

Reach Out & Read
New York, NY
December 1, 1998

PHOTOCOPY
PRESERVATION

First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton
Reach Out & Read Announcement
New York City, NY
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Thank you all. Thank you. Thank you so much. You know, I know that Pat [Schroeder, president and CEO of the Association of American Publishers] is very happy in her new job, but I for one really miss her in the Congress. She is somebody who can throw about five metaphors out in the space of six minutes that are all memorable -- you know, "ruffles on overcoats" and the like. She has brought to her public service, and now to her new position, the same kind of commitment to real issues and people's concerns that we so desperately need more of in our country, and I'm just delighted that she could be here with all of us today.

I'm also pleased to be at Bellevue. I received some briefing material, and I think that this is the oldest public hospital in the country. And I think we ought to applaud all the people at Bellevue for that.

I want to thank all of the speakers: I want to thank Mr. [Carlos] Perez [executive director of Bellevue Hospital Center] for inviting us here to gather to make this announcement; Dr. [Barry] Zuckerman [founding director of Reach Out & Read], whom I have known and admired now for a number of years -- I want to thank him for being the leader of Reach Out & Read and the real catalyst for so much of what has gone on around the country. Dr. [Leora] Mogilner [director of Reach Out & Read at Mt. Sinai Medical Center], I want to thank you for your work specifically here in the New York area. And I particularly want to thank Richard Robinson [president and CEO of Scholastic Corporation] for his commitment on behalf of Scholastic Corporation to making sure that the books that doctors and nurses and hospitals such as this need in order to give to families and children are made available.

I think that all of us who care about what happens in the early years of a child's life recognize how essential it is to do everything we can -- at whatever intersections we might be privileged to witness or be part of -- to create an environment in which a child and a family feel secure, given the attention that they need, and provided with the advice and the support that every new family needs. You know, it's something of a misconception that only families that might have more challenges than other families need this kind of support. I think all American families, given the kind of stresses that we live in in our time, with all of the pressures on working parents, whether it's two parents in a household, both working, or one parent working, or a single parent working, all that we know that goes on in the lives of most American families. We need to do all that we can to provide support and guidance. And we know that most parents will have some interactions with medical professionals, starting at their baby's birth and going forward for a couple of years at least. So that the brilliance behind Reach Out & Read was to recognize that that intersection where a professional could interact with a parent, a guardian, a child, over something like a vaccination, provided an opportunity to do even more.

Now we've always recognized, I think maybe intuitively, and certainly anecdotally, that reading to children seemed like a good idea. It certainly was gratifying for those of us who were lucky enough to be read to, and for those of us who continued that habit with our own children. There was just something very special about that time -- you know, holding a child, maybe cuddled up in a chair, or lying across a bed before the lights went out -- and reading a book or telling a story.

But certainly, as Pat and others have already referred to, we now know from the research that has gone on in the last several years how critical that kind of stimulation is to brain development. It used to be a good thing to do, that we thought was worthwhile. We now have empirical evidence about what it physically does to those synapses and those brain cells.

That was a real breakthrough, and it provided even more opportunity for physicians and nurses to say in their professional interactions, "You know, this is not only a nice thing to do. This will literally help your baby's brain grow."

So what became a great idea based on the observations and the research and work that was done starting some years ago in Boston, has now swept the country. Because clearly more and more parents are being reached by this information, even though we still have a long way to go. Most parents won't read scholarly journals, they might not watch programs in which this is reported, but they will listen to their doctor, they will listen to a nurse, they will listen to someone whom they believe has their child's best interest at heart. So filling that time with not only advice about vaccinations and other problems that a parent brings to you, but talking about the importance of reading and stimulating your child is something that is irreplaceable. And only those of you who take care of our children in institutions such as this and in community health centers and in private practice offices all over our country can really have that opportunity.

So about 20 months ago, after following Reach Out & Read and being very admiring of the work that was being done and the way that it was slowly spreading around our country, I was honored to host an event at the White House where publishers, and booksellers, and pediatricians, and librarians, and other dedicated citizens came together to try to create a national program. We called it the "Prescription for Reading Partnership," which was really a way of describing what Reach Out & Read does -- to prescribe reading to parents. And now we can report that we're serving more than 780,000 children in 47 states, and as you've already heard, the number of doctors who've been trained and the number of people like this coalition represent who've come together to do this has just grown by leaps and bounds.

So today, we are gathered to make an important next step in the national campaign to promote reading for children -- by launching the Reach Out & Read Coalition of Greater New York. Now there isn't any city in the world better known for its great publishing houses, its first-class hospitals, its community health centers, its nonprofit organizations. So we know that the resources are here to meet the dreams and aspirations of the Coalition founders and members. Already more than 100 organizations have joined. You have set an ambitious goal -- to

“prescribe” books to one million children in five boroughs, New Jersey, and Westchester by the year 2000, and to help prepare countless children for a better life in the future.

I’m also honored to announce today that Scholastic has expanded its generous commitment to our cause. And I want to thank Mr. Robinson and all of his colleagues. Scholastic is not only donating 50,000 books to Reach Out & Read, the coalition here in Greater New York, it is donating one book for every new child served by the program over the next five years. So if you go above the million mark, and you reach even more children, Scholastic will be there with a book for each child served. Scholastic is also extending its local challenge grant program to New York so that for every \$5,000 raised locally, 500 books will be given locally.

And, for every \$100,000 raised nationally, 5,000 books will be given nationally. And lastly, Scholastic will expand their multi-lingual book program, which I had the honor of announcing last April at the University of Chicago Hospital at an event such as this announcing the coalition in Chicago. I’ve lost track, Dick, of how many languages you already do. [Inaudible reply.] Ten languages, and now adding Bengali and Serbo-Croatian as a means to serve those growing communities here in New York. So, indeed, I want to join all of you in commending and thanking Mr. Robinson and Scholastic for contributing so much to the lives of our children.

I think you’ve heard from all of the speakers our deep concern about the growing literacy gap -- and by literacy we no longer mean just the ability to read well enough to get a job that doesn’t require a lot of reading, which used to be the old measurement, but we’re now looking at what it means to be literate, truly literate, in this new world that is being created by leaps and bounds every day through the electronic media.

If we do not do more to assist parents who have themselves limited education, low incomes, for whom English is not their primary language, to prepare their children, then that gap can only grow wider.

So we have to do more to level the playing field. We have to support programs like this, but also other high quality early childhood programs. We have to also make sure that children have access to computer literacy, so that they are not left behind by the children of people like us, who are very adept at using computers, and very comfortable with them.

So I’d also like to commend a new computer literacy program that is being launched here in New York today, thanks to some of the people here as well as their partners around the city. Over 10,000 pieces of software are being donated by U.S. Kids Compute in conjunction with the Learning Company. And First Book will in turn distribute the software across the country to improve access for children who, because of economic or other reasons, have little or no access to computers and educational software.

You know, I just spent Thanksgiving with my family, which includes a 3 ½-year-old

nephew, who has probably been read to so much he's sick of being read to. But he now operates his own little computer, he has his own little programs, he's writing little letters, he's learning all kinds of words. And we know, as Dick reminded us, that those words really go into that vocabulary bank which determines very much how children are viewed once they get to school and how they view themselves.

Any of you who have ever been in a classroom, in the first days or weeks of kindergarten or first grade, know that you have some children who come, like my nephew, probably taking his portable computer to kindergarten. And you have other children, who when the teacher passes out worksheets and says, "Circle the figure that's different," they don't know what circle means. I've been in classrooms where children have been asked to stand up and say their names, and some children only know their first names. So we know very well that by providing this kind of stimulation, and then providing the resources for the stimulation, we're going to be helping countless children just move forward a little further, a little faster, than they would have been able otherwise.

If you are involved in Reach Out & Read, and I hope every one of you has a chance to be -- not only Bellevue, but Mt. Sinai, all the hospitals and health centers represented here -- you truly will see what we've already heard reported: you will see lives changed. You will also have a way of interacting with your patients and their parents that maybe wasn't available to you before. I've had a lot of doctors tell me, Barry [Zuckerman], that it's really changed the way they relate to patients and to parents and to families. And even in this time of increased pressures on physicians and managed care restrictions, there isn't any substitute for spending time with a family, with a patient, with a parent, and trying to create that bond of trust, and then trying to leave something that can continue on after they leave the office.

So I am excited about what you are doing here, and the consequences that I know will flow from it. And I want to congratulate all of you who have worked so hard to launch this new Reach Out & Read partnership. I'll look forward to hearing the results -- both the empirical ones and the anecdotal ones -- in the months and years ahead. Because you're going to be literally changing lives as much as you will be when you provide a well-child check-up or give a vaccination. So I want to thank all of you.

And I want to thank those who, like Barry, conceived of this idea, which sounds so simple, but has such profound implications for families, for children, and for our collective future. Thank you very much.