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COMMENTARY: Literacy Still A Huge Problem

By BOB SCHROEDER

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NORTHWEST ARKANSAS — Many of you may have seen the story aired on KNWA this past fall concerning the 11 percent of your Benton County neighbors who are considered illiterate.

While this figure of about 45,000 is shocking, the extent of this number is even more staggering when the composite Arkansas and U.S. totals are included along with other data concerning illiteracy.

According to reporting agencies, such as National Institute for Literacy, National Assessment of Adult Literacy, or Arkansas Literacy Councils, the national adult illiteracy rate is between 14 percent to 20 percent. Very few adults are total nonreaders, but the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy estimates that one of seven Americans age 18 or over does not have the skills for post-secondary education; getting a job or a better job - and keeping the job; helping their children with schoolwork; navigating day-to-day needs such as paying bills, taking care of health issues and practicing wellness; understanding rental contracts or mortgages - all of which have devastating effects on self-esteem and self-confidence.

Here are a few more statistics from EducationPortal.com:

42 million American adults can't read at all;

50 million are unable to read at a higher level than is expected of a fourth- or fifth-grader

The number of adults that are classified as functionally illiterate increases by about 2.25 million each year

20 percent of high school seniors can be classified as being functionally illiterate at the time they graduate

70 percent of prisoners in state and federal systems can be classified as illiterate

85 percent of all juvenile offenders rate as functionally or marginally illiterate

43 percent of those whose literacy skills are lowest live in poverty

According to the U.S.

Department of Health and Human Services, about 50 percent of the nation's unemployed youth, ages 16 to 21, are functional illiterates. Low literacy's effects cost the U.S.

\$225 billion or more each year in nonproductivity in the work force, crime tax revenue due to unemployment.

According to the Journal of the American Medical Association, 46 percent of American adults cannot understand the labels on their prescription medicine. Inadequate health literacy costs between \$106 billion and \$238 billion each year in the U.S. - 7 to 17 percent of personal health care spending.

Bringing that closer to home: The National Institute for Literacy has estimated that 20 percent of adults in Arkansas are functionally illiterate - meaning 583,184 Arkansans are illiterate.

What does becoming literate mean for one of our students? It means an increase in self-esteem.

It can mean reading bed time stories or the Bible with your children, or finishing your GED. It can mean gaining your U.S.

citizenship and becoming eligible to vote.

It can mean gaining the understanding you need to be able to buy your first house, or gaining a promotion, or even working your way toward a college degree. All of these benefits and more have been experienced by our students for free at Literacy Council of Benton County.

Our executive director once heard a keynote speaker at an adult education conference tell his story. He was a college professor in California and he could not read!

He had faked and cheated his way in his career, but couldn't take it anymore and called his local literacy council. After working with them to the ninth- grade reading level, he was referred to his local adult education center.

He likened the literacy council to the ambulance;

the adult education center to the emergency room.

That's a great way to explain what we do! With government spending already through the roof, the burden to help alleviate the literacy problem in the U.S. falls upon the private sector and nonprofi t organizations. I urge you to help us make a dent in this devastating problem.

Call or visit your local Literacy Council. Contact our friends at Dogwood Literacy Council in Siloam Springs or Ozark Literacy Council in Fayetteville or the Adult Education Center at NorthWest Arkansas Community College. Visit our web site at www.goliteracy.org

or call us at 479-273-3486, like us on Facebook or follow us on Twitter. Consider donating, consider volunteering.

Invest in your neighbors!

Invest in literacy!

Literacy changes lives!

BOB SCHROEDER IS PRESIDENT OF THE LITERACY COUNCIL OF BENTON COUNTY'S BOARD OF DIRECTORS.

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