

Creating a generation of readers

Written by By Laysha Ward
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Some Minnesota students learned that their school's library was selected by Target for a School Library Makeover. At Best Academy and Harvest Prep and Marcy Open School -- both in Minneapolis -- and American Indian Magnet School and World Cultures Middle School in St. Paul, students will soon see their library renovated, updated, and outfitted with new computers, iPads, and thousands of new books. The students will be excited, of course, thanks to the new technology and new books. But they'll also be hopeful and proud -- as the upgraded library will demonstrate that the community is committed to investing in their success.

These upgrades are part of a larger effort by Target to invest \$1 billion for education by the end of 2015. The School Library Makeover program will help improve reading proficiency by transforming libraries at 32 elementary schools around the country which serve predominantly low-income students.

It's a small but much needed step to help turn the tide against a growing crisis in our nation's education system.

At a time when the economy continues to shift towards knowledge-based jobs, and when reading skills have never been more important, the country is often failing to give children the skills they need to succeed. Young people will be seeking jobs in a market where 75 percent of

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openings require not just a high school diploma, but also some post-secondary education.

Recent studies have found that developing reading skills early on has a significant impact on future educational success. Third grade, it turns out, is a critical juncture when it comes to reading. That's when children shift from learning to read to reading to learn.

And students who can read at grade level when they start the fourth grade are far more likely to graduate from high school than those who can't, according to research sponsored by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. In fact, children who lack basic reading skills by the fourth grade are about four times more likely to fail to get a high school diploma than those who are proficient readers.

Despite the high stakes, an alarming number of fourth graders can't read at grade level. According to the Department of Education, just 34 percent of fourth graders rank as proficient readers. Among low-income students, that number is an even more distressing 27 percent.

Is it any wonder that one in four children doesn't graduate from high school on time, if ever? The odds are even worse for Hispanic and African American students, with 40 percent failing to get a diploma.

One of the best ways to give these students a chance is to help them become successful readers. School libraries provide students with the books, resources, and mentors they need to succeed.

In Florida, for example, elementary schools that had library programs staffed 60 hours a week or more showed a 9 percent improvement in test scores compared to those staffed less than 60 hours. A study of Alaska schools found that students in schools with full-time librarians scored higher on standardized achievement tests than those with part-time or no librarians.

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Unfortunately, school libraries are increasingly targeted for budget cuts. Overall, school library budgets have fallen since 2009. And cutbacks tend to be more severe at schools serving high-poverty areas. Local and state officials must make literacy programs a high priority in budget plans and strategies.

Against this backdrop, programs like Target's can help schools overcome difficult fiscal times -- and get students reading during those critical early years. The makeovers leverage the pro bono work of Target's design and construction teams, along with the support of thousands of Target team member volunteers. And it happens with a partnership from The Heart of America Foundation.

In each school selected for a library makeover, Target has also partnered with Feeding America to create a "Meals for Minds" food pantry, which helps children concentrate and perform better in school by providing much-needed nourishment. The students also take home seven books of their own, as studies have demonstrated that reading at home has a dramatic impact on educational success.

But as much as the new libraries complement the physical classroom, the country's education crisis won't be solved until everyone at every level - including parents, school administrators, local, state and federal government officials, and other caring adults - recognizes that future generations deserve the resources needed to improve reading skills when it really counts.

Now that we know where to focus our efforts, the time for collective action is now. Today's students deserve nothing less.

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