

**FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON  
REMARKS FOR EARLY LITERACY FOR ALL CHILDREN:  
MEETING THE CHALLENGE  
LITTLE ROCK, AR  
MARCH 11, 1997**



Thank you Representative [Bob] McGinnis for that kind introduction. I want to thank you for your leadership in the statehouse and for all that you do on behalf of education and the children of Arkansas. I am delighted to be back in Little Rock, to join all of you who have dedicated your life's work to helping our children fulfill their own God-given potentials.

No task is more important nor more urgent than the one we are gathered here to discuss: The education and literacy of our children.

As America moves into the Information Age and a global economy, our children will be presented with boundless opportunities and unprecedented challenges. And yet, today, 40 percent of our children are lacking the most fundamental skill they will need to seize those opportunities and meet those challenges. Forty percent of fourth graders cannot read a book on their own. If forty percent of our children cannot read at grade level, how can we expect them to read a biology text or grasp advanced theories of physics, chemistry, and computer science -- fields of learning that are in so much demand in this Information Age?

As we all know, the ability to read is the foundation for all learning, the key to opening unlimited doors of knowledge, opportunity, and success. Study after study has shown that students who are unable to read well by the end of the third grade are more likely to become school dropouts and truants, and, as the years pass, have fewer good options for jobs.

While these statistics are daunting, let's not forget that many of the answers and solutions to these problems already exist. Just as we are entering an unprecedented age of progress and technological discovery, so we are discovering new information about early childhood development and literacy. Innovative educators such as yourselves have been working very hard over these past years to develop the teaching methods and curricula that are most effective with children. All we need to do as schools, communities, and a nation is muster the will and the energy to make good use of them.

Which brings us to the reason for this conference and the reason for my coming to Arkansas. This is the place where the President first began his lifelong crusade to raise standards in our schools, to strengthen the public commitment to education and to make sure that every child received the high-quality education he or she deserved. This is the place where so many of the innovations in early childhood education that the President hopes to introduce to the rest of America first got their start.

I remember when Reading Recovery was first brought to Arkansas. We had heard the

success other states and school districts had had with the program and were eager to use it to help the our own children. So I am delighted to learn that Reading Recovery is meeting your high expectations. Since its introduction in Arkansas classrooms in 1991, Reading Recovery has helped so many children who could easily have been forgotten and abandoned as hopeless and uneducable, become more confident readers -- and learners.

Reading Recovery recognizes that the best time to make sure a child is on a certain path to reading success is in the first grade, early in his or her school career. It recognizes that the best way to help a child who comes to school unprepared to learn is through an investment of time, elbow grease and personal attention.

But we must recognize that dedicated teachers and Reading Recovery specialists alone cannot help our children read. It will take all of us.

In his State of the Union, the President outlined his Call to Action for American Education. Behind each of the policies and initiatives in the Call to Action is a challenge to every American and every sector of our society to recognize the many crucial roles we can play in a nationwide effort to prepare our children for the 21st century.

Through the America Reads challenge, the President wants to use 30,000 reading specialists and volunteer coordinators, including thousands of Americorps members, to lead a citizen army of a million volunteer tutors that will help every child read independently by the end of the third grade. He's calling upon parents teachers, college students, senior citizens, businesses, religious institutions, libraries, universities, the media to make sure our children get the extra help they need during the afternoons, weekends and summers. And he's making it easier for college students participating in work-study programs to fulfill their work requirements as reading tutors in their communities.

Studies have shown that children who are tutored in their earliest years are more likely to become fluent readers by the end of the third grade. And I have seen firsthand the differences volunteers can make in a school and in the lives of its students. On Valentine's Day this year, I visited a school in one of Washington's most depressed neighborhoods. But because it had been adopted by several groups in the community -- a law firm and members of the U.S. Army among them, who sent volunteers every week to work with its dedicated teachers, staff and children -- the school was thriving.

But the need for efforts such as Reading Recovery and America Reads could become far less urgent if we helped more parents understand that the literacy and learning process can begin long before a child enters the classroom. In fact, the preparation for the challenges of school can begin soon after birth.

Today, thanks to advances in science, we know much more about the importance of intellectual stimulation for children in the first three years of life. We know how critical it is for

infants and toddlers to hear words, listen to stories, and develop their imaginations. We know that time spent sharing a favorite book not only strengthens the bond between a parent and child, it enriches a child's vocabulary and literally helps a baby's brain grow.

Next month, the President and I will be convening a White House conference on early childhood learning and brain development that will help sort through these new discoveries and help parents and teachers make the most of this new knowledge.

Earlier this year, I announced a nationwide effort to make sure that initiatives that encourage early reading touch every city and every household in our country. There are few efforts that I believe can make a more dramatic difference over the next 10 years in this country than to persuade parents of all educational and economic backgrounds to take this mission of reading to and talking with their babies seriously.

In Washington and in Kansas City, I discussed and helped launch programs that encourage pediatricians to take leading roles in this effort. Doctors are often the first professionals our infants and toddlers see on a regular basis. While parents may not take a child to a library or a preschool program until he or she is three, they will most likely take that child to a doctor or nurse for vaccinations and checkups. These regular visits present doctors with important opportunities to instill good reading and learning habits -- along with good health habits -- in parents and children.

The American Library Association's Born to Read and the Reach Out and Read programs are two national efforts to convince doctors and nurses that they can use the authority and influence of those white uniforms and stethoscopes to encourage parents and children to read aloud as often as possible. And research has shown that these prescriptions are followed: Parents and children who are given books by their doctors are more likely to read aloud at home.

Over the years I have met parents who have told me they never really talked to their babies because they thought the infants were too young to understand what they were saying. I've met parents who believed that they could not read well enough to read a book to a child.

But we have to help parents understand that, no matter their educational level or reading ability, they can stimulate their children's intellectual potential by talking to and reading to their children, even when they stumble over a few words here or there. Most likely, their children won't even notice. But they *will* notice the power of reading and books to take them on fascinating adventures and introduce them to interesting ideas.

Parents need to recognize that they can and must be their children's first teachers. That is why we introduced HIPPIY, the Home Instruction Program for Pre-school Youngsters more than 10 years ago in this state. When we brought HIPPIY into rural areas and housing projects in Arkansas, a number of educators and others did not believe that parents who had not finished high school were up to the task of teaching their children. Many of the parents doubted their

own abilities. But not only did the program help kids get a jump-start in the right direction, it also gave the parents a boost in self-confidence. Many became interested in learning themselves and went back to school for GEDs and college degrees. That's why I'm pleased that the President's America Reads challenge includes new funding for proven programs such as HIPPO and supports networks to help parents share information on how they can best teach their children.

So I thank all of you for your commitment to progress in education, and for your commitment to our children. In the 14 years since I first became involved in education reform in this state, I've been exposed to a great deal of theories on childhood learning. Some of these theories have stood the test of time, others have long been abandoned. But there is one belief, one commitment that we can never cast off -- and that is that every child has potential, every child has the capacity to learn and to fulfill our highest expectations. We can't afford to leave any one of them behind.

###