

You and the gift of reading

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Here's a quick request: could YOU please spend five minutes considering how to give a youngster the gift of reading? Yes, you — regardless of whether you are a parent, grandparent, whether you have students in school now, or never have had youngsters in school.

Could you, and/or some organization you belong to help at least one youngster in community learn to read in the coming year?

Is this your responsibility, if you are not a parent? Probably not. But is it in your self interest? Yes, absolutely.

Last week I wrote about a new national report showing the percentage of students with strong reading skills is declining. Summarizing the report, Dania Gioia, Chairman of the federally (i.e. taxpayer) funded National Endowment for the Humanities wrote:

“There is a general decline in reading among teenage and adult Americans. Most alarming, both reading ability and the habit of regular reading have greatly declined among college graduates. The declines have demonstrable social, economic, cultural, and civic implications. Across a vast array of groups, reading skills are declining.”

This week brings a new international report about 4th grade reading skills of American youngsters — compared to 4th graders in more than 30 other countries. The study compared reading skills in 2001 and 2006. In 2001, only three countries were ahead of US fourth graders. Now we trail 10 countries or jurisdictions, including Hong Kong and three Canadian provinces.

Why pick fourth graders? Because, as the report's authors explained, “... fourth grade is an important transition point in children's development as readers, because most of them should have learned to read, and are now reading to learn.”

The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement — an independent international cooperative with 49 members, did the study. They have been doing research for 50 years.

Their study also found (no surprise) that high performing 4th graders have

* parents engaged their children in early literacy activities before starting

school (e.g., reading books, telling stories, singing songs, playing with

alphabet toys, and playing word games).

* more children's books in their home

* parents who are frequent readers themselves

* parents who have favorable attitudes toward reading

This is not surprising. Many parents who read this column do what is described above.

But kids don't get to pick their parents. Some parents are not doing the things listed above. So, how about your church group, or civic group like Rotary, Kiwanis, Optimists, etc?. How about your business? Can you adopt a classroom of 1st or 2nd graders? Can you help one or two kids, for an hour each week?

I've done this over the years. Kids thrive on individual attention. And strong teachers welcome volunteers.

So please consider giving yourself, and your community a present this month. Please consider helping one youngster (other than your own) learn to be a strong reader. You will give an incredible gift that will continue well beyond your life.