

## **A WORD OR TWO ABOUT LITERACY**

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### **Body**

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#### THE GIFT OF GIVING

\* Contributing time to help others learn to read is the best holiday present anyone can give to the community.

Nearly 56 percent of St. Louis' students fail to earn high school diplomas. More than a third of the state's school children score at the lowest level of the Missouri Achievement Program. Children of color, children who are from homes headed by adults who did not graduate from high school, and children of immigrants who do not speak English at home, comprise the largest percentage of those who lack basic literacy.

According to the St. Louis Adult Education and Literacy program, many in the new wave of immigrants lack high school credentials. Women refugees may lack any formal schooling. But we can help these immigrants learn to speak, read and write English.

Newly released data from the 2000 census show that more than a quarter of a million adults in Missouri do not speak English well. These workers hold the greatest potential for bringing regional gains in productivity. Increasing their abilities to read, write and do math can boost the economy. But the benefits for the individual who is helped are more important. Literate people are less likely to depend on public medical and welfare programs, are less likely to be a victim or perpetrator of crime, and are less likely to have children who are trapped in illiteracy's debilitating cycle.

Literacy leads to better lives, and tutoring is a thrifty educational strategy. A 1999 study by the Literacy Volunteers of America found that every dollar invested in tutoring returned \$11.

Many organizations are working on the problem of poor literacy. Literacy service providers from both sides of the Mississippi River have created the Literacy Roundtable to share fund raising, to share research-based practices for tutor training, and to expand service. Public libraries in St. Louis city and St. Louis County, St. Charles and East St. Louis, have been recruiting literacy volunteers since Sept. 24. LIFT-Missouri, the state's literacy resource center, hosts a Literacy Volunteer Hotline (800-729-4443). Tutor volunteers and prospective new readers are welcome.

If you don't have time to be a tutor, donations can help provide people with transportation to the literacy service center, home study supplies, books and child care while parents attend classes to improve their English speaking proficiency, and basic literacy skills. As it does for corporations, enhanced literacy pays big dividends for all of us.

### **Notes**

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## A WORD OR TWO ABOUT LITERACY

COMMENTARY: A FORUM FOR OTHER VOICES, IDEAS AND OPINIONS; Jeri A. Levesque is an associate professor at Webster University and is the director of its Literacy Center.

## Graphic

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PHOTO, GRAPHIC; (1) Photo headshot - Jeri A. Levesque GRAPHIC GRAPHICS; (2) KNIGHT RIDDER TRIBUNE Graphic/illustration - (Family holding books open, with letters of the alphabet falling out from them)

## Classification

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**Company:** LITERACY VOLUNTEERS OF AMERICA INC (54%); LITERACY VOLUNTEERS OF AMERICA INC (54%); LITERACY VOLUNTEERS OF AMERICA (54%); LITERACY VOLUNTEERS OF AMERICA (54%)

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