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The Michigan Right to Read Effort

by Barbara Burke

In his now famous speech to the National Association of State Boards of Education in Chicago, September 23, 1969, the late Dr. James E. Allen, Jr., who was then U.S. Commissioner of Education, pointed out that one out of every four students nationwide has "significant reading deficiencies"; that about half of unemployed youth are "functionally illiterate"; and that three-quarters of juvenile offenders in New York City are "two or more years retarded in reading."

He then proclaimed, "We should immediately set for ourselves the goal of assuring that by the end of the 1970's the right to read shall be a reality for all - that no one shall be leaving our schools without the skill and desire necessary to read to the full limits of his capability."

From its beginning, the Right to Read was designated as a coordinated endeavor of all segments of the society, public and private, professional and non-professional, working toward one common goal - to ensure that by 1980 ninety-nine percent of all people under 16 years of age living in the United States and ninety percent of all those over 16 will possess and use literacy skills. Right to Read defines functional literacy as possession and employment of reading skills which enable an individual to benefit from the options American society has to offer.

Right to Read operates under some basic principles which make it a people-oriented effort rather than a process-centered program: (1) with the exception of the one percent of our population which is considered uneducable, all people can learn to read if they are given materials designed to meet their needs; (2) teachers will adopt effective methods if they are provided with a viable and challenging

program within which to work; and (3) the United States now has the resources, research, human and financial power to cope with the reading crisis. If solving the reading crisis is indeed an achievable goal, then what is missing in the Right to Read Effort?

One of the missing elements in the Right to Read Effort is massive public demand. To be successful, the Right to Read Effort must be a nationwide effort of all segments of society striving together to achieve the goal of a literate citizenry. Scattered model programs are not sufficient for the success of this massive literacy effort. Individual states must obtain the necessary support and coordinate the necessary resources in order that aggressive comprehensive reading programs are implemented statewide, specific to the needs of each local education agency.

Specific responsibilities of the states under the grants include: (1) selection of local education agencies which are representative of the geographical location and student population of the state to participate in the program; (2) securing specified agreements between local school districts and the state education agency for participation; (3) preparing local school district Right to Read directors to participate in the program and providing a minimum of 30 days of training for the selected local school district directors during the grant; and (4) evaluating the effectiveness of the program.

At its meeting of October 28, 1969, the Michigan State Board of Education passed a resolution supporting the Right to Read Program as it had been described at that date by Commissioner James E. Allen. Specifically the resolution included the following:

"...dramatize the crucial importance of reading to success of all educational programs, and insure that by the end of the 1970's everything possible will have been done to guarantee that every citizen in Michigan will have the opportunity to learn to read up to the limit of his ability."

In addition, at its meeting on April 15, 1970, the State Board of Education approved the Right to Read Program as proposed by the State Superintendent.

As a result of these endorsements by the State Board of Education and the endeavors of the Michigan Department of Education, as exemplified by the State of Michigan Accountability Model and State Minimal Communication Skills Performance Objectives, the State of Michigan was designated by the United States Office of Education as one of the 31 Right to Read states. Subsequently, an allocation of \$50,000 was granted to Michigan on April 1, 1973, for a Work Grant; and an additional allocation of \$145,000 on June 30, 1973, for a Training Grant. The two grants constitute the following tasks: (1) to assess the state of the art of reading in Michigan, and (2) to train a number of local educational agency reading directors to implement the Michigan Accountability Model and effective reading programs. The purpose of these tasks is to assure that all citizens of the state, regardless of their socioeconomic status, racial or ethnic heritage, or geographical location, will attain at least minimal competencies in

terms of the State Communication Skills Objectives.

It is intended that the Michigan Right to Read Program consist of three phases. Phase I extends from approximately November 1, 1973, through June 30, 1974. Phase II would extend from July 1, 1974, through June 30, 1975; Phase III from July 1, 1975, through June 30, 1976.

Phase I activities are now well in progress: A membership for the Right to Read State Advisory Council was approved by the State Board of Education. The Advisory Council met in December; its committees are working to amass public support and to develop a criteria of excellence in reading programming.

An ad hoc committee has been convened to help implement the survey and dissemination tasks specified on the work grant.

A comprehensive and pragmatic 30 day staff training program for reading/curriculum specialists from all over the state has been organized and is scheduled to run for four day sessions between January 21, 1974 through April 23, 1974. Invitation to participate were extended to all Michigan intermediate and local school district superintendents.

It is hoped that the 30 selected participants will gain additional competencies in the areas of both reading and problem-solving techniques, enabling them to implement more effective reading programs in their local districts, and thus increase student reading competencies.

(Barbara Burke is Director of the Michigan Right to Read Program, Michigan Department of Education.)