

Ready to Read Ready to Learn

First Lady Laura Bush's Education Initiatives

"Every child deserves to realize his or her dreams. From the crib to the classroom, it is essential that children have parents, teachers and others in their lives who prepare them for success in school and in life."



Foreword by First Lady Laura W. Bush

Some of my fondest memories are of sitting quietly wrapped in my mother's arms, listening to her read to me. Little did I know that she was doing much more than providing comfort and entertainment – she was paving the way for learning and success in school.

Unfortunately, not every child is as fortunate as I was.

Some children enter school without even knowing the basics, such as the alphabet and counting. For these children, reading and learning can often be a struggle. And, it is a struggle that affects every American because if our children are not able to read, they are not able to lead.

Our challenge is to reach these children early and lift them to success. My experiences as a mother and an elementary school teacher have taught me that children that are ready to read are ready to learn.

As First Lady, I will work tirelessly to make sure that every child gains the basic skills to be successful in school and in life.

Across America, there are countless classroom heroes who are helping children beat the odds. I want to build on their success by helping to recruit more teachers, shine the spotlight on successful early childhood pre-reading and vocabulary programs, and help parents get access to information that will help them help their children learn.

Each of us has a duty to help our children achieve their full potential. By working together, we can shape the destiny of America's children with our hands and hearts.

Children who are able to read will be ready to learn and ready to lead.

Bringing What Works to Parents

“As parents, the most important thing we can do is read to our children early and often. Reading is the path to success in school and life. When children learn to love books, they learn to love learning.”

In 1998, in our highest poverty schools, 68 percent of fourth graders could not read at the basic level. Over the last 15 years, 15 million students have graduated from high school without the ability to read at the basic level.

Learning to read starts long before a child enters school, and reading is what helps turn a child into a good student. Reading is the skill that makes all other skills possible.

Unfortunately, not all adults know how important it is to read to very young children, and not all children have the advantage of owning and enjoying books of their own. Too many children begin elementary school ill prepared for successful reading and learning. They lack important basic skills.

In 1989, a team of pediatricians from Boston City Hospital created a program that incorporates early literacy efforts into standard pediatric care. They named the program Reach Out and Read (ROR).

Building on the trusting relationship parents have with their children’s physicians, ROR uses regularly scheduled well-child visits to help parents understand the importance of reading to their young children.

In ROR clinics, doctors and nurses actually prescribe that parents read to their children. Volunteers in the waiting rooms show parents creative ways to use books with their children, and after each visit, every child leaves with a new book. By the time a child enters school she will have a collection of her own books.

In 1997, Laura Bush helped initiate the Reach Out and Read program in Texas. With Mrs. Bush’s support and funding from private foundations, more than 60 Reach Out and Read clinic sites were opened around the state.

Reach Out and Read is a wonderful contribution to the effort to help children arrive in school prepared to read and learn. The First Lady is committed to supporting and expanding this vital program in communities across America.

The Tools to Teach What Works

“We know that children who have poor beginning reading skills are less likely to develop better reading skills throughout their school careers. Children, who start school behind, often stay behind. We can reverse that trend.”

Through scientific research, we have learned a great deal about the way children learn to read. Education experts agree that we should incorporate stronger pre-reading and vocabulary activities in pre-kindergarten programs.

The Margaret Cone Head Start Center, located in one of Dallas’ poorest neighborhoods, implemented a terrific example of a strong pre-kindergarten program. The Cone Center, in partnership with the Texas Instruments Foundation and Southern Methodist University, created the model for the Texas Ready to Read Program.

Mrs. Bush visited the Cone Center in 1998. There she saw the innovative program that had documented success in helping children to enter grade school ready to succeed in reading and learning. When the Cone Center compared the pre- and post-language and reading development scores of its children, the results were outstanding.

The Cone Center visit inspired Mrs. Bush to help more Head Start and other pre-school programs to build similar curriculum and teacher training models around the state. She promoted legislation to create the Ready to Read Pre-school Grant Program.

The Texas Legislature, in turn, appropriated \$17 million to replicate pre-reading and language programs like those at the Cone Center around Texas. This appropriation represents the first state-funded commitment to Head Start.

As First Lady, Mrs. Bush will continue to encourage and promote strong cognitive activities and teacher training models in our Head Start Centers and other pre-schools. And, she supports President Bush’s Early Reading First Program that will provide grants for pre-school programs to implement curricula rich in pre-reading and vocabulary skills – skills that are strong predictors of a child’s later success in school.

Recruiting the Best and the Brightest

We know what works. We have the tools to help children succeed. But the tools are meaningless if we lack the third essential component – teachers.

America’s future depends on our teachers – teachers with the training, authority, and freedom to challenge their students and change their lives.

While we have many wonderful teachers already at work in our public schools, we need to create more opportunities for men and women to enter the teaching profession. Many talented, well-qualified people have the desire to teach but do not have education degrees. This roadblock is a loss for these skilled individuals and for America’s schools.

The First Lady will encourage America’s best and brightest college students, professionals and military retirees to bring their talents and experience to classrooms around our nation, especially in inner-city public schools, where the need is greatest.

Teach For America:

Every child should have a high-quality education and an equal chance for success. In 1989, Wendy Kopp, a senior at Princeton University was troubled by the inequities in America’s educational system. She decided to take action. She launched Teach For America, a national teacher corps. Since then, more than 6,000 outstanding young grads have taught close to a half million children, and these teachers have become leaders in the fight for educational equality for all of America’s children.

The First Lady is pleased to join forces with Teach for America to encourage our country’s best college graduates to join the teaching ranks.

The New Teacher Project:

The New Teacher Project is another outstanding teacher recruitment effort. This project helps inner-city and rural school districts establish teaching fellows programs to encourage professionals in all fields to take their talent and experience to our schools.

Teaching fellows programs guided by The New Teacher Project are designed to streamline the transition of professionals to teaching. Applicants must

have a college degree. Fellows participate in an intensive teacher-training program, and a strong support network assists them throughout the school year.

Ninety-six percent of New York City's first class of fellows passed the state's main certification exam for new teachers after their acceptance into the program.

Among the applicants selected for the New York City Teaching Fellows program were a doctor and a former Criminal Court Judge with an undergraduate degree in physics from Harvard and a law degree from Yale.

Troops to Teachers:

Troops to Teachers recruits talented, retired military personnel, whose experience and strength of character can make a real difference in the classroom.

Many of these military professionals have science, math, and engineering degrees -- disciplines desperately needed in our schools.

Troops to Teachers candidates are men and women who have served their country and want to do more for the next generation. They're ready to teach and Troops to Teachers gives them the opportunity.

Strong Teachers, Strong Families, Strong Students

From the crib to the classroom, children need parents, teachers and others to prepare them for success in school and in life.

The scientific research of the past decade reveals how children learn to read and how we can enhance that process. Evidence clearly demonstrates that parents and pre-school programs can use specific activities to help children get ready to read and ready to learn. Beyond that, we know we need many more talented and enthusiastic teachers, especially in our under-served schools.

Major threats to a child's educational development and well being are not a matter of chance, but a matter of choice. Choices that we make for infants and children impact the choices which children, in turn, make later in life.

The First Lady actively supports Reach Out and Read, programs similar to Ready to Read, Teach For America, The New Teacher Project and Troops to Teachers. These programs are an effort truly worthy of our nation's support and commitment.

We must do more than say that all children can learn. We must believe it. Mrs. Bush is proud to join with President Bush in his mission to reform education with the Ready to Read, Ready to Learn Initiative.