



VIEW*S* & VISIONS

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Want to Change Education? Change the Climate!

Mary Kay Bond, Executive Director
Read Aloud West Virginia

Read Aloud West Virginia was born in Mary Kay Bond's living room in 1986. Mrs. Bond served as its chairman until 1991, working with a volunteer board in Kanawha County and assisting individuals in six other counties to initiate Read Aloud programs in their communities. She went on to coordinate the Food for Thought program, placing books in high risk schools.

From 1995 to 2000, Mrs. Bond was named the Read Aloud State Coordinator after it became a program of The Education Alliance. She was responsible for all aspects of the program, including the design and implementation of a support system for county organizations across the state.

After serving as the general manager of the West Virginia Youth Symphony Orchestra for several years, Mrs. Bond returned to Read Aloud in 2008. In her current role as executive director, she is responsible for re-establishing the Read Aloud West Virginia program as an independent, free-standing non-profit organization and revitalizing it throughout the state, thanks to a grant from the Benedum Foundation.

Mrs. Bond received her bachelor's degree from West Virginia University. She is a former member of the Literacy Volunteers of West Virginia and is a current member of the Library Foundation of Kanawha County and the Faculty Merit Foundation of West Virginia. She was cited as an "American Heroine" by *Ladies Home Journal* and received the Celebrate Literacy Award from the International Reading Association.

How many down-hill snow skiers do you know who were born and raised in Barbados? My guess is not many. The climate in that country simply does not foster that particular activity.

Now ask yourself how many students in West Virginia graduate from high school reading proficiently? Sadly, the answer again is not many, and for much the same reason. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, reading scores for 8th grade students in West Virginia are lower than the scores of 8th graders in all but two states and the District of Columbia.

While it may be tempting to seek a simple answer or single cause – parents, the educational system, screen time – the real solution lies in changing the overall educational climate in our culture. Each and every one of us has a role to play, and each of us has a stake in the outcome. Our future employees, caregivers, doctors and mechanics are sitting in a classroom today. Their ability to read and understand what they are reading will have a direct impact on all our lives.

The key to raising readers is not mysterious or costly. We simply need to look at the way we interest human beings in *any* activity – sports, cooking or computers, for example. If you want to interest a child in an activity, the key is to:

- Introduce the activity early
- Speak about it with enthusiasm
- Demonstrate or model the behavior
- Provide access to the necessary equipment
- Provide good basic instruction; and
- Allow time for practice.

Children are the world's greatest mimics. They follow the lead of the important people in



their lives, and they seek to behave in the same manner. This is both the good news and the bad news. In West Virginia, we do a wonderful job of raising future Mountaineer and Herd football and basketball fans, and an extremely poor job of raising children interested in books and pursuing a meaningful education.

I often ask parent and community groups if they have ever heard someone caution that "You need to get to the game early. That parking lot is going to be filled!" Most smile and nod. Then I ask if they have ever heard someone advise, "You better get down to the library early next Saturday. They just got a new shipment of books!" This question is usually greeted with laughter. The answer is no. We give informal "commercials" each day to our children. *All* of us need to be aware and do our part in choosing what we "advertise" to our children. We can change the educational climate of West Virginia.

We wring our hands when confronted with poor reading scores. We lament the fact that students are more interested in sports, television or movies than books, but should we be surprised? I have often witnessed an adult engaging a child or teenager in a conversation about sports. The conversation usually goes like this: "Do you play a sport? What position? Do you have a favorite team or player?" This is usually a pleasurable experience for adult and child alike. The young person feels important that an adult is interested. What I have RARELY witnessed is an adult asking: "What are you reading now? What's the best book you ever read? What's the best

book someone read to you? Do you have a favorite author or type of literature?” Most assuredly, families and educators play a major role in changing the educational climate, but there is a significant role for the community at large to use a child’s natural interest in the people around them to promote reading.

Here are some specific suggestions:

Volunteer

Read Aloud West Virginia’s volunteers serve as live commercials for reading. They introduce children to a wide variety of literature, read well. Far too often students think reading is a “school only” activity. They may acknowledge that teachers and librarians read (they work in buildings with lots of books) but they are unaware of the role reading plays in lives of other adults. When a Read Aloud volunteer visits the classroom on a regular basis to share a love of reading, that individual is sending a powerful message: Reading is pleasurable. It is a lifetime activity, and it is essential in my career and life.

A number of employers already allow employees time to read in classrooms on

a regular basis (often employees pair up to “adopt” a particular class). Businesses are understandably concerned about the return on their investment (ROI). The ROI for an investment of time in the classroom is huge. Consider just one example from many. One Read Aloud volunteer was approached by a young woman she did not immediately recognize at her daughter’s graduation. The young woman remembered the volunteer as “her” classroom reader in kindergarten and first grade. The diploma she was about to receive was due in part to those classroom visits and that reader, she said. Our volunteer had instilled a love of reading in that young woman – a love that sustained her in difficult years when she considered dropping out of school. One reader, reading regularly for two years, helped keep that young woman in school. I think you’ll agree that is a *very* good return on investment.

Read Aloud also needs individuals to assist with other programs – developing Author Week materials, assisting with Book Distribution programs and serving on local chapter boards are just a few examples. Local libraries and other literacy

organizations are also in need of the skills and services community volunteers provide.

Donate

Non-profits must work diligently to keep costs down, but money is necessary to keep programs operational. Home, school and community libraries are essential if we really believe education is important. Funds donated to literacy non-profits, like Read Aloud and local libraries, help put books and magazines in the hands of students. Just as we don’t expect athletes to compete without the proper equipment, we can’t expect children to gravitate to reading if they don’t have access to reading materials. Funding provided to Read Aloud also enables our organization to train and place volunteer readers and develop parent education and classroom enrichment materials.

Literacy is far too important to relegate to parents or teachers alone. All of us are needed to change West Virginia’s educational climate. √

