



Books & Writers



Can you read this? More than a million Georgians can't

By David R. Altman
Books & Writers Editor

We talk a lot about reading in this space. What books are popular? Who are the local writers who have published books? What are kids reading in school?

But we haven't touched on the subject of people who can't read. According to the U.S. Department of Education, nearly 32 million adults can't read. That's about 14 percent of our population.

We don't have the full statistics for Georgia, but Literacy Action says there are about 1.3 million Georgians who never graduated from high school.

What does it matter? Because illiteracy means societal chaos. It means crime. Forty one percent of inmates here have not completed high school. Nationally, 85 percent of juvenile law breakers are functionally illiterate.

According to the website, *BeginToRead.com*, 90 percent of welfare recipients are high school dropouts and U.S. Justice Department prison records show that inmates have a 16 percent chance of returning to prison if they receive literacy help, as opposed to 70 percent who receive no help.

In Atlanta, the high school graduation rate is 59 percent. Yes, that's 59 percent. Statewide, it's 71 percent and here in Pickens the rate is better, at 85 percent.

When you can't read you



have no chance. You can't apply for a job, help your kids with homework, use your local library or read your prescription bottle.

In short, the cards are stacked against you.

The *Progress* two weeks ago ran a front page story about how the Boys and Girls Club of North Georgia were offering summer reading programs thanks to a gift from the Dollar General Literacy Foundation (talk about a company that gives back; Dollar General has donated more \$100 million on literacy programs nationwide, helping nearly 6 million individuals).

The Pickens First Foundation provides books for children that have no books. These sorts of programs are making a difference and they are doing it at a young age.

The problem is that many adults who could take advantage of literacy programs are not doing so.

Of those 1.3 million Georgians over the age of 25 without a high school diploma, only 5 percent are enrolled in literacy programs. The State of Georgia

is working hard to correct this—and has developed 37 “delivery areas” through its Office of Adult Education.

But it's a problem educators shouldn't have to solve alone. The non-profits are also at work on the problem.

Literacy Action, an Atlanta-based organization which has been around for nearly 50 years, says that each dollar invested in Literacy Action returns about “\$33 to the community in the form of reduced recidivism, better public health, engaged parents and knowledgeable workers.”

The public-private partnerships have worked to address the problem, with major companies like IBM and UPS both helping to outfit Literacy Action's classrooms with computers, much like the donations that General Dollar has made in this community.

But it will take more than that. It takes awareness of the situation and action on the part of local governments and civic-minded individuals and companies to make a difference. It's the unsung teachers and the volunteers who give their time to make these programs work, including those that serve in Pickens County on local boards, that are ultimately what will make us a more literate society and a stronger community.

Chattahoochee Technical College (CTC) has a robust adult education program and was one of

the first colleges in the nation to offer on-line GED's—and hundreds of local citizens have taken advantage of it.

The Technical College System of Georgia, of which CTC is a member, enrolled nearly 100,000 Georgians in adult education programs last year, with 18,000 graduating with a GED.

A community with a low literacy rate means high crime and higher unemployment.

An inability to read is also a curse of intangible proportions. It often means broken families with nothing to build upon. And when there is no hope, there is no future.

There is also a measurable financial cost to each individual.

According to CTC, a person without a high school degree will earn, on average, about \$7,700 a year less than someone who has graduated. Worse than that, one study done in 2007 found that people who did not finish high school lived, on average, nine years less than those who did.

If you're reading this, you don't need the help. But think what it would be like if you couldn't read. When we don't have readers, we don't have writers. When we don't have readers, we don't have informed and involved citizens. When we don't have readers, we don't have leaders.

Reading is a gift. Let's do what we can to pass it on.

If you know someone who could benefit and you want to learn more about this critical issue, check out any of these websites:

www.readrightfromthestart.org,
https://tcsg.edu/adult_literacy.php,
chattahoocheetech.edu,

*David R. Altman has been nominated for Georgia Author of the Year by the Georgia Writer's Association for his first book of poetry, *Death in the Foyer*. He lives part time in Jasper, and can be reached at altmandavidr@gmail.com and www.davidraltman.com.*