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Dole ignores progress in improving reading

By Richard W. Riley

I am pleased that Sen. Bob Dole has added his voice to those concerned about the reading skills of America's students. Clearly, nothing has a more fundamental impact on the success of our children in school and later life than their ability to read.

Looking at the data, anyone would have to agree that there is urgent cause for concern. Far too many students at all grade levels lack basic reading skills. However, while Sen. Dole claims that there has been a meltdown in reading, the reality is more complex. While far too many U.S. students score poorly in reading, the average score among American fourth-graders was the second-highest among 31 nations participating in a recent international comparison, and our highest-achieving students (those at the 90th percentile and above) were rated the best in the world. Still, we clearly have a long way to go, especially with our country's most disadvantaged students.

Another assertion Sen. Dole makes is dead wrong. He states that the U.S. Department of Education has stood on the sidelines when it comes to reading. In fact, the department has been a real leader in efforts to improve America's reading skills.

The Title I program, which was reauthorized with bipartisan support in the 103rd Congress at my and President Clinton's urging, provides vital funds to local schools to improve the basic and advanced skills of disadvantaged students. A greater share of this money goes into the improvement of reading skills than into any other subject. Sen. Dole describes the "whole language" vs. "phonics" instructional debate, indicating his view on which learning technique is more effective; under Title I, though, it's up to local school districts and educators to determine which instructional approach works best for them.

The president and I are concerned with results, not micromanaging classrooms or intruding in the decisions of parents and teachers. Unfortunately, the Republicans in the U.S. House of Representatives want

to cut Title I by 17 percent, meaning that as many as 1 million fewer students will not receive the instructional help they need; the Republican-led Senate Appropriations Committee also recommended a reduction in funds from 1995 levels.

The president, on the other hand, considers reading and the other basics a national priority and has proposed to increase funds that local schools can use for skills improvement. We can make this important investment in our children's future and still reach the goal of balancing the budget.

Sen. Dole also overlooks the Department of Education's remarkably successful READ-WRITE-NOW! initiative. In launching the initiative in 1995, I called on America to help families, schools and communities improve the reading and writing skills of learners of all abilities, backgrounds and ages. Together with business partners like Pizza Hut, the department reached almost half a million chil-

dren this past summer, encouraging over 125,000 reading partners to volunteer to work with young children. The initiative sent free kits to schools, summer recreation programs and households, with an idea book on how to help young readers devote at least 20 minutes a day to reading.

The majority leader mentions how important it is to involve parents in their children's learning. President Clinton and I are deeply committed to the idea that parents are their children's first teachers; this fundamental truth has been a cornerstone of this administration's education policies. We have demonstrated our leadership by strongly supporting the Family Involvement Partnership for Learning, providing practical, helpful information to thousands of parents and other community members on the many ways in which they can help children read and learn better.

Through our publications, on-line library, and toll-free telephone number — 1-800-USA-LEARN — we have brought the message of family involvement in chil-

dren's learning to the American people. I have encouraged parents to find the time to check homework every day, read with their children, limit TV viewing and encourage their children to take challenging courses at school. Moreover, through our sponsorship of the Employer Promise for Learning, we have also held up the example of companies such as Marriott, GTE and United Airlines that have committed to family-friendly education policies, such as providing regular time off so workers can get more involved in their children's schools.

Finally, Sen. Dole notes how important academic standards are in encouraging better student learning, citing Virginia's standards as an example. This administration has carried forward a bipartisan movement, which began with the 1989 Education Summit in Charlottesville, Va., to encourage all states to adopt their own challenging academic standards in core subjects like English, math, science, history and geography. The Goals 2000: Educate America Act provides funds — on a voluntary basis — to states and school districts who wish to carry out effective learning improvement plans revolving around high academic standards as determined by states and local citizens. At last count, 46 states, including Sen. Dole's Kansas, are participating in this important effort to help all U.S. students learn basic and advanced skills. Unfortunately, Goals 2000 has been unfairly attacked by Mr. Dole and other critics, when they should have been lending a hand. I hope that, from this point forward, we can count on Mr. Dole's support for this important initiative.

Again, I am glad that the majority leader is attuned to the vital role that reading plays in the education of our youngsters. We need his help, and the help of all Americans, to ensure that the U.S. is truly a "Nation of Readers."

Riley is secretary of the Department of Education and a former S.C. governor. Knight-Ridder/Tribune News Service.

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Bill Kincaid

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

THE SECRETARY

January 22, 1996

Editor
The Wichita Eagle
825 E. Douglas
Wichita, KS 67202

I am pleased that Sen. Dole has added his voice to those concerned about the reading skills of America's students ["A Dearth of Basic Reading Skills," January 7, 1996]. Clearly, nothing has a more fundamental impact on the success of our children in school and later life than their ability to read.

Looking at the data, anyone would have to agree that there is urgent cause for concern. Far too many students at all grade levels lack basic reading skills. However, while Sen. Dole claims that there has been a "meltdown" in reading, the reality is more complex. While far too many U.S. students score poorly in reading, the average score among American fourth-graders was the second-highest among 31 nations participating in a recent international comparison, and our highest achieving students (those at the 90th percentile and above) were rated the best in the world. Still, we clearly have a long way to go, especially with our country's most disadvantaged students.

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Again, I am glad that the Majority Leader is attuned to the vital role that reading plays in the education of our youngsters. We need his help, and the help of all Americans, to insure that the U.S. is truly a "Nation of Readers."

Yours sincerely,


Richard W. Riley

COMMENTARY

A dearth of basic reading skills

By Sen. Bob Dole

Knight-Ridder/Tribune News Service

One of the most important, but under-reported, stories of 1995 was the shocking failure of the nation's schools to teach our children the most basic of skills: reading.

Here are the facts. According to the 1994 National Assessment of Educational Progress, a staggering 40 percent of all fourth-graders have "below basic" reading skills, which is a euphemism for saying that they are unable to understand the overall meaning of what they read. By the time these students are preparing to graduate from high school, their performance is not much better: A full 25 percent of high school seniors — many of whom will go on to receive diplomas, enter the work force, and even attend college — are deemed functionally illiterate. Only 36 percent are considered "proficient" readers and a mere 4 percent have "advanced" reading skills.

With our school failing to teach the basics of reading, it should come as no surprise that somewhere between 40 and 44 million Americans now operate at the very lowest levels of literacy.

The United States Department of Education may not have "caused" the reading meltdown, but at best it has stood on the sidelines, despite the cheery assessments of the current Secretary of Education Richard Riley. During the past two decades, the federal government has spent hundreds of billions of tax dollars on scores of programs that too often feed a money-hungry educational bureaucracy without producing real results for real-life students.

The lesson we have learned is that educational success does not necessarily depend on the dollars spent; instead, it depends on what is being taught, how it's being taught, and demanding that students meet high standards.

Many local officials understand this reality. As Mayor Rudy Giuliani explained earlier last year in a speech comparing New York City's troubled public schools with its parochial ones, the city spends more on education — \$8 billion — than the states of North Carolina (6.3 billion), or Georgia (5.1 billion), or Virginia (\$1.7 billion): "The point ... isn't that we're

spending too much on education. The amount of money is not the issue. The issue is how that money is spent."

Unfortunately, it's often the rule rather than the exception for education bureaucrats to spend our tax dollars on the latest, and sometimes untested, educational fads.

One fad is called outcome-based education. It sounds like a good idea — judging the quality of schools not on the basis of resources invested but on student performance, or outcomes. Unfortunately, the outcomes that count most are often not reading scores or high achievement on math tests, but attitudinal outcomes like "willingness to cooperate with other students" or "appreciation of diversity." In other words, it's more important to be a skilled lunchroom pal than a skilled reader.

Then there's another fad called "invented" spelling. According to some educators, children are "independent spellers," capable of making their own judgments on how words are, and should be, spelled. To correct a child's spelling errors, the proponents of this approach claim, could dampen his creative energies, and even worse, damage his "self-esteem."

One of the most pervasive fads is the "whole language" approach to learning how to read. The proponents of "whole language" claim that learning how to read is as natural and as easy as learning how to speak. As a result, they have emphasized "literature skills" and de-emphasized phonics, attaching little importance to the ability of students to decode a word by phonetically pronouncing vowels and consonants. Instead, children are simply expected to look at a word and recognize its meaning.

During the 1980s, the State of California experimented with the "whole language" approach, with predictably disastrous results. California students today have some of the worst reading scores in the country. Gov. Pete Wilson and the new California superintendent of education are now championing a back-to-basics movement with phonics as a key ingredient of the reading-skills curriculum.

There are other signs of hope.

In contrast to the much-maligned

National Education Standards, the Commonwealth of Virginia has recently adopted its own state "Standards of Learning." The standards, which were developed by Gov. George Allen and the bipartisan State Board of Education, emphasize such proven educational techniques as rigorous mathematics training, particularly in the early grades and, yes, the teaching of reading through phonics.

In New York City, citizens can take pride in the Frederick Douglass Academy, a public junior and senior high school located in central Harlem. The principal of the academy, Dr. Lorraine Monroe, is a tough, no-nonsense educator who takes standards seriously, insisting that her students prepare for the most rigorous standardized tests. She says she will place less emphasis on the SATs "just as soon as Harvard no longer requires them."

Recognizing that parental involvement is often the key to a child's educational success, Dr. Monroe also insists that the parents of her students must pledge to provide quiet study space at home and to encourage their children to work hard and obey the school's rules.

In fact, some experts have estimated that if every parent spent 20 minutes each night reading with his or her child, that child would read an additional one million words a year. Imagine if parents all across America turned off the television set for just one hour each evening and insisted that their children read a book. Instead of watching "The Simpsons" or "Beavis and Butt-head," our kids could be reading the classics. Parents should also set reading goals for their children: say, two books a month or 25 books a year.

As the New Year continues, I have a simple suggestion for America's parents: Forget the latest video game or the newest action-hero toy. Buy your child a book. In fact, buy several books.

After all, reading is fundamental, not only to our nation's cultural vitality but to our economic security as well.

Sen. Bob Dole, R-Kan., is majority leader of the U.S. Senate. Knight-Ridder/Tribune News Service did not subsidize the writing of this commentary.

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