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# A CONTRIBUTION TO READING: THE NEBRASKA GOLDEN SOWER READING/AWARD PROGRAM

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Child-choice state book awards are a double-edged sword. On one hand they are popular with children and librarians and they provide an invitation to reading. (Jordan, 1979) On the other hand, they are criticized for being popularity contests with lists of nominees that often overlook the better books. Detractors feel that titles in state book award programs are assumed to be of lesser quality than the national winners such as Newbery or Caldecott books. Opponents also believe that children are incapable of making decisions/judgments regarding literary quality when voting for a state book award winner. (Kaye, 1984) One critic noted that "if the matter were food and the children selected 'Twinkies' over fresh fruit, no nutritionist would be asked to kowtow to the choice." (Gerhardt, 1982) However, inasmuch as there are some 23 state and one regional child-choice award programs, the issue gains importance.

## The Survey

While the debate rages, how do librarians/media specialists on the "front lines" perceive the outcomes of a state book award program? In order to ascertain attitudes toward the Nebraska State Award: The Golden Sower, participants in the relatively new program (begun in 1980) were asked to respond to questions regarding how they evaluated related aspects of the program. The survey questions were posed to ascertain whether or not there was some value in Nebraska's Golden Sower Reading/Award Program beyond hypothesized popularity.

## The Program

The Nebraska Golden Sower Reading/Award program has two divisions: K-3rd grade and 4-6th grade. In both divisions a separate list of nominees is supplied to the

schools. The children as well as adults have an opportunity to nominate books for the program. During the school year children must read or hear at least four books to be eligible to vote. In April the youngsters vote for the book to win in a selected grade category.

The Population

The 75 who responded (from 150 surveyed) were librarians/media specialists selected at random from the 1985 list of 350 Golden Sower registrants. The respondents represented public schools in Nebraska with populations ranging from four students to a maximum of 520 pupils. The average media specialist/librarian had participated at least three years in the five year old 4-6th grade Golden Sower Program and at least two years in the three year old K-3rd grade program.

The Responses

All respondents were asked to indicate their opinions in terms of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Undecided (U), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD). The responses regarding the Golden Sower Program (G. S.) were reported in percentages.

Survey Questions

Responses in percentages

	SA	A	U	D	SD
The G.S. Program is really a popularity contest	1	32	18	44	5
Children consider the literary quality of a story when voting for a winner		21	23	51	5
Children have developed better reading habits due to the G.S. program	17	55	27	1	
Children read literature more frequently due to the G.S. program	20	46	27	8	

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Children recognize certain authors to a higher degree due to the G. S. Program	13	72	11	4	
Children check out other books by nominated authors/illustrators due to the G.S. Program	15	60	17	8	
Children feel pressured into reading more literature due to the G. S. Program	1	13	12	66	8

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### The Findings

An overwhelming number of the librarians/media specialists surveyed felt that better reading habits were developed by the youngsters due to participating in the Golden Sower Program. The opinion of the respondents appeared to be that children read more frequently due to the program. However, while readership was up, participants feel that the program did not make students feel pressured into reading the books in the program.

Another positive attribute of the Golden Sower Program was the cross-over reading and literary awareness exhibited by the children. The respondents perceived youngsters were reading other books by the nominated authors/illustrators. This aspect was also related to the high incidence of reader recognition of nominated writers and artists thought to be due to participation in the program.

When children are asked to vote for the book that should win the Golden Sower Award, they are instructed to take artistic/literary merit of a book into consideration. However, a majority of those surveyed maintained that Nebraska children were not employing such guidelines when making their selection. Although this appeared to be the status of voting patterns, a majority of the respondents felt the Golden Sower program was not a popularity contest. However, those who felt the selection of a winner was based on popularity, made the popularity contest notion less of a clear cut issue in Nebraska.

## Discussion

Child-choice book awards are developed and promoted for a number of reasons. In a statement of goals for the Nebraska Golden Sower Reading/Award Program, it was noted that the award was created "in an effort to promote reading among Nebraska school children . . . It gives the students an opportunity to designate what is 'good reading' material by letting them vote for their favorite book." (NEMA News, 9) Thus, quality and popularity were both expected influences and desired outcomes of the program from the start. It was hoped that children would become engaged in recreational reading, critical reading, and literary analysis.

The issue of literary/artistic quality must be considered in the eye of the beholder. By having both adults and children nominate books different perspectives are represented. "When children endorse a book, they simply mean it is the kind of book they like to read. When professional reviewers endorse a juvenile title, they tend to focus on the literary aspects, favoring the kinds of books they think children should read." (Carter, Harris, 55) Because a board of adults selects the final list of books to be placed under consideration for the Golden Sower Award, the question of artistic/literary merit is partially tempered before children come into contact with the proposed reading material. Thus popularity (and perhaps reading level) and literary merit seem to be factors that warrant the reading of the nominated books.

A number of aspects of the Golden Sower Program could influence reader interest and participation. First, the media specialists/librarians are actively engaging children in the process of nominating, discussing, and balloting during the program. Secondly, the sheer numbers of voters (over 20,000 Nebraska school children in grades K-6th voted in 1985) indicate that children are reading or listening to the nominated books and sharing the experience. Thirdly, knowing the Golden Sower Program is a state reading program could give the children a sense of identity. They are reading what others across the state are reading and they are all jointly responsible for selecting a winner. Lastly, the reading level or interest level of the nominated books could also be a positive factor in that the average children could read or

understand at a recreational or instructional level.

### Conclusion

The number of state book award programs is increasing which "is indicative of the library profession's growing interest in children's literature." (Jordan, 1979) Whether the winners and nominees of state book award programs should be viewed as material that is of lesser artistic/literary quality than that of national award books is another matter. The important thing is that children are reading, and reading more due to the Nebraska Golden Sower Reading/Award Program. Thus program goals to "stimulate children's reading, introduce them to different types of literature. . . and help them begin to make comparisons between novels" (Jones, 1983) appears near to being met. As a result the Nebraska Golden Sower Program is seen as a positive force in influencing reading habits and awareness of literature. Hopefully, other state book awards could provide a legacy of reading interest and reading habits that could have an affirmative impact on readership and attitude toward other books.

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