

Doing More for Education: “Read with a Child”

Governor Olene S. Walker, State of Utah

In the next decade, Utah will see 145,000 new students enter its public education system. Compare that to 17,000 new students in the past 10 years. We face a challenge to educate our children so that they become successful and are part of a skilled and well-educated workforce. As leaders, educators and parents, we must ensure our children have learned and mastered the basic skills like reading, writing and math. We must work to provide adequate funding for education, including dollars for special programs to focus on children who are falling behind. We must also enlist the help of every parent, neighbor and volunteer to supplement a child's education outside our schools. Since becoming Utah's fifteenth governor, I have created a program titled “Read with a Child.” This program has provided \$30 million to Utah schools to focus on reading, a very basic skill. The program also encourages every Utahn to “spend the most important 20 minutes of their day, reading with a child.” I believe that together, we can help our youth gain strong foundations for future learning and success. And it begins with exploring a book with a child.

DOING MORE FOR EDUCATION: “READ WITH A CHILD”

During a recent elementary school visit in Weber County, I asked a class of fifth graders what democracy meant. One boy blurted out, “Democracy means the people rule, so everybody's got to do something.” How right he was! We live in a state with the highest percentage of volunteers. From donating time at a child's school to delivering cans of food to a nearby shelter, Utahns take pride in helping their neighbors. It seems a lot of people are doing “something.”

Upon becoming governor in November 2003, I realized we needed to do “something” more to help our children obtain the education they desperately need. In the past decade, 17,000 new students have entered our public education system. In the next ten years, 145,000 new students will enter our schools. We are last in per-student expenditures, falling \$250 per student below Arizona. We have more children per capita than any other state, and our population continues to grow. We may never be number one or 25 on the list of per-student expenditures, but we must not allow ourselves to slip any further. We face a challenge in educating our growing number of students, but they are our greatest asset.

If we want to provide economic stability in our state, we must have qualified and trained workers. This goal begins with our children. We want our children and grandchildren to stay in Utah, and to accomplish this we must grow quality, high-paying jobs. As a state, we have been moving toward

competency-based education to ensure children have more time learning the skills they need, rather than earning “time in the seat.” Our children need to learn basic skills such as reading, writing and math before they can successfully accomplish other materials and subjects.

Last summer I attended education summits statewide and heard from both educators and parents that we must pursue basic skills first and focus on the early grades if we want to make a difference in our education outcomes. I took their advice seriously and began cultivating a plan.

PERFORMANCE PLUS – READING ACHIEVEMENT

One in five Utah students cannot read at grade level. If children cannot read, they will not succeed in life. From kindergarten through third grade, students learn to read. After third grade they read to learn. How can a student learn history or complete a story problem if he or she cannot read? I believe we can do more for education if we can ensure our children are reading at grade level.



In my budget recommendations for 2005, I proposed a \$30 million allocation for reading achievement in our elementary schools. I worked hard to get the proposal passed during the 2004 Legislative Session, and we will now provide schools essential tools to improve literacy.

Teachers will receive special training to help struggling students, schools can better test a child's reading skills, and we will put materials into every classroom to help children read. The literacy experts recommend we should aim to have 90 percent of our students reading at grade level by the end of the third grade. This takes into account the 10 percent of students with learning disabilities and special needs. But I will continue to ask that we help every student learn to read at grade level, because I don't want to predetermine which child will not make it. We should give them all an equal opportunity.

We cannot hope this \$30 million will solve our problems. It is a great start, but we'll need to continue to have the foresight and dedication to fund reading programs in our public education system if we want to ensure every child, not just four in five, can read.

THE MOST IMPORTANT 20 MINUTES OF YOUR DAY

Funding reading programs in our schools will certainly help improve literacy in our state. But we can do more. We are naïve to think schools have the entire responsibility of educating our children. As parents, grandparents, neighbors and volunteers, we can help boost a child's educational experience.



I remember meeting Michael, an 8-year-old boy who was found living along the Jordan River with his little brother. Michael was homeless, hungry and had never been to school. When his adoptive mother brought him home, she learned he didn't know his alphabet or even his colors.

She, along with a special education teacher, worked countless hours with Michael to help him transition into school. By the age of 14, Michael was not only performing at grade level, he was at the top of his class.

Each one of us can make a difference if we do "something" for a child's education. I believe we can make the most difference if we spend just 20 minutes of our day reading with a child.

In December 2003, I launched the "Read with a Child" campaign encouraging Utahns to do just that: read with a child. We must begin reading with children from the moment they come home from the hospital. Even a newborn will enjoy hearing the sound of your voice and being held in your lap.

Many parents have told me they are trying to incorporate reading with their four or five year old, but it is a challenge to have them sit still. I applaud parents for reading with their

children at any age, but I promise they will be more attentive the earlier in life you begin.

We are finding more and more students are entering school without any lap time with an adult. You can increase lap time by reading with a child 20 minutes every day. You will stimulate his or her imagination and build a learning foundation. You will also create an opportunity to bond with a child. If we can ensure a child has at least 1,000 hours of lap time before he or she enters school, they will be prepared for the subjects they are taught.

IT BEGINS AT HOME

1. You can do a lot to help your child learn to read.
2. Litter your home with books, magazines and other reading material.
3. Provide easy access to reading material.
4. Let your child turn the pages.
5. Follow the words with your finger.
6. Select stories that use repeated phrases and sound out the words with your child.
7. Point out pictures and ask questions.
8. Act out a story with your child.
9. Ask questions as you read.
10. Relate stories to your child's life.
11. Re-read your child's favorite books.
12. Subscribe to a children's magazine.
13. Get a library card.

Even if you speak another language at home, read with your child in your native language. Reading with your child will enhance his or her vocabulary skills, stimulate imagination, increase comprehension, and provide a foundation for all future learning.

IT TAKES ALL OF US

Some children may not have a parent who can read to them every day. That is why it is important for grandparents, aunts and uncles, older siblings, neighbors, and volunteers to help.

Recently the Boys and Girls Clubs of Utah have promised to read with every child who enters their doors for 20 minutes a day. Organizations like the Salt Lake Chamber of Commerce and businesses like Zions Bank are encouraging members and employees to do the same thing. Cities like Midvale and media outlets like Bonneville International are also spreading the word.

The *Deseret Morning News* is now running a "Read with a Child" column every Tuesday. While the articles are interesting to children, they also show children how to stay informed of local and world events.

I hope every citizen will see and hear advertisements and read billboards carrying the message: "Read with a Child."

Together, we can make a difference.

WHAT'S NEXT?

It will take continual funding as well as a grassroots-level effort to improve literacy in our state. I hope every citizen will feel a sense of ownership and a sense of duty to do "something" to improve education in Utah.

Education is the engine for economic development in our state. We must have an educated workforce today and tomorrow. Let us begin now, let us begin with the basics, and let us begin with our children.

