
Read Across America Day Should Not be Celebrated on Dr. Seuss' Birthday

By Shawnta S. Barnes - March 11, 2018



The National Education Association (NEA) wanted to encourage children to read. On March 2, 1998, the first Read Across America Day took place on Theodor Geisel's birthday. Geisel, who is known by most as Dr. Seuss, is a renowned children's author. To most, it made sense for this celebration to take place on his birthday.

In 2017, conversation about Geisel's earlier career was brought to light. Many people were unaware of the racist cartoons he drew. This led to

some educators, including myself, questioning whether or not we should use his books due to his racist past. Earlier this month, I wrote the blog post, “The Use of Dr. Seuss Text – Should his racist cartoons stop us from using his books?” where I concluded using his books is not problematic as long as you are not hiding Dr. Seuss’ racist cartoons. It can be a great point of discussion for older students.

An educator I know pushed back on my blog post and told me she didn’t think Read Across America Day needed to take place on Dr. Seuss’ birthday especially with the knowledge of his past. I agree. The NEA has a contract with Seuss Enterprises until August 2018. This means the day could be moved, but will the NEA take a bold stance? We have to do more than distance ourselves from situations that are problematic. We have to take a firm stance.

The distancing began this year. This year’s Read Across America theme was “Celebrating a Nation of Diverse Readers.” The Read Across America event held in D.C. showcased best-selling diverse authors Kwame Alexander, Jesse J. Holland, and Gene Luen Yang. The NEA has been mum about what actions they will take when the contract ends in August.

March is National Reading Month, so maybe Read Across America Day could take place on the first day of March to kick off National Reading Month. In addition to moving the day, the NEA should release resources to help educators engage students in conversation about the problematic past of Geisel or other authors. No, this wouldn’t be appropriate for kindergarteners, but National Reading Month should be a K-12 focus. Many times we push reading hard in elementary school, but National Reading Month should be a focus at the elementary, middle, and high school level and resources should be available for all of those levels.

Let’s move past having one big day focused on Dr. Seuss and focused on the mainly the primary level. Move Read Across America Day from Dr. Seuss’ birthday and make the focus on building lifelong readers K-12.