

March 28, 2000
“READING FIRST”
Ensuring that All Disadvantaged Students Can Read by the Third Grade

“We have a national emergency. Too many of our children cannot read. Reading is the building block, and it must be the foundation, for education reform.”

-- Governor George W. Bush, March 28, 2000

Background:

Governor Bush believes that reading is the gateway to all learning. He considers it a national tragedy that a majority of low-income fourth-graders cannot read at grade level:

- In the highest-poverty schools, 68 percent of fourth-graders could not read at basic level in 1998, as measured by the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) reading exam. In low-poverty schools, by contrast, more than three quarters of the fourth graders read at or above the basic level.
- The 1992 National Survey of Adult Literacy discovered that some 90 million Americans - nearly half the adult population - have severely limited literacy skills.

This situation is made even more tragic by the fact that research has identified effective solutions to the literacy problem. Indeed, recent studies conducted by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), conclude that:

- Effective reading instruction involves a balanced approach, which includes explicit instruction in phonics and phonological awareness skills.
- An emphasis on phonics-based instruction is particularly important for disadvantaged children and others at risk for reading failure.

Accomplishments:

Governor Bush put these solutions to work in Texas by setting a clear goal, providing flexible funding to local school districts, and by demanding results. Specifically, in January 1996, he set an ambitious goal: every Texas child must learn to read at grade level or better by the end of third grade, and continue to read at grade level or better throughout his or her schooling.

To help schools achieve this goal, Governor Bush and Texas leaders in 1997 gave educators the tools they needed to improve reading performance:

- A rigorous, research-based core reading curriculum that is phonics-driven and emphasizes a back-to-basics approach.
- A new diagnostic tool, the *Texas Primary Reading Inventory*, to help kindergarten through second grade teachers detect and correct reading problems early.

- New funding totaling \$82 million over a four-year period to support "Reading Academies" – intensive schools-within-schools to teach reading programs that work.
- Training for teachers, involving more than 90 percent of Texas kindergarten teachers in an intensive summer training program.
- A commitment of more than \$200 million for reading intervention programs – after-school, summer school, or in-school reading instruction.

Results:

As a result of these reforms, the percentage of third graders passing the Texas state skills test in reading increased by 13 percent in only two years. For low-income third graders, the passing rate improved by nearly 20 percent.

Proposal:

Governor Bush believes that this model can work in local school districts nationwide. As President, he will commit his administration and the nation to the ambitious goal of ensuring that every disadvantaged child can read by the third grade. Others have announced similar goals. But they propose resources without reform. Under Governor Bush's plan, new federal resources must be an instrument of reform, not another investment in failure. Specifically, coupled with his proposals demanding accountability in federal education programs, particularly those that serve disadvantaged students, Governor Bush will:

Establish the "Reading First" Program to Invest \$5 Billion over Five Years to Conquer Illiteracy Among Disadvantaged Children: Governor Bush will increase federal funding to disadvantaged students by creating a \$5 billion incentive fund for states to teach every child to read by third grade. States that choose to draw from this fund will be required to initiate the following:

- A reading diagnostic for students in K-2 to determine where students need help.
- A reading curriculum that includes elements based on the recent findings of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) research on reading.
- Training for K-2 teachers in reading preparation.
- Reading intervention for students who are not reading at grade level in K-2.
- Ongoing state reading assessment for students in grades 3-8 linked to the state accountability system.