

the Liberator

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE LIBERAL ARTS COUNCIL
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS IN AUSTIN

MAIN MENU

STUDENT ORGANIZATION SEAL WORKS TO IMPROVE LITERACY IN AUSTIN AREA

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Issues, Student Life, The Language Issue.

Written by **Cynthia Turner**

Texas has [among the worst literacy rates](#) in the United States. According to the Texas Center for the Advancement of Literacy and Learning, an average of 19% of Texas adults are unable to read a newspaper. The majority of those adults are living under the poverty line. Education correlates strongly to economic success, but without the right resources the problem of illiteracy and poverty becomes cyclical.

A student organization founded by UT sophomore, Davey Bemporad, works to break this cycle by combatting illiteracy through the organization Students Expanding Austin Literacy (SEAL). In Travis County, the illiteracy rate is 13%, slightly better than the state average, but SEAL believes it still could be much better. SEAL coordinates with Austin Partners in Education to send volunteers to Pecan Springs Elementary School, where volunteers are paired with an after-school reading buddy.

The majority of students that SEAL works with come from lower socio-economic backgrounds and predominantly Hispanic and African-American backgrounds. The students do not receive enough practice in reading at home. For those students whose parents are immigrants, English may not be spoken or taught at home. When enrolling in public school, these students have to catch up to the academic standards of their peers.

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Bemporad explains, “Most of the students’ ability to read is not inhibited by their intelligence, not anywhere near that. Their math homework, they blow it out of the water.” Instead it is a matter of accessing sufficient resources. According to Bemporad, “Our goal at SEAL is to provide that extra reading practice.”

Texas was the first state to require public schools to provide English Second Language (ESL) courses where twenty or more students have deficiencies in the English language for their grade level. Sometimes these courses are not enough, especially when financial resources for these additional courses are limited. Taxes from a neighborhood are used to fund schools in that given

neighborhood. Inevitably, students from wealthy neighborhoods will attend schools with an abundance of resources while students from poor neighborhoods will attend schools with far fewer financial resources.

Texas legislators who continue to defeat legislation that would call for equal funding of public schools argue that it is not about the quantity of funds but the quality of teaching. However, results show a correlation between poor funding and poor academic performance. From first-hand experience, Bemporad recounted, "The people working in the education system are doing the best they can. The teachers I have worked with are very good at what they do."

” MORE FUNDING MEANS SCHOOLS CAN COMPETE TO HIRE QUALITY ENGLISH TEACHERS, PROVIDE MORE ESL CLASSES, AND MOST IMPORTANTLY BUY BOOKS.

What many of these legislators fail to recognize is that any small increase of resources at a poorly funded public school will return exponential improvements in academic performance. More funding means schools can compete to hire quality English teachers, provide more ESL classes, and most importantly buy books.

Improved literacy for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds can substantially improve their chances at attending college and becoming employed. Students may not start with equal opportunity for academic achievement, but the public education system has to be bolstered in a way that equalizes academic opportunity as much as possible. SEAL volunteers help in that process.

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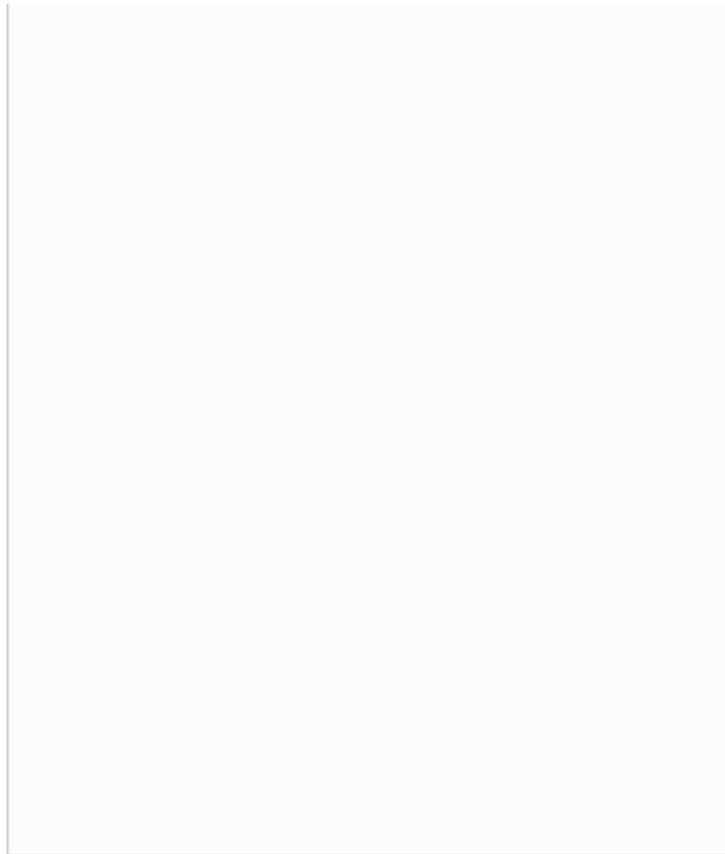
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