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COMMENTARY

The Case for Literature

By **Nancie Atwell**

A few weeks ago, I received an urgent e-mail: The National Council of Teachers of English is looking for volunteers for an ad hoc task force whose charge is to gather evidence about why literature should continue to be taught in the 21st century.

Apparently, the worth of book reading had become an issue among the work groups that, behind closed doors, were writing the K-12 “common-core standards” that promise to shape curriculum in U.S. classrooms. Given that the Common Core State Standards Initiative is dominated by test-makers and politicians—representatives from the College Board, ACT, Achieve, the Council of Chief State School Officers, and the National Governors Association—I was dismayed, but not surprised, that the NCTE was finding it necessary to lobby on behalf of literature.

Drafts of the various standards reportedly have been undergoing significant revisions, and release of a version for public comment may be imminent. But regardless of the stage of the project, giving corporate interests a role in setting education policy is like letting foxes supervise the henhouse. These foxes are not vested in children’s reading books. They are interested in profitmaking—in selling prefab curricula, standards, and the diagnostic, formative, and summative tests that measure them.

The irony—and tragedy—is that book reading, which profits a reader, an author, and a democratic society, is also the single activity that consistently relates to proficiency in reading, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

In 2007, fully 70 percent of U.S. 8th graders read below the proficient level on the NAEP exam. Our 13-year-olds aren’t reading well because they’re not reading enough: The National Endowment for the Arts has reported that only 30 percent of students in this age group read every day. And that’s where literature comes in—or should.

Each year, my 7th and 8th graders choose and read between 30 and 100 titles. They devour books because the classroom library is packed with intriguing stories by serious writers, because they have daily time to read in school, because I expect them to read at home every night, and because 35 years of experience has taught me that it’s my job to read, embrace, and recommend worthwhile young-adult literature to the young adults I teach.

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