





Promoting Literacy For Development—an American story

By Sadab Kitatta Kaaya

While the United States does not publish country-wide literacy rates, various published assessments suggest that the overall literacy rate has remained at 99.9 per cent over the past two decades.

This has been the result of various pro-literacy drives from successive governments and other funders, which has led to education reform from primary through higher education. But this figure is misleading because it does not mean that everyone in the U.S. can read a full newspaper article or complete an ordinary job application.

Founded in 1966, Reading Is Fundamental (RIF) is a not-for-profit organization that spearheads efforts to raise literacy rates among American children. RIF estimates that about 25

million children in the country lack reading proficiency. According to its figures, 34 percent of American kindergarteners lack the basic skills needed to learn how to read, while 63 percent of 4th graders (aged 9–10 years) cannot read texts suitable for their level. This results in an alarming 8,000 students dropping out of high school every day.

“Many of my students had convinced themselves they didn’t like to read because their reading skills were several levels below grade

level. For many of these students declaring that they hated reading was easier to express than the embarrassment of being a struggling reader,” said Christal Watts in a 2011 Huffington Post article.

To tackle the problem, RIF works to give every child in the U.S. an opportunity to own books, to learn how to read, and to obtain the fundamental building blocks to achieve their highest potential.

“By continuing our flagship programs and introducing new initiatives, we have developed a powerful collection of resources to ensure that every child can read and contribute to a society that demands literacy at every level,” said RIF President and CEO Alicia Levi. The organization has reached more than 50 million children in all 50 U.S. states, distributing 416 million books to them.

“We are applying a multi-pronged approach to our mission to inspire a passion for reading among all children and solve the literacy crisis,” said RIF Chairman Jack Remondi.

According to Remondi, the organization works with individuals and organizations to develop programs geared to achieve fast, concrete results, such as allowing children to select books to own. To help fulfil its mission, in March 2018 RIF launched a ‘Million Book March’ in which students were encouraged to read one million books collectively.

“Giving us books is a good thing and you should keep on doing it because it has given kids a chance to read. I thank you for giving books because it can really change somebody’s life knowing that someone cares,” said one beneficiary, Ashley of Brooklyn, New York.



Global Problem

An estimated 250 million children around the world cannot acquire basic literacy skills. A recent report by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) on global literacy predicts that about 30 per cent of adults and 20 per cent of young adults in low and middle-income countries will be illiterate by the year 2030.

This forecast therefore means that UN Sustainable Development Goal 4, which aims to ‘ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’ by 2030, will not be achieved.

“Literacy is the first step toward freedom, toward liberation from social and economic constraints. It is the prerequisite for development, both individual and collective. It reduces poverty and inequality, creates wealth, and helps to eradicate problems of nutrition and public health,” said Audrey Azoulay, UNESCO Director-General, at 2018 International Literacy Day.

An estimated billion people around the world is illiterate. These people are at grave risk of exclusion from full participation in their communities.

According to the blogging platform of Bridge International Academies, an Africa-based network of private elementary schools, being illiterate limits your chances in life and hinders your participation in much of the world. And this is increasingly so given that more and more social interactions are in the written word due to the rise of digital communications tools, notably email and online messaging apps like Twitter, WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger.





Another initiative RIF has taken is to launch the 'Literacy Central App', which lets users scan a book's barcode and immediately receive links to thousands of free digital resources related to that book. The app also offers children an easy way to list, track, and safely share the books they are reading.

The App was developed with funding from Dollar General Literacy Foundation. RIF works with other corporations, foundations, and community organizations too to identify and implement literacy programs.

Last year RIF received the David M. Rubenstein Prize (worth \$150,000) from the Library of Congress in recognition of its outstanding and measurable contributions to boosting literacy levels in the U.S. The Library of Congress is the world's largest library.

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The official research library of the U.S. Congress, it serves as a repository for a dizzyingly deep and wide range of materials from around the world. The Prize was named for philanthropist David M. Rubenstein who in 2013 created the Library of Congress Literacy Awards as an expression of his love of reading and of the critical role it played in his success.

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