Kelly Gallagher, a high school English teacher at Magnolia High School in Anaheim, California, has twenty-five years of experience in working with teens. He has written seven books, including Readicide: How Schools are Killing Reading and What You Can Do About It (Stenhouse 2009). Gallagher is an advocate for recreational and authentic reading in schools. He also employs an academic reading instructional strategy that combines close reading as well as pre-reading discussions to increase students’ understanding of complex texts, resulting in what he calls “the sweet spot” of instruction that gives students just the right amount of support to literature.

Gallagher has graciously allowed us to use his term “readicide” as the theme for this issue of Knowledge Quest. On November 17, 2010, he took time early in his busy teaching day to answer questions about his views on reading.

I thoroughly enjoyed my conversation with Kelly Gallagher and hung up smiling. How could I not? He said being a school librarian at the end of his career is one of his “fantasies.”

**RUTH COX CLARK:** The term readicide—“the practices educators employ to raise reading scores that actually kill students’ love of reading”—is based on your experience with teens. Is there any incident that comes to mind that helped bring this term to life?

Kelly Gallagher (kellygallagher@cox.net) teaches English at Magnolia High School in Anaheim, California, and is the author of Readicide (Stenhouse 2009).
Kelly Gallagher: A group of senior English students were reading editorials on the war in Iraq and while discussing what "the lifeblood of al Qaeda" means one of the students asked, "Who is this Al guy?" Our students are being taught how to read to pass tests and in the process they are not exposed to real-world, authentic reading materials such as editorials in newspapers, magazine articles, and blogs.

RCC: You state in Readicide that "interesting books are disappearing as funding is diverted to purchasing ‘magic pill’ reading programs." What would be your “magic pill” to fix the problem of readicide in our schools?

KG: There is no magic pill. What works is bringing kids back to interesting books and an array of other reading materials. The kids who read the most do the best in school.

RCC: Readicide addresses the need for a "discussion director" in a school. What do you mean by this?

KG: The discussion director is someone on faculty, a teacher or the librarian, who advocates reading in the school by keeping the topic at the front of everyone’s mind, at faculty meetings addressing the need for recreational and authentic reading, and supporting reading-incentive activities in the school. I have led a book club in my school for the last eighteen years, and I have helped implement the twenty-minute campus-wide sustained silent reading time.

RCC: What part does the school library play in developing a book flood zone?

KG: I have over 2,500 books in my classroom library. Many of them are titles suggested by my students (I currently teach 160 teens a day in my classroom) or are recommendations from teens, teachers, and librarians I’ve spoken with around the country. Some titles are selected based on recommendations sent to me through my website <www.kellygallagher.org>. I have also selected titles by authors I’ve met and heard speak.

RCC: What types of activities occur in your classroom to encourage recreational reading?

KG: I take my students to the library often, but I am a strong believer in the power of the classroom library. As much as I’d like to take my students to the library every day, that is not possible. The classroom collection allows the students immediate access to books and other reading materials for recreational reading.

RCC: What role does the school librarian play in creating a book flood zone?

KG: Show me a good librarian, and I’ll show you a good school. Librarians should be right in the middle of curriculum, visiting classrooms, and doing booktalks. They should be going to the teachers rather than waiting for the teachers to come to them. A good librarian is worth his/her weight in gold.

RCC: What one piece of advice would you give to a novice school librarian?

KG: The mission of the school librarian should be to make the library the most inviting building on campus. Make it welcoming and fill it with a wide variety of reading materials including books, magazines, comics, and electronic resources. It should be the place in the school that the students want to be.

Ruth Cox Clark (clarkr@ecu.edu) is an associate professor in the Department of Library Science at East Carolina University in Greenville, North Carolina. She teaches youth materials courses.

There is no magic pill. What works is bringing kids back to interesting books and an array of other reading materials.