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Reading to Kids

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Last weekend my wife and I had the inspiring opportunity to spend the morning with five energetic first graders through a Los Angeles non-profit program called [Reading to Kids](#). As it is said about so many volunteer opportunities, I am sure we got way more out of it than the children. It was an eye-opener on any number of levels.

Reading to Kids follows a simple but profound philosophy, that “the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children,” cited in the [1985 report of the Commission on Reading](#). On the second Saturday of each month, volunteer recruits gather at one of seven underserved elementary schools near downtown Los Angeles, and are assigned in pairs to read an age appropriate book to small groups of kids beginning in Kindergarten and advancing to Grade 5. The books are selected by the regular curriculum teachers at each of the seven schools, and are all award winners by well-known authors for children.

Training is provided on arrival, and new volunteers are paired with experienced participants, some of whom have shown up more than 50 times for the three-hour block! After training and a chance to review the book, readers meet their groups on the playground, where parents are waiting with their eager kids to line up and walk the volunteer pairs to an assigned classroom. Everyone is there because they want to be, even the school principal who walks around to make sure everything is going well. The children are happy, exceptionally well-behaved, curious, excited, thankful, warm, all of that, well beyond expectations, even the shy ones.

We started as instructed with a thematic overview and picture tour of our assigned book – [A Sick Day for Amos McGee](#) – then read the book and acted out the characters, many of whom were animals from the zoo (I won't spoil the ending). We asked tons of questions of the children before turning each page, which they more than answered. After we finished the book and discussion, we did an arts and crafts project about the book's theme of friendship, making Valentine cards which the kids took home (some gave their artwork to the volunteer adult readers to say thank you). At the end of the morning, every child is awarded a prize book to take home with them after a brief farewell ceremony. A copy of each read-aloud book is then donated to the school's library.

It's that simple. It's beautifully organized, and we even went to lunch afterward with many of the other readers at a nearby restaurant that offered free snack trays.

Why in the world am I writing about this on my business blog?

It's no secret that I have spent a reasonable amount of my career around children's media, and that I have some deep convictions about the necessary link in learning between [education and entertainment](#). This experience was different. What I saw before me at this Los Angeles Unified School District facility – surely in need of financial investment – were five young people as motivated about learning as any I have encountered in all my travels and focus tests. There was one minor difference, English was their second language, even though they were growing up here in Southern California. For my thinking, that actually put them at the head of the class – how many six-year olds do you know already equally fluent in two languages? These children knew most of the words on the pages of our book, they had opinions about all the characters, they were willing to go out on a limb and predict how the story would twist and turn, and they were clearly able to interpret the moral of the story, that when we are at our weakest, we most depend on our friends.

These kids were amazing. They have all the potential in the world. They are ready to dream and learn and help each other and work hard. As we drove home and I looked around at parts of Los Angeles where many of us don't spend enough time, I wondered, where will these kids be in five years when they hit middle school? In ten years when they are in high school? Will they go to college? Will they have the kinds of

opportunities that will let their dreams come true? I couldn't know, but that's what I wanted to happen.

We allow the subject of education to be politicized, but it's not really a political topic in my mind. Year after year, I fill out the surveys sent to me by government leaders, local and national, whichever party is in power, always asking for my priorities. My priority for tax dollars never changes, I believe the priority has to be education. If we want these kids to have good lives, they need education. If we want our economy to thrive, we need an educated population. If we want a new generation of businesses to be born and staffed, education is the proven route to success. The thing is, at six years old on a Saturday morning, the kids are showing up, their parents are bringing them, so what they need they already want. How can we not see that of every possible investment we could make with a taxpayer dollar, this is the one that will pay off?

Is there inefficiency in school districts and administration? Of course. Will these bright young kids soon enough become less exuberant adolescents? History would seem to confirm that. Do we have competing priorities for underserved community needs? Without a doubt. All of those are realities, which simply makes them challenges. What I want to see are those first graders I met last weekend on a path to realize the same kinds of dreams we all share. I think in a nation as great as ours we have a moral responsibility to make that happen, broadly for the greater good.

What can we all do to think globally and act locally? First off, try a little [volunteering](#). Reading to Kids is one fine program among many, find one that makes a difference in your home town and sign up. You will do good, and it will do your soul good. Second, as the national debate on budget control escalates to hyperbole, think hard about where money should be saved and invested, with an emphasis on the notion of capital that can provide a return on investment, where human capital is the most precious resource we can nurture. Third, if you are investing in your own future, consider investing in the future of our communities with whatever dollars you can afford, in the form of a [donation](#), directed to a program you find of value.

Reading will always be one of the most magical experiences we enjoy as human beings. A love of reading brings a love of learning, and that is a gift of boundless reward. Spend three hours reading a children's storybook to some kids you've never met and you might just learn more than they do. I did.



About Ken Goldstein

Welcome to Corporate Intelligence Radio, a trading space where career perspectives are freely offered and exchanged. Join the dialogue and discussion about Ideas, Business, Survival. About The Author: Ken Goldstein most recently was Chairman & Chief Executive Officer of SHOP.COM, a venture-backed e-commerce leader acquired by Market America. Previously he was Executive Vice President & Managing Director of Disney Online, and Vice President of Entertainment & Education Products for Broderbund Software. He currently advises start-ups as well as established corporations helping unlock creativity and innovation, and is at work on his first novel, about the strange marriage of media and technology.

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