

Author proposes tough solutions to national woe

By JENNIFER GREENHILL-TAYLOR

Staff writer

There are 60 million adults in America who read at a level below the ninth grade. And there are a million more "functional illiterates" coming out of the public schools annually. These are people who may not be able to comprehend the instructions on a medicine bottle, or balance a checkbook.

This group of individuals will be facing another problem as more and more jobs in technology will require a high degree of literacy.

The only way to prevent this situation from worsening or continuing is to guarantee excellent reading teachers in earliest grades.

Educator Jonathan Kozol confronts the issue of illiteracy in his recent book, *Illiterate America* and proposes some hard-hitting solutions.

"One dollar spent at the third-grade level can save \$10 in remedial education in high school," Kozol said recently in an interview from his home.

His book, a powerful and sometimes frightening portrayal of the numbers of "functionally illiterate" individuals in this country, has inspired a renewed national interest in reducing these numbers.

Beginning this month, two national television networks, the American Broadcasting Corporation and the Public Broadcasting Service, will be presenting programs aimed at increasing public interest in fighting illiteracy.

Kozol, whose interest began 20 years ago when he was a fourth-grade teacher in the Boston inner-city schools, will be the luncheon speaker at the Network for Literacy seminar, to be held at the Sheraton at St. Johns Place on Sept. 11.

"Schools in that area [of Boston] talked less of reading methods and more of survival methods," he said.

"It was a classic underfunded, overcrowded school, and it wouldn't have mattered what method was used to teach reading."

Now much of his time is devoted to lecturing around the country on the subject of illiteracy.

The actual number of people in America who can be considered functionally illiterate depends on how we define the term.

"The definition depends on how well we want America to *function*. If we accept that an ability to read simple things — signs, warnings, numbers — is sufficient literacy in a democracy, then a fifth-grade reading level is sufficient.

"There are 25 million adults in America today who read at levels lower than fifth grade.

"If, on the other hand, we believe that one is functional in a democracy when he or she can understand

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