

The Executive Memorandum

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THE READING EXCELLENCE ACT: HOW CONGRESS CAN ENCOURAGE PROVEN METHODS OF INSTRUCTION IN THE CLASSROOM

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As a response to the reading crisis, the FY 1998 budget resolution calls for \$260 million in funding for literacy programs consistent with the “goals and concepts” of the President’s America Reads program. Yet the U.S. Department of Education already spends more than \$8 billion a year on 14 literacy programs, and the federal government has spent more than \$100 billion since 1965 on Title I, Aid to Disadvantaged Children, to fund specially trained teachers who give extra help to disadvantaged children in reading and math. Despite the vast amounts spent on these programs, however, studies have shown that their effect on reading achievement has been minimal. Moreover, the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test found that 40 percent of fourth graders read at the “below basic level.”

The Reading Excellence Act (H.R. 2614), introduced by Representative William Goodling (R-PA), would require that funds be spent on reading programs which produce measurable, positive results supported by scientific research. Rather than manage the results of failing to learn to read in the classroom, as America Reads tries to do, the Reading Excellence Act (REA) addresses the source of the problem: the quality of classroom instruction. Hence, it offers Congress the best available option for spending the \$260 million called for in the 1998 budget resolution.

Goals of H.R. 2614. The stated purpose of H.R. 2614 is to improve the reading and literacy skills of children and families by “improving in-service instructional practices for teachers who teach reading” and other family literacy programs “to ensure that children can read well and independently not later than the third grade.” The \$260 million program would provide funds through competitive grants for states to form literacy partnerships with the governor, chief state school officer, chairmen of state legislative education committees, local education agencies, and parents and teachers. Unlike America Reads, which would fund training for a million after-school reading volunteers, this legislation would:

- **Send the dollars to the classroom.** The state literacy partnerships would have to send 95 percent of their funds to the local level, targeting schools with a high percentage of disadvantaged students. Funds would be spent on teacher training and tutorial assistance grants instead of on an ever-changing “army” of non-classroom volunteers with varying degrees of commitment and ability.

- **Fund proven practices in teaching reading skills.** Under America Reads, the Department of Education will not require that funds be spent on research-based reading instruction methods with proven track records. All training in reading instruction funded by the REA, however, would be based on “reliable, replicable research on reading.” Many studies have shown which methods are most effective in teaching children—particularly children with low reading skills—how to read, but they have not been widely disseminated or taught to teachers, and thus have not reached many American classrooms.

Recent studies have shown that many children who cannot read have been instructed using unscientific or “fad” techniques, such as “whole language” programs that exclude phonics instruction. The REA, in what is perhaps its most important provision, would ensure that children who need the most help in reading are taught using the most effective methods. The REA would promote the use of reliable teaching methods—such as phonics-based instruction—that have produced results supported by replicable research. To qualify, the research must have an adequate sample size and established standards of measurement, test more than one theory, be peer reviewed, and measurably improve reading skills.

Furthermore, because the bill requires literacy partnerships to coordinate with other federal programs such as Head Start, Even Start, Title I, Special Education, and Adult Education, teachers in these programs also would be able to receive training in effective reading instruction. Such training could improve the performance of programs which thus far have failed to produce significant results.

- **Empower disadvantaged parents.** H.R. 2614 also would fund state and local literacy grant recipients to provide tutorial assistance grants (TAGs) to economically disadvantaged parents who reside within empowerment communities or enterprise zones. Modeled after federal child care and job training vouchers, these TAGs could be used to obtain additional help to improve reading skills as quickly as possible. TAGs would enable children to attend local after-school learning centers or be tutored by other providers using research-based methods. Instead of funding volunteer training, as America Reads proposed, this provision would give the neediest students access to trained reading specialists.
- **Repeal unfunded programs.** More than 100 Department of Education programs no longer receive funding. The department has agreed to repeal 69 of these in Title IV of H.R. 2614.

The End Result: Ensuring That Children and Adults Can Read. The REA requires that the performance of all federal education programs benefiting from literacy partnership grants be peer reviewed by a panel of reading experts: representatives from the National Institute for Literacy, National Academy of Sciences, and National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, as well as other respected experts who provide professional development and training based on reliable, replicable research. Each partnership would be required to spend 2 percent of its grant on an evaluation by a qualified research institute to determine the degree to which children’s reading skills have improved through TAGs or teacher training. These evaluations would be submitted to the U.S. Department of Education and the peer review panel. Grant recipients not following reliable, replicable research on reading would no longer be eligible to receive grants. The National Institute for Literacy would disseminate information about successful reading instruction programs and other relevant data to all recipients of federal education program funds.

The end result of training teachers to teach reading efficiently and effectively, using methods based on reliable and replicable research, would be more American children who know how to read. Moreover, this small change would fundamentally alter reading instruction within existing federal programs. Through such sound teaching practices, children would be reading successfully by the end of third grade, fewer children would be placed inappropriately into learning disabled or special education programs, and the need for federal education programs overall would decrease. Thus, the Reading Excellence Act would be a major step forward in Congress’s efforts to restore parental and local control of education.