

Letter from a Teacher

Tanya

2004

Teaching at Durfee Middle School in Detroit's inner-city, I found that most students had not been exposed to books of any kind before entering school in first grade or Kindergarten. No one read at home, not to themselves, and parents did not read to their children.

At staff meetings and informal discussions with teachers at both schools, I tried getting a teacher book discussion club going. One reason was to model enjoyment of reading to our students. I was appalled to find out that most of the teachers didn't read anything outside of school either. One year, I discovered that only one teacher out of 33 read out-side of school and that for a weekly bible study class at her church.

This past spring, I found three teachers in my school who read regularly, mostly fiction. I'm going to try again next year to get a book club going.

This past year our principal was finally enlightened and provided books for every teacher to read aloud to their classes. But prior to that, in every year since 1994, when I came back to teaching in Detroit, I have had to hide the fact that I read to my class. Principals believed there was no time nor purpose for that in the curriculum.

Several teacher friends who either live in or have visited Australia and New Zealand notice a marked difference in attitudes toward reading. They see so many people reading in public in those countries that the difference from this country stands out dramatically. For example, people frequently read books on public transportation, while waiting for the bus, and drivers usually have a book at their elbow.

Have you noticed the lack of bookstores in Detroit? There are none in either of the neighborhoods where I have taught and no easily accessible library.

Several years ago, I was appalled when Detroit's superintendent of education sent a letter to every teacher urging all 11,000 of us to vote yes on a referendum to build football and baseball stadiums in the city. He never mentioned that the same ballot would also ask voters to approve continuing a proposal for financing the public libraries. The stadium vote won and the library vote lost.

The library in my school's neighborhood was torn down a few years later when the roof fell in and was never replaced.

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