

THE NEWS

Literacy should never be taken for granted

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It's amazing how a seemingly small, fun exercise can grow into a movement that crosses borders and spurs education among young people. The Wow! Reading Challenge has done that in the decade it has operated since its kickoff at a single rural school in Pictou County.

In the hopes of sparking a greater love of books among young people, RCMP Const. John Kennedy issued a challenge at Salt Springs Elementary: how many books in total could the students collectively read in a month.

It started from there and turned into a fun challenge to other schools. Even more inspirational, the program has spread far beyond Pictou County and been picked up by schools in other countries around the world.

Now, not to bring anybody down, but it's worth noting a sad contrast between this celebration of books and the plight of public libraries in the province. They officially learned this week that for the seventh year in a row they will receive no increase in funding.

That will mean, in Pictou County, likely elsewhere, libraries hoping that municipalities can help fill the funding gap – which they've been doing. But the sad reality is, if the province doesn't begin to recognize the immense value of libraries, they will be forced to cut hours and services.

Back to the Wow! program, here in the province Kennedy said that since its inception it's resulted in the distribution of \$1 million worth of books free to help the cause.

What's more, the constable cites statistics showing that 65 per cent of inmates in Canadian prisons have difficulty reading. Since the beginning of the program, reading has increased among inmates in local prisons. Kennedy's waiting to see whether a correlation can be made showing that higher literacy in a population results in lower crime statistics.

Other statistics do show that strategies improving literacy rates correspond with a reduction in poverty, unemployment and isolation.

We can think of another reason to celebrate the power of books. At a time when children are spending more and more hours in front of electronic screens – which of course have their own value in learning – some extra time with a physical book makes for a more well-rounded learning experience.

If our provincial government could just catch on to the value of these benefits, compliments of books, think how much more widespread those benefits could be.