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'In so many homes, not a single book'

A literacy crisis plagues Chicago's underprivileged communities and handicaps our educational system.

ERIC B. JOHNSON

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Eric B. Johnson

Like most Chicago kids you probably know, Dr. Dana Suskind's grew up in a home filled with books. But when her research takes her into the homes of low-income children, she often sees something completely different.

"In so many homes, there's not a single book," says Suskind, a pediatric surgeon and co-director of the TMW Center for Early Learning + Public Health at the University of Chicago.

Suskind is seeing the manifestation of a literacy crisis that plagues Chicago's underprivileged communities—and handicaps our educational system. Research has shown that while more affluent homes contain about 13 books per child, poor communities have only one book for every 300 kids. The absence of books is especially crippling for the very young, because 85 percent of brain development happens before kids begin school.

Words and books are the primary catalysts for that development. When nobody's reading to children—from books, not devices—during their preschool years, they're less likely to achieve reading proficiency by third grade, a critical milestone. That makes them far less likely to

graduate high school. Ultimately it deprives them of the opportunity to participate in our burgeoning information economy.

It would be easy to blame their parents; but where Suskind encounters homes with no books, she finds loving, involved families—with no access to books. There are no bookstores in the Chicago neighborhoods where those children live. Few of their parents have the money to buy books online.

But, you may ask, are there no libraries? In fact, Chicago has fabulous libraries, full of kids' books. But many parents of poorer children work long and sometimes odd hours, have transit challenges, or aren't familiar with the workings of libraries.

To level the playing field, to free our schools from the burden of playing catch-up and to give all Chicago children a shot at achieving their potential, we must lay the groundwork for education in the first three or four years of life. That means getting books into every home and ensuring someone is reading to every child every day.

The battle has been joined. The Chicago Public Library deploys a host of programs designed to bathe kids in books—including the annual Summer Learning Challenge and the 1,000 Books Before Kindergarten program—and dispatches its brigade of librarians to give away books and coach parents on reading to kids at community centers, grocery stores, laundromats and other places parents have to go.

My organization, Open Books, delivers free, new books to kids ages 0-5 in North Lawndale, Little Village and Austin in partnership with Dolly Parton's Imagination Library. We'll extend the program to Englewood in November, and we intend to keep expanding until every child in Chicago can enroll.

We're also partnering with the Steans Family Foundation to launch North Lawndale Reads, a multiyear campaign to promote the importance of early childhood literacy to North Lawndale families.

And Suskind, through her science, advocacy and eloquence, is bringing worldwide attention to the low-income language gap.

The private sector is also pitching in. Accounting giant KPMG contributes more than 40,000 books to CPL's Summer Learning Challenge every year.

But we need more help, especially from the business community. Chicago's early childhood literacy crisis will persist until we dedicate significant resources, implement proven,

scalable, measurable solutions, and marshal our city's collective ingenuity to defeat it.

It's worth the effort. Putting books in kids' homes not only helps them build the literacy skills they'll need to succeed in school. It also helps them unlock their imaginations, their creativity, their curiosity—precisely the skills Chicago needs in the Information Age.

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Inline Play

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