



Ending Book Deserts

by MOLLY NESS

Thirty-two million American children today live in book deserts; as such, they lack access to reading materials in their homes, schools, and communities. All children—regardless of their zip codes—deserve access to books and reading culture. The work to get books into the hands of readers is an issue of social justice and equity; furthermore, it is a necessary step in helping students to develop as lifelong readers.



LITERACY CHAMPION: MOLLY NESS, PhD

Molly Ness is a former classroom teacher and, since 2006 has been a teacher educator and reading researcher at Fordham University. She's the author of four books and numerous articles. She is an active contributor to the International Literacy Association and serves on the Elementary Advisory Board for Penguin Random House. In 2019, she created the End Book

Deserts podcast to bring awareness to the issue of book access. When not writing or teaching about reading, Molly spends time hiking on the coast of Maine, wandering farmers markets, listening to Bruce Springsteen, and shuttling her 5th grade daughter to ice hockey practice.

One to Know: What Are Book Deserts and Why Must We End Them?

Imagine, for a moment, that you are nine years old. You're ready to snuggle up with a book of your choice. Only, there are no books to be found in your home and your closest public library involves a lengthy cross-town bus ride. Your school and classroom libraries are not available because of the COVID pandemic, and your town has no independent bookstore. Your simple quest for a book is a reminder of the inequity you face.

Unfortunately, this hypothetical scenario is a reality for too many American children. Thirty-two million young readers live in *book deserts*, high-poverty geographic areas that lack reading material. Forty-five percent of children in the U.S. live in neighborhoods that lack public libraries and stores that sell books, or in homes where books are not present. Two-thirds of schools in the lowest income neighborhoods in the U.S. can't afford to purchase books at retail prices. This lack of books makes reading an unlikely habit.

When books are not readily available, there are dire consequences. As Neuman and colleagues (2019) explain, book deserts constrain young children’s opportunities to start school ready to learn. Without books, children miss out on chances to acquire vocabulary, content knowledge, and a myriad of literacy skills. In book deserts, children may miss out on the vast socio-emotional benefits that come from adult-child reading interaction. We cannot expect our children to become readers unless they have ample access to high-quality, engaging, and diverse books.

Fortunately, in our nation’s urban and rural pockets, there are innovative literacy warriors who work to end book deserts. Since 2019, the End Book Deserts organization has featured more than fifty people/programs, working tirelessly to get books to kids and to build sustainable reading culture. Some people focus on providing book access to specific geographic areas, while others look to serve overlooked populations (such as foster children, children in juvenile detention centers, and children who might go without bedtime stories because of incarcerated parents). Here are just a few of the most successful:

- [United Through Reading](#) enables deployed military parents to send personalized video recorded readings (and their accompanying books) home to children. Similar programs exist for students with incarcerated parents, such as the [Women’s Storybook Project of Texas](#).
- All across the country, laundromats are being transformed into literacy centers. A collaboration between the [Laundry Cares Association and Too Small to Fail](#) has succeeded in engaging young children in up to 47 minutes of literacy-based activities as parents/caregivers wash and dry clothing.
- Book banks—staffed by volunteers—help sort and deliver books, such as at the Illinois-based [Bernie’s Book Bank](#); San Francisco’s Children’s Book Project; the Maryland Book Bank (which loads a van full of book and local NFL players into book deserts); and teacher-created, New Jersey-based [Book Smiles](#).
- [Jet Blue’s Soar With Reading](#) has stocked books worth \$3.5 million into free vending machines in urban areas. Strategically placed in visible locations in low-income areas, these vending machines enable young readers to get an unlimited number of free, brand new books—donated by popular publishing companies.

In August 2021, more than 500 literacy activists are coming together for the [End Book Deserts conference](#)—the first-ever event focused solely on book access and literacy culture. Registration is free and open to all.

More to Know and Do: How to End Book Desserts

Press & Media Coverage of End Book Deserts

Dr. Ness and the End Book Deserts podcast have appeared in the following media outlets.

- [How You Can Help #endbookdeserts](#) (International Literacy Association)
- [Literacy as a Vehicle for Social Justice](#) (The READ podcast)
- [End Book Deserts](#) (Disrupted Magazine)
- [Ending book deserts: Why it matters](#), Alabama Literacy Network podcast, February 2021

- [Book Access in a Post-COVID World](#), Webinar for International Literacy Association.
- [Ending book deserts](#). Webinar for New Jersey Literacy Association.
- [Ending book deserts: Ensuring literacy access for all](#). TED-like Talk for Fordham University

Here are ways you can help!

- Listen, rate, and share the End Book Deserts podcast, available on all major podcasting platforms.
- Be a vocal advocate who spreads awareness around the issue of book deserts.
- In your community, perhaps you might inspire local businesses, houses of worship, and organizations to begin book collections or drives. [Click here](#) for resources and printable graphics on how to do so.
- Donate money or time to your favorite local or national book bank, literacy program, or reading organization. For a list of my favorites, [click here](#).
- Register for the [2021 End Book Deserts conference](#), bringing together literacy activists from across the country. [Click here](#) for free registration.
- Become [a sponsor](#) for the End Book Deserts conference or for an individual podcast.
- Make a financial contribution to End Book Deserts, a 501c3 organization. Email molly@endbookdeserts.com for more information.
- Rally your public library to eliminate late fees, which penalize economically strapped patrons.
- Buy books for teachers and literacy organizations—choosing from their Amazon wish list or [DonorsChoose.org](#).

How to Reach Molly Ness

Check out the books, articles, and videos from Dr. Molly Ness at www.drmollyness.com.

For more about Molly, check out her [End Book Deserts](#) podcast. Follow her on social media (Twitter @drmmollyness; IG a_reading_mother; FB End Book Deserts).