

GUEST COLUMNIST: Reading is backbone to furthering one's education

By Brittany Fish

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Early in December, thousands of Houston schoolchildren participated in a major citywide effort to set a Houston record for the number of schoolchildren reading the same book at the same time – usually with an adult reading out loud. The goal was to help children and their families get excited about reading, and reinforce that literacy remains the cornerstone of all learning.

The Houston read-a-thon was just the latest example of a concerted effort by educators across the state to refocus attention on the most important academic subject of all – reading.

Reading remains the backbone of every child's education. A student's academic success starts with the ability to read at grade level. According to the National Institute for Literacy, students who are not reading by the end of third grade risk failure in school. Reading is not only important to our Texas schoolchildren's lives right now, but in their long-term quality of life.

Shockingly, the simple act of reading and comprehending, which most of us take for granted is anything but a given. According to the U.S. Department of Education, each year approximately 2.2 million people -- that's 44,000 people each week -- are added to the adult illiterate population in the United States.

“Students have to learn to read, and then they have to read to learn,” said Anita Givens, Texas Education Agency Deputy Commissioner for Standards and Alignment in a recent interview.

“English Language Arts and Reading is one of the foundation content areas,” Givens explained. “As students master the essential knowledge and skills in English Language Arts and Reading, that's going to help them learn math, science, social studies, fine arts, languages other than English -- all of the curriculum areas across the entire spectrum.”

In 2009, this emphasis on reading will be underscored when the 81st Texas Legislature is asked to approve funding for new instructional materials for English Language Arts and Reading.

These new instructional materials for English Language Arts and Reading are scheduled to arrive in Texas classrooms in fall 2010, complete with the State Board of Education's long-awaited revisions to the state's standards, the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). These new English Language Arts and Reading materials will replace decade-

old instructional materials, and will include the new curriculum and college readiness standards.

In 2009, it will also be important that the state make a financial commitment to upgrading technology in our schools. Our children deserve the opportunity to take advantage of 21st century resources. And when those new resources come to Texas classrooms, we want to make certain that our students can read the instruction manuals that accompany them.

Texas has a big job to do. Student population in Texas is growing at a rapid pace. Our current student population is approximately 4.6 million students. By the time we reach 2010 and these new instructional materials will be going into the classroom, it is projected there will be as many as 4.8 million students in Texas public schools.

Our organization is working to ensure that Texas students get that opportunity. School district textbook coordinators across the state are preparing to deliver these new instructional materials to Texas students in a timely manner. We can't let our children down.

Let's make 2009 a year where we recognize the important role reading plays not only in our schoolchildren's lives, but our own.

Brittany Fish is the Executive Director of TexasCurriculum.org, a resource Web site designed to keep Texas educators, local and state school officials, parents and students informed about the current textbook adoption process.