

Americans, it's one in 100.

In this new economy, teaching our kids just enough so that they can get through *Dick and Jane* is not going to cut it. Over the next 10 years, the average literacy required for all American occupations is projected to rise by 14%.

It's not enough just to recognize the words on the page anymore. The kind of literacy necessary for the 21st century requires detailed understanding and complex comprehension. And, yet, every year we pass more children through schools or watch as more drop out. These are kids who will pore through the help-wanted section and cross off job after job that requires skills they don't have. Others will have to take that help-wanted section over to somebody sitting next to them and find the courage to ask, "Will you read this for me?"

We have to change our whole mindset as a nation. We're living in the 21st-century knowledge economy; but our schools, our homes, and our culture are still based around 20th-century and in some cases 19th-century expectations.

The government has a critical role to

play in this endeavor of upgrading our children's skills. This is not the place for me to lay out a long education-reform agenda; but I can say that it doesn't make sense if we have a school system designed for agrarian America and its transition into the industrial age, where we have schools in Chicago that let high school students out at 1:30 because there's not enough money to keep them there any longer, where teachers continue to be underpaid, where we are not restructuring these schools and financing them sufficiently to make sure that our children are going to be able to compete in this global economy.

There is a lot of work to do on the part of government to make sure that we have a first-class educational system, but government alone is not going to solve the problem. If we are going to start setting high standards and inspirational examples for our children to follow, then all of us have to be engaged.

There is plenty that needs to be done to improve our schools and reform education, but this is not an issue in which we can just look to some experts in

Washington to solve the problem. We're going to have to start at home. We're going to have to start with parents. And we're going to have to start in libraries. We know that children who start kindergarten with awareness of language and basic letter sounds become better readers and face fewer challenges in the years ahead. We know the more reading material kids are exposed to at home, the better they score with reading tests throughout their lives. So we have to make investments in family-literacy programs and early-childhood education so that kids aren't left behind and are not already behind the day they arrive at school.

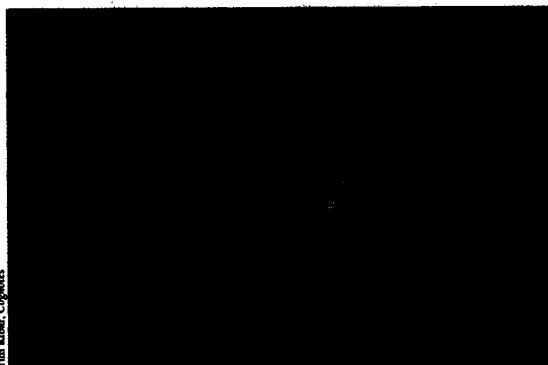
We have to get books into our children's hands early and often. I know this is easier said than done, oftentimes. Parents today still have the toughest job in the world. And no one ever thanks parents for doing it. Not even your kids. Maybe especially your kids, as I'm learning.

Most of you are working longer and harder than ever, juggling job and family responsibilities, trying to be every-

Straight Answers from Barack Obama

Since exploding onto the American political stage with his stirring speech at the Democratic National Convention last year, Barack Obama has enjoyed extraordinary popularity as an idealist and a unifier. *American Libraries* caught up with the Illinois senator June 25 just before his keynote speech at what was probably the best-attended opening session in ALA Annual Conference history.

Can you share your memories about what libraries meant to you as you were growing up? I lived overseas for several years in Jakarta, Indonesia, when I was young, and having access to books—English-language books in particular—was just



Tom Miller, Cognos

a huge prize. So when I came back from Indonesia, the first place I wanted to be was in a library. It just always seemed to be a magical place where, if you wanted to sit there, you could learn about everything in the world.

Can you tell us more about the effect libraries have had

on you? Here's another interesting fact: People always mention libraries in terms of just being sources for reading material or research. But I probably would not be in Chicago were it not for the Manhattan public library, because I was looking for an organizing job and was having great trouble finding

a job as a community organizer in New York. The Mid-Manhattan library had these books of lists of organizations, and the librarian helped me find these lists of organizations, and I wrote to every organization. One of them wound up being an organization in Chicago that I got a job with.

Tell us something that you're not going to say in your speech. You know, I have a soft spot in my heart for librarians. Although I'll probably mention this in my speech, I have been known to misbehave in libraries.

What's your main message to librarians? That our prosperity as a nation is directly correlated to our literacy.