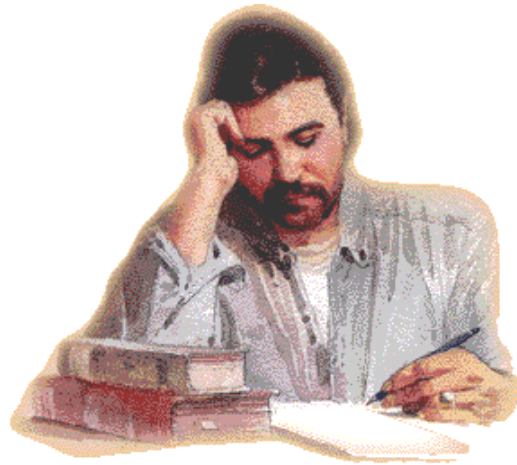


The Gift of Reading

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Twelve years ago, as an administrator of a British Columbia high school, I was assigned the responsibility of overseeing an alternative program that was being offered to kids who were struggling in the regular system. Having been a reluctant reader and only recently having discovered children's books, I went to my 53 fifteen to eighteen year olds. In a large, common room with bodies sprawled everywhere; I informed my students that I'd be reading them children's stories once a week.

Itold them that I had not been read to as a child and had only recently discovered the world of children's literature. I expected, by the very nature of the fact that they found themselves in this program, that they were not unlike me. And sure enough, most of them had limited experience with children's literature – at home or at school.



Their response to my proposal was less than enthusiastic. In fact, someone in the back of the room expressed his displeasure by swearing loudly. When I asked the student to own up, three arms shot up, ready to take responsibility!

I, nonetheless, proceeded in what was to become a sacred ritual (My first read was Barbara Park's *Skinnybones*, a book written for grades 4-5.). I read one book and then another and then another. But I couldn't be sure what effect I was having, if any, until one day in December. I was home with a very bad flu. Leif, an eighteen year old in my program, broke a cardinal rule and called me at home.

"YO – Mr. B?"

"Who is this speaking?" I asked.

"It's me Leif, Man!"

"Leif Man?" I questioned.

"Come on Mr. B! Leif -- at school, Man!"

"Where did you my phone number Leif?" I asked.

"John gave it to me," he answered. John was the program's head teacher.

"What do you want, Leif?" I asked harshly.

"Some of the kids, well, we were just wondering... Like? Are you coming down to read or what? It's Tuesday!"

"I'M HOME SICK, LEAF!" I barked.

“What! Too sick to read?” my harasser persisted.

No, I did not go read to them. But I couldn’t get back to sleep either! I understood what was happening. An eighteen-year-old was asking his administrator, on behalf of a select group of non-conforming kids, to come and read them children’s stories. I immediately recognized this for what it was. A call! A calling! A Mission!

And yes – I did take it up.

Through my students at SWAP, I was forced to look *the problem* in the eye. I had come face to face with a reality that I should have recognized years before and that reality was this: I had made these kids in the palm of my hand. I had them enjoying listening to the written word!

I had the power to make them listen and I had the power to make them read!

I had the power and had had it for some time...but like so many around me, I had not used it and not using it, meant that I had been abusing it!

My problem now was that I knew I had to do something! Knowledge is a funny thing! It is not unlike necessity that is attributed with being the mother of invention. Sometimes, just knowing necessitates some form of action and in this case that is exactly what it did!

I analyzed my situation. I recognized the difficulties that I faced trying to make a difference in the secondary system where the overwhelming focus is often on the sacred ‘Grade Point Average.’ Our teachers had no time to think about literacy or anything else that might cut into instruction time. I wasted little time in the face of this overwhelming foe.

I transferred into a middle school. There, I stood a better chance of making an impact. And I did make a difference – but it wasn’t enough and it was taking too long. The following year, I moved into the elementary system where I could make an impact. I spent the next eight years as an elementary school principal, all the while learning to champion literacy.

I began writing specifically for those whom I thought needed me most! And I began talking to parents, teachers and administrators -- to anyone who would listen! Why didn’t they see? How could they not see what was right before their eyes: We have lost perspective on who and what we are teaching! Kids are slipping through our fingers without being taught to read!

There **are** educators, families and small pockets of society for whom this message is unnecessary – but these are the exceptions! When I point an accusatory finger at parents – I am speaking of the majority of parents. When I point the finger at teachers, I am again speaking of the vast majority. There are exceptions and yes, I am ready to be abused. It has already begun.

When I’m invited into a secondary school to speak to teachers, I’m always confronted with questions such as: “And what of numeracy? Is it not as important as literacy?” Or “How can you honestly expect me to talk and think about reading when I have so much to cover of my own curriculum in such little time?” Or “All right then, give me strategies and suggestions as to how I can fit literacy into my subject area – be it social studies, science or

mathematics!” To these I say this: “You don’t need strategies or tools; you need a change of attitude. You need to stand back and look at the bright eyed, beautiful kids standing there before you. You have to make their well being your concern! There are a handful of these kids who would walk over hot coals for you and you know who they are! You have the power to influence these kids and to help them learn to read. You have the power and along with that power comes the responsibility. And be very clear: if you are not living up to that responsibility, you are abusing it!

Teachers, you have the power to change lives. [Forget the curriculum. Think kids!](#)

Take a little time to focus on books. Let your students observe you reading and if you don’t read, start! They must know that you read! Lean over and pick up a book from your personal collection. Lend it to the child who thinks that you are the end of the world. You have the power, in Orville Prescott’s words, “to lure them into the wonderful world of the written work.” Prescott said that “someone has to show them the way.” Shouldn’t that someone be you?

Someone, somewhere has to point the finger at those responsible for our kids not reading. Some months ago, I was speaking to a large group of educators up island in British Columbia. The first two Harry Potter books had been released. Harry was on the cover of Time Magazine. When I asked how many educators in the hall had read Harry Potter, I was not at all surprised to learn that less than 20% of my audience had read a Harry Potter book.

Think about what that means. Educators, people who have devoted their careers and their lives to teaching our youth, did not have the time or the interest to read what may be the most popular piece of literature written for children during our lifetime. And, while I do not want to get into an argument about the merits of Harry Potter, I will say that if you are not on board the Hogwarts Express, you are not on track.

We must forget the curriculum and rediscover teaching kids. We have spent the last fifty years focusing on curriculum with little success. A large percentage of our graduates cannot read. Teachers, we are NOT doing our job. Nor is the ministry, nor are our school boards, and nor are the vast majority of our parents!

Don’t try to tell me that we are. I am too old and have seen too much to be snowed!

Literacy is not for the fortunate few. It’s the right of every child. Teaching children to read is not the responsibility of a chosen few. It’s that of every teacher, every administrator and every parent.



It is the right of every child to learn to love to read and there is no magic to making it happen.

It is a frame of mind. It is focus and priorities. And there is no perfect method of getting the job done. What is important is the combined, on-going commitment that must be made by all parties involved in working with children. Everyone has a role to play and everyone should know the roles played by others.

I was a reluctant reader – I *am* a reluctant reader! I am a better reader than I once was but I am still not a “good reader”! I can’t start to tell you the number of times that I’ve made this confession to my students nor can I fully describe the effect it has had on many: I didn’t read a single book from cover to cover until I was 27 years old.



I graduated from high school and completed three university degrees. I became a teacher, a principal and a best selling author. These things, I accomplished as a non-reader! Like many of the kids that I’ve taught over the years, I became a master at filling in between the lines. I was a good listener and developed a strong imagination. To satisfy requests for book reports, I learned to improvise and make up stories based on the title and the first few pages of the book. I alone was aware of my weaknesses and had no need to share this knowledge with anyone. Why would I? What might that serve? I didn’t realize until well into my teaching career that it might serve children – children who had similar problems!

For years, I thought that I was alone in this world of make believe readers. Not until relatively recently, sheltered by what is quickly becoming old age, did I muster enough courage to admit to being a reluctant reader. I would have felt a whole lot better had I known sooner that I wasn’t the only one in this predicament – but I didn’t!

Not until a few years ago did I learn that there were at least two of us.

The second person, I was shocked to learn, was one of my mentors and one of my favourite authors ever: Bill Martin Jr. I met Bill in Winnipeg in 1989, where he was addressing the International Conference of Whole Language Teachers. He was the after dinner speaker. During the banquet, just prior to dessert, he rose to share his wisdom with 5000 international whole language educators. But instead of giving a speech, he told a story, his own story, *Ghost Eye Tree*. The telling took less than fifteen minutes. When he was done, he simply turned to leave the podium and the stage. The conference chair jumped from his seat, grabbed the microphone and tried to draw Bill back to the microphone, “Excuse me Bill, but before you leave, might you have any suggestions or ideas or talk of your new projects that you might care to share with our friends from around the world?” Bill stopped on the second step, turned back, smiled and said, “No”!

I shut my eyes and asked for divine intervention. I had missed something. I knew that I was to have learned from this experience but did not understand what had just happened. Why had this wonderful man with so much to share refused to say a word to us beyond the content of his story? The conference chair was in shock, his carefully laid plans in ruins, a forty-minute speech shrunk to twelve. But I knew that Bill knew what he was doing.

Finally, three weeks later, the lesson was revealed to me. After dinner at a Chinese restaurant, I opened my fortune cookie to a message that could have come straight from Bill Martin Jr. himself, “When your work speaks for itself – don’t interrupt!”

Enough and back to Bill’s message. Among other things that I learned in speaking with Bill Martin Jr. was that he is also a reluctant reader. In fact, if you go to his website today, you’ll find the following:

A blessed thing happened to me as a child. I had a teacher who read to me. Of course she was reading to all other children in the classroom, but I believed she was reading just to me because I was a non-reader.

If Miss Davis knew that I was not a reader, she never mentioned it. I was wholesomely at home in the classroom. Learning wasn’t as specialized then as it is now. There were no classes for the less able kids. Neither were there classes for the gifted. We were all part of a group, a pack, sharing individual triumphs and misfortunes in common cause.

I had been well schooled to survive as a non-reader. All through the grades teachers complimented my ability to draw, to ride the crest of the day. They appreciated my willingness, my cheerfulness, and my rosy cheeks. There were no reading tests beyond the teachers’ interrogations, and I was skilful at catching the drift of the conversation and classroom comments, which could be woven, into a reasonable answer to a question.

My first book reading came when I was twenty, in college. Yes, then even non-readers were admitted to college or university if they could muster tuition fees (and based on what we know of our grads today, non-readers are still being admitted to universities across North America).

There is comfort in numbers. I’m always thrilled when I hear stories like my own from others – and I do, regularly!

I believe that “the literacy problem” began at the same time that we began closing one-room schools. One-room schools functioned in much the same way that our primary classrooms function today. The teacher knew and understood each and every one of her students. She knew the names of her students, their families and their pets. She knew who could and who could not read. She kept a close record of what she had tried doing to help each student and what she would try next. A comprehensive file on each student was kept and was always accessible. Her students’ rarely slipped through the cracks. Reading and writing were priorities.

Initially of course, few books were available in these one-room schools. Books, slates and the chalkboard were mere tools. Over time, more books appeared necessitating some system of organization. They were naturally categorized by subject area. With that system in place, it took little time for teachers to begin focusing on these various groupings of books be it history, sciences, mathematics or one of many other subject areas.

The focus then has shifted from teaching the child how to read and write to teaching the child science and social studies and mathematics, all the while hoping and assuming that literacy would be taught as a natural consequence of working with books.

Before we realized what was happening, we grew to accept that if our students were in a setting that necessitated their being able to read (and this was a classroom that focused on various curriculums) surely these students *must* be able to read. And if they could not, that was no longer the responsibility of the classroom teacher, after all, his/her role was to teach the curriculum and that curriculum did not include teaching the child to read!

To this very day, we teach a wide variety of subject matter hoping and assuming that some measure of learning to read and write might come to pass by virtue of the fact that we are working with text.

Results show us, time and time again, that our kids can't read and that no matter how many new courses and programs we add to our calendar, our kids don't read any better.

In primary years, we focus on individual children. In our primary classroom, our teachers *are* attempting to teach children to read. At some point, usually around fourth year, we begin assuming that our students can read. It is then that we close the book on their learning to read and that we begin focusing on curricular content.

And what of the slow or reluctant readers? What happens to all those fourth year (and older) students who haven't begun or who are having trouble reading? The answer is simple: they lose. They are too late. Sure, we'll provide them with remedial material and, for a select few, with learning assistance. But they start falling behind from that day onward. And for many of our kids, the fall isn't broken until they graduate or drop out.

Parents – you'd better hope that your child is a reader and a fast one at that because our system is geared to early and fast readers. These kids succeed and somehow keep the system afloat. The entire *Start Early, Finish Strong* initiative is built on the premise that kids should be reading by fourth grade. I can assure you, after years of experience, that many of our kids are not “ready to read” by the end of third year.

What will happen when national polls indicate that the large majority of our kids are illiterate? Might things change then? Many parents and educators already feel helpless; they do not know where to turn.

We are all responsible for solving this problem, but we are so caught up in the curriculum at school and the electronic media at home, that we cannot place our focus where it needs to be.

Parents and educators have lost sight of our respective responsibilities in promoting literacy! And what makes it even worse is that we don't know that we have!

How and when did this happen?

It must have been a long time ago because in looking back at my own youth, this phenomenon had already occurred by the 1960s. I was a typical high school student who had favourite teachers. I would have jumped through burning hoops for my math teacher, Mr. L. I would have likely even read a book or two had he asked me to or had he suggested a title that was one of his personal favorites. But Mr. L. was a math teacher, not a literature teacher. He never once talked books nor did he ever give me the slightest inkling that he was himself a reader.

It took me years before I came to realize what the problem was and that I had become part of it.

And today, I finally have a grip on it and I now know how we can all become involved in solving it.

A few months ago, I was in a senior high school talking to kids about books and literacy. As always happens, I was accosted on my way out the door. I was surrounded by kids confessing that they couldn't read...that they were disheartened and didn't know where to turn.

As I always do, I left my email address and as always happens, I returned home to more confessions. This is one of these letters:

Dear Mr. Bouchard,

Thank you for coming and presenting at my school. You are a unique writer and a very inspiring person. I really enjoyed your talk.

I am in grade 12. I fall under the category of those who don't like reading. I hate it when a teacher calls on me to read in front of the class, I feel as if everyone is going to mock me because I read slowly and get words mixed up easily. I have never approached any of my teachers because I'm quite sure they would tell me to go find an easier book. This feeling has caused me to never want to try the harder novels. I have probably only read 2 or 3 full novels and that's including ones where I skipped a chapter or at least a few pages. I have a great imagination and would love to enjoy reading.

My dad used to read to me all of the time when I was younger and I wish he still did. I enjoy short stories and things like that but I get bored easily and need something to really grab my attention.

...Could you please send me the names of a few books that you would recommend.

You are unlike any authors I've heard. It is unique how you go around giving talks about your books and your life. Most authors, if they said write to them, would probably have someone working for them, who would reply to all of their so-called fans! But it is nice how you are so involved with the community and the students. It makes all the difference in the world. I know I am rambling but I would really like you help in what has been a hard and frustrating road - reading and enjoying it.

One last thing I would like to add. Recently I have thought of taking up writing after I finish high school. I love writing in English, when they don't give you a topic to write about. We use to write weekly journals in English. Last semester I got 11 out of 10 every time. I never asked why I got the bonus mark but I guessed he liked my writing. So I thought maybe writing was a course in life I could take - at least the first course!



Thank you for your time and I hope to hear from you in the near future.

The President of the United States recognized illiteracy as being a critical problem in North America. He authorized the expenditure of millions of dollars to research the problem. From that a program named *Start Early, Finish Strong* was drawn up and put into action. The depth and quality of this initiative merits its being an integral part of any future study on literacy in North America.

The following is an excerpt from its executive summary:

[*Start Early, Finish Strong. How to Help Every Child Become a Reader*](#)
[U.S. Department of Education, America Reads Challenge -- July 1999](#)

The American public understands that when our students fail to read, we are failing them. An unprecedented pro-literacy movement, focused on children under age 9, is driving activities in thousands of communities today and could do so in thousands more tomorrow.

The Clinton-Gore administration has joined Congress to create the boldest national reading initiative in 30 years. Governors and legislatures in the majority of states are taking decisive action regarding illiteracy, and many mayors of cities with stubborn illiteracy rates are tackling the challenge head-on.

Newspapers, businesses, libraries, sports teams, community service groups, employees, college students, and volunteers of all ages are stepping forward to tutor children, work with parents, provide books, and support schools. In fact, in 1999 we are witnessing a year of unparalleled activity to get more children on the road to reading.

This crusade is reshaping our view of the reading challenge. No longer can we simply point fingers at schools for failing to teach students to read. Every parent, teacher, and citizen has a role to play to spark dramatic improvement in reading.

Bingo!!! That's it: "Every parent, teacher, and citizen has a role to play to spark dramatic improvement in reading!" No short cut, no professional development, no government agency, and no amount of money can replace the INDIVIDUAL ROLES of parents, teachers and citizens in improving reading.

We Canadians recognize that we have been afflicted with the same problem. The 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) showed that 81% of Canadians aged 16-and-over measured up this way:

- 22% of Canadians are at level one. These people have difficulty reading and have few basic skills or strategies for decoding and working with text. Generally, they are aware that they have a literacy problem
- 26% of Canadians are at level 2. These are people with limited skills who read but do not read well. Canadians at this level can deal only with material that is simple and clearly laid out. People at this level often do not recognize their limitations.
- 33% of Canadians are at level 3. They can read well but may have problems with more complex tasks. This level is considered by many countries to be the minimum skill level for successful participation in society.

That means that almost half of Canada's population falls *below the minimum skill level for successful participation in society*. And less than a quarter are above that level. Rarely does a report dealing with the literacy level of North American children not verify the findings of previous reports: many of our kids are functionally illiterate! Our kids simply can't read!

Even those of us who have devoted the better part of our lives to serving the kids we so love, even we have trouble not acknowledging this horrific problem! The hopeful and overoptimistic may not all consider our kids illiterate, but we are all conscious of the fact that our students are poor readers just as we know that their ability to write isn't any better.

The situation is appalling and you and I are to blame. You've heard messages like the following before—a thousand times or more:

Do you want your kids to learn to read? It's as simple as playing a game and costs no more than a few dollars. Order it TODAY at this toll free number. Do it now! Your child is guaranteed to learn to read. If not – we'll give you your money back! Isn't your child worth it?

We've been bombarded with plots and plan, games and gimmicks!! There are lists and more lists of books that are sure to ignite every possible kind of reader. It's all been said before! It's all old hat!

And today, in the early part of my retirement, I will say it again. Only in my saying it, I will do what is seldom done! I will point the finger! Yes, I know that ***Start Early, Finish Strong*** suggested that we can no longer point the finger at educators and I don't plan on just pointing the finger at schools. I will point the finger at schools AND at parents. I will direct my comments at all those who are responsible for the state we are in...at those who could and should be making a difference.

I will call a spade a spade and then I'll say *again* what it takes to get kids reading. If we choose to go there, great. If not, let's at least stop kidding ourselves by appearing shocked and horrified every time we are told that our kids are illiterate. Let's look in the mirror and recognize this for what it is: it's OUR decision!

It's OUR decision! It's our responsibility! And in the case of our students being illiterate: it's OUR fault! This is not about reading and it's not about writing. This is about attitude and responsibility: MINE and YOURS.

Orville Prescott, a critic for the New York Times, said "*few children learn to love books by themselves. Someone has to lure them into the wonderful world of the written work; someone has to show them the way.*" **No one is born wanting to read. Others must instil the desire.**



If *Start Early, Finish Strong* falls short, it is in failing to stress the importance of modeling. It fails to focus on how important it is that all those responsible for teaching our children to read, a) learn to read themselves and b) make certain that the kids under their care see them reading (and be given the opportunity to emulate those whom they respect). No one is born wanting to read. Someone must instil the desire!

It is the role and responsibility of educators and parents alike to instil the love of reading in our children. It is our collective responsibility! The issue is not primarily about **how** to teach children to read but rather about **who** should be teaching our children to read and about how their focus and attitude must change.

This is about ME and this is about YOU! We are the ones responsible for the way things are! Collectively, we are all part of the reason that our kids can't read and we can all become part of the solution!

Ministry of Education:

Our kids are illiterate and YOU are to blame! How can you *not* see the forest for the trees? Our public, *your* public, is paying you to oversee the teaching of our most treasured resource: our children.

Parents want what they have always wanted. They want their kids to be taught to read and write! That's the bottom line! Self-esteem, career planning and the multitude of changing and ever-growing programs that our schools are undertaking are not being driven by the masses but by a few vocal minorities! The majority is begging for literacy and you are not delivering! You are hung up in red tape, innovations, forward planning, technology and quality this and quality that! You are stuck in your offices spinning your wheels. You have set a table that is cluttered and confusing!

You must learn to openly discuss, plan for and prioritize literacy. Everything you do can and should have literacy at the forefront. From the money that you allocate to individual boards, to the resources that you make available to them, to the curriculum and the systems you provide and recommend for teachers to use as report cards, each and every one of these things must reflect that for which your public is crying out – literate graduates!

It's time that you clear the table and allow your school boards the opportunity to focus on literacy.

School boards:

Our kids are graduating without being able to read and write and YOU are to blame! You have limited budgets that are ministry driven – so what??? That's life! You still have the autonomy to have your schools focus on literacy and you are not doing it!

You are busy counting scholarships that will please and impress some. You are working at becoming world leaders in technology and in order to achieve this, you are spending important dollars that should have been allocated to promoting literacy. You are spending much too much of your time and money trying to please small, special interest groups that know how to find their way into your board rooms.

Your leaders, those elected and those whom you appoint, are not interested in literacy! Over time, bureaucracy and mundane, day-to-day routines have distracted them. Their focus is on a thousand and one personal, pet projects, all of which have captured someone's eye and attention!

Books must become a part of your world. The word 'literacy' should appear in your mission statements. All of your employees should be committed to at least trying to read –

not only to modeling good reading practices, but to come to understand the value of reading. Those individuals whom you appoint to play key roles in your organization should all be committed to making reading a living part of your community – for adults and youth.

You have the power to make these changes, yet you are not doing it...

You are just as responsible as the ministry and MORE – after all, you have been elected and appointed by a community that knows and trusts you. You are letting them down!

School Administrators

Our kids can't read and WE are to blame!
Even after ministry and board level fumbling, we should be embarrassed at the choices we are making based on the opportunities still being presented to us. *We* are responsible for illiteracy among our graduates. Even after all the cutbacks, the dictates, the roadblocks, we still have much to work with.

We hire. We direct and oversee the implementation of curriculum. We are responsible for reporting. We control many expenditures and programs. We have significant influence over many issues that matter and make a difference. We still have power and we are not using it to help our kids learn to read.



Administrators, we must start to Model, Motivate and Manage. We have these skills! That's how we have come to be where we are!

From the board level right into schools, school administrators, we are guilty.

Teachers

Teachers, we too are to blame. The buck stops with us!
Only we can look ourselves in the mirror at night. Our students can't read and we are responsible.

Teachers, we have learned many things, but we've not learned to say, no. "No! I can't do everything you ask of me and still focus on literacy. No – I'm sorry, but I can't!" When all is said and done, when the first assembly is over and our students are all nicely tucked into their desks, the ball is in our hands and it doesn't get simpler than that. Teaching these kids is our responsibility. If they are illiterate after 12 years with us, it *is* our fault.

So many of us have lost our passion for reading. Books are becoming less and less a part of our personal or professional lives. We spend our time, money, and energy on other things. We too are listening to the handful of parents who have come lobbying with pet projects. And our excuses are wearing thin. It is true: we have too much on our plates – so what? Yes, we have too much to do and have been given too many new incentives. In the end, that's not good enough.

Our student/teacher ratio is not what we would like it to be; it is not fair to us or to our kids. But that is a sign of the times. Everyone in almost every field is encountering similar problems. These excuses don't cut it when we examine the outcome for our students who have spent all those years with us.

They can't read.

When did we stop teaching kids to take up teaching chemistry or senior math, physical education or history? Do we no longer recognize the handful of kids who think that each of us is the greatest thing since God created Napster? And what of all the kids who would do anything we ask of them, including read a book? Who exonerated us from the responsibility of leading those children toward literacy? At what point did what we do become so important that we thought we had to push the pursuit of literacy aside? Yes, we are responsible for failing the many kids who look up to us and who, over the years, have needed us.

Our areas of specialty are a cop-out. We are all responsible for our kids being illiterate. I am and so are you. Teachers, you too are responsible for this mess.

Parents

How can we criticize the state of our educational system when our homes are in such a state of disarray? The electronic screen is out of control. Educators know it and we parents know it too. The time and money that we spend on computers, television, cable services,

phones, cells and gismos reflect our priorities. How can we expect any school system to succeed in teaching our children to read when we are not doing our share?



And parents, do *you* read? Many of us do, but even more of us do not. Most of us are too busy. We find it too easy to collapse in front of the TV screen when we do have a few moments to spare. We are not modeling good reading practices nor are we spending our money on books.

Of any one group responsible for this sad state of affairs – parents, we are the guiltiest.

What needs be done? To overcome illiteracy, we must drop much of what is being handed to us and begin prioritizing reading in our homes, in our classrooms and in our schools. We must take a step away from the curriculum and re-discover our own sense of reading and then we must re-discover our kids!

That's it. Nothing more. I can detail responsibilities of the school administrator, as I have been a principal. I can speak for teachers, as I was a teacher for years and for parents as I am a parent. And I can speak for reluctant readers, as I was, am and will always be a poor reader. *It is not only my right to speak out but it is my responsibility.*