through its partnership networks, the Center for the Book reaches into every state. In addition to promoting books, reading, and libraries, each state center celebrates its own regional literary and cultural heritage.

The National Digital Library Program is a public-private partnership on a much larger scale and of great significance for the library's future. Through collaboration with other institutions and with \$60 million in mostly private and congressional funding, its goal is to digitize several million items by the year 2000. Through the Internet, it is making LC's special collections of Americana—documents, films, manuscripts, photographs, and sound recordings—available to citizens everywhere. Some 350,000 images are already online, with 1.7 million more in the pipeline. The library's Web site (<http://www.loc.gov>) now processes more than 33 million transactions a month. Moreover, many of the users are teachers and schoolchildren, especially from schools around the country with Internet access.

With funding from the Kellogg Foundation, the National

Digital Library has established a separate "Learning Page" on LC's Web site. Designed for teachers and students from K through 12, it shows educators and librarians how to make the library's digitized American history collections (dubbed "American Memory") come alive. The Learning Page, online teacher training, summer teacher institutes at the Library of Congress, and linking our digitized historical collections to the nation's educational needs—all are examples of LC's new educational role.

Moreover, the National Digital Library and the Center for the Book are working together to promote literacy and reading in the Electronic Age.

Through its Web site, the Center for the Book has links to the home pages of 13 state centers (<http://www.loc.gov/cfbook/>). The digitized American Memory collections stimulate interest in all kinds of topics—and in books about those topics.

Thus the Center for the Book, which has prepared "Read More About It!" lists of suggested books for CBS television since 1979, early this year completed its first set of "Read More About It!" messages for all 18 of the library's digitized American Memory collections. Appropriately enough, these lists are found on the Learning Page—which itself symbolizes what all libraries are all about.