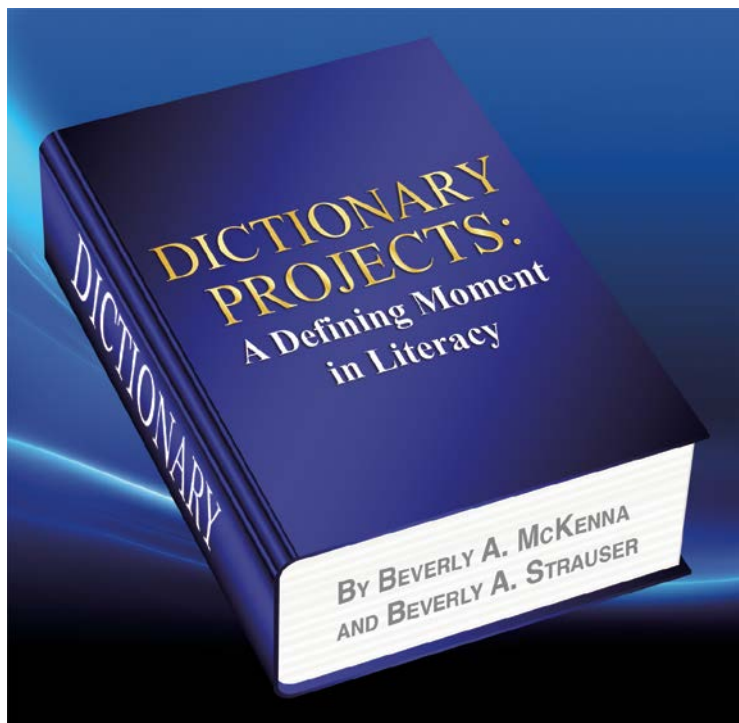




The scene is the auditorium of a high-poverty school, where every third-grader has been assembled. When a visitor explains that each child will receive a dictionary of his or her very own, looks of surprise turn to joy. Most live in homes without a dictionary. Regrettably, many have never owned a book.

This scene plays out again and again each spring as we visit schools in Chatham County. After years of providing this service, we can think of no way of promoting literacy that is more visible or more rewarding. It is a simple program that teachers across the state can easily replicate in their schools at virtually no cost. In this article, we explain how.

How It All Started

Annie Plummer, better known as “The Dictionary Lady,” began giving away dictionaries in 1992 after noticing that many of the students in her neighborhood walked to Garrison Elementary without any books (Ward, 1999). At the time, Garrison served children from three housing projects and two homeless shelters. Annie’s ingenuity and determination helped her develop a workable strategy that over time she extended first to other Savannah-area schools and eventually, through a network of family and friends, to schools in other cities.

Though Annie Plummer died in 1999, her work goes on. In 1995, her ideas inspired volunteer Mary French to found The Dictionary Project, a nonprofit based in Charleston, South Carolina. This organization has helped launch projects across the nation and beyond. To date, more than 18 million dictionaries have been given to third graders (Dictionary Project, 2014).

How You Can Get Started

Undertaking a dictionary project is not difficult, though it helps to be organized! We suggest the following steps based on our experiences over a number of years.

1. *Decide the scope of your involvement.* You can involve any number of schools, but our advice is to start with your own. After you’ve gone through the process once, you’ll have a much better idea of what is required. You can then decide whether to broaden the scope to other schools in your district.
2. *Gain the support of school administrators and third-grade teachers.* Do not simply assume that the obvious benefits of the project will eliminate the need to apprise teachers and administrators of how the project works. Although resistance is unlikely, your colleagues need to be in the loop.
3. *Seek permission from the district.* It is a good idea to gain district approval as well, though the principal can make a request on your behalf.

In our experience, district-level administrators are enthusiastic supporters of the project. In fact, do not be surprised if they urge you to include all third graders from the outset.

4. *Locate funding.* There are several options for obtaining the funds necessary to purchase the dictionaries. Partnering with a local service group is a possibility we have found to be particularly effective. Two organizations that have shown willingness in the past are the local Rotary and the area Pilot Club, an organization devoted to brain-based disorders. Another possibility is the parent organization that serves your school. Still another is one or more of the school’s local business partners. Occasionally, a single benefactor may wish to underwrite all of the costs.

5. *Plan logistics.* Once you’ve decided on the scope of the project and have secured the funds to carry it out, you’ll need to think through the process from start to finish. Make a to-do list that includes the following:

- Determine the number of copies you will need, estimating a bit high. Obtaining a few extra copies will ensure that no child is left out.
- Place an order. We recommend ordering through The Dictionary Project, which makes it possible to obtain dictionaries at very low cost—just \$1.25 at this writing.
- Arrange for delivery. This means working out arrangements with the principal and third-grade teachers. The event could be as elaborate as an assembly or as low key as going from room to room. But everyone involved needs to know what will occur and when.

6. *Seek publicity.* When all of the arrangements have

been made, contact local media. They are often happy to run a public interest story, and the publicity is good for the school. Before doing so, however, be sure to notify the principal.

A final touch could involve placing a sticker in each dictionary to credit the funding organization. It might contain an encouraging message as well, a practice started by Annie Plummer herself. When children opened their dictionaries, they discovered a handwritten note from Annie: "A mind is a terrible thing to waste. I challenge you not to waste yours."

Additional information is available from the Dictionary Project, 581 Flannery Place, Mt. Pleasant, SC 29466. Call 843-856-2706 or visit their website at dictionaryproject.org.

A Final Word

"Sadly," Remondi and Rasco (2013) observe, "two out of three of the 16 million children currently living in poverty in the United States have no books to call their own" (p. 5). Needless to say, this problem is not unique to the U.S., and the idea of combatting it by providing children with free books is hardly new. Warwick Elley's Book Flood program (1975) provided thousands of books to children in developing countries. Closer to home, Reading Is Fundamental (RIF) has given free books to children since 1966. But there is still much to do and there is room for many initiatives. Providing third graders with dictionaries targets a key inflection point in their development as readers. It gives them a resource they can return to again and again. It is a means for each of us to think globally while acting locally. And it makes a difference.

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Curl up with
a good
group



You live to read. You can hardly wait to get cozy in your favorite spot and crack the pages of a good book. You're also an educator. Why not curl up with a good group, too? Membership in the Georgia Reading Association will connect you to others like you who inspire and teach others about reading.

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