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December 15, 2008

President-Elect Obama Education Policy Transition Team & Health and Human Services Transition Team
RE: Early Childhood Education Recommendations

To Whom It May Concern:

On behalf of Teaching Strategies Inc. (TSI), I am pleased to submit the enclosed memorandum outlining immediate and long-term recommendations for improving the Early Reading First program authorized under the No Child Left Behind Act (PL 107- 110).

TSI is a national leader in providing high quality educational services to programs serving preschool children. I founded the company because I believe that our country's future depends on our ability to nurture the optimal growth of every child. Our mission is to enhance the quality of early childhood programs by offering practical, innovative, and developmentally and culturally appropriate curriculum materials, professional development, and parenting resources. Our materials and services are used by a majority of Head Start programs, as well as thousands of child care, public school, and other preschool programs throughout the country, including programs run by all branches of the military and Department of Defense schools worldwide.

On behalf of the over 70 employees at TSI, I would like to thank President-Elect Obama for his commitment to early childhood education. We agree that all of our nation's children, particularly the most vulnerable among them, should benefit from experiences that foster their development and success in school. Given TSI's extensive reach into many early care and education settings serving children birth to age five, we are eager to share our knowledge and expertise in support of the President-Elect's early childhood education agenda. The enclosed memo is the first in a series of memorandums which will provide key recommendations for enhancing the quality of our federal early childhood programs and building a system that helps all children reach their full potential.

Please do not hesitate to reach out to me if I can be of further assistance. I started my career as one of the first education coordinators for the Head Start program in the mid-sixties in Holly Springs, Mississippi and have over 40 years of experience in early childhood education. TSI stands eager to support President-Elect Obama in a bold vision for America's children, so please do not hesitate to call on us.

Sincerely,

Diane Trister Dodge
President & Founder

**MEMORANDUM**

TO: George Askew, Ian Bassin, Olivia Golden, Kris Gutierrez, David Kirp, Joan Lombardi, Ray Mabus, Steve Robinson, Jon Vaupel
FROM: Diane Trister Dodge, President, Teaching Strategies, Inc. *Diane J. Dodge*
DATE: December 15, 2008
RE: Early Reading First Program: Recommendations to the Obama Administration

Teaching Strategies, Inc. urges President Obama to restore the integrity of the Early Reading First program (ERF) by overhauling the application and grant-making processes. Problems in ERF are identical to the Reading First Program problems that were documented by the Inspector General and reported to the House Education and Labor Committee. **As an immediate step, it is essential to delay the request for ERF grant applications that is scheduled for January 2009. Teaching Strategies recommends that the DOE delay the application process until a thorough review of the application and grant processes has been completed.** Otherwise, the Bush Administration's influence over preschool programs of instruction will continue unabated, and another year of the administration's early education philosophy will be imposed on the nation's preschool programs.

The Obama Administration has an opportunity to send the message that important pedagogical decisions should be made by local education leaders and early childhood professionals, who are most familiar with the needs of the children they serve. The review should not delay the actual awarding of the grants in late summer, but it must ensure that the program provides disadvantaged preschool children with the opportunity to begin school with a strong foundation for language and literacy learning.

Background on ERF Issues

Only about one-half of all children, regardless of income, read at grade level by the fourth grade. The statistics about minority children are far worse: More than 80% of Black and Latino children cannot read at grade level by the fourth grade.¹ ERF is intended to address this crisis by strengthening children's basic literacy skills so that they can later achieve reading proficiency. ERF resources are dedicated to building the skills of early childhood teachers who serve educationally disadvantaged children, through high-quality professional development services and access to the best materials and curricular approaches.

Research confirms that the preschool years are the optimal time to support children in order to prevent later reading difficulties. Teaching Strategies therefore strongly supports the laudable goals of ERF. However, improper implementation of ERF by the Department of Education (DOE) has caused the program to fall far short of its vast potential. A recent DOE's Inspector General's reportⁱⁱ of the Reading First grant-application process found that the DOE attempted to influence decisions about curriculum and program of instruction. In the case of ERF, DOE action has been less overt, but it has nonetheless attempted to impose harmful pedagogical constraints through the grant-application process. For example, the application requires applicants to describe the "scope and sequence" of the proposed curriculum. This is problematic. Such a description is not a statutory requirement, but the DOE requirement has tremendous practical influence over the selection of a handful of reading programs and curricular strategies. Mandating a scope and sequence promotes mediocrity by requiring all children to learn the same content at the same time. Excellent curricula have the flexibility that enables teachers to meet children's individual needs by connecting new learning to what children already know and can do.



The recent national evaluation of ERFⁱⁱⁱ provides evidence that DOE implementation of ERF has caused the program not to be successful. According to the evaluation, ERF had only a modest effect on children's reading skills. Children made slight gains in their ability to recognize letters, but there was no evidence of improvement in other skills that are important for later reading proficiency, such as phonological awareness and oral language. Interestingly, the ERF evaluation, conducted in 2003, states that two curricula without a defined scope and sequence—*High Scope* and *The Creative Curriculum*—were the most widely used curricula among ERF grantees that year. However, this point is misleading and inconsistent with the DOE's own publication on ERF winners that year.^{iv} *High Scope* and *The Creative Curriculum for Preschool* were among the most commonly used products *before* grantees received ERF grants.

Because *The Creative Curriculum* and *High Scope* focus on a whole-child approach to literacy, the DOE has systematically rejected grant applications that sought to purchase materials or professional development services from the publishers of those curricula. This helped to perpetuate a widely held belief among programs seeking to receive ERF resources that the selection of either of these curricula would hinder their ability to receive an ERF grant award. Programs wishing to use one of those curricula were forced to pair them with one of the administration's preferred curricula.

Long-Term Recommendations for ERF

Teaching Strategies also recommends that the Congress and Obama Administration work together to strengthen ERF in the following ways:

- **Ensure comprehensive, integrated, developmentally appropriate literacy instruction.** As Ross Thompson argued in his testimony to the House Education and Labor Committee over a year ago, the scientific literature about child development makes clear that early learning depends on both cognitive and noncognitive skills.^v A child's curiosity, motivation to learn, self-confidence, excitement about discovery, and ability to focus attention, control behavior, and get along with others are essential to learning in all areas, including literacy. As such, ERF's program goals should focus on literacy, but not at the expense of the other developmental domains.
- **Prioritize the use of ERF resources for teacher professional development.** The most important element of any early childhood program is the quality of teacher-child interactions. While educational materials are important, well-trained early educators must bring them to life. A cap on ERF resources for the purchase of educational materials would help to ensure that resources are dedicated to training early childhood professionals.
- **Improve the quality of services for dual-language learners (DLLs).** Approximately 40% of the children served by ERF grantees are DLLs. This is largely due to efforts undertaken by the DOE to encourage grantees to serve these children. However, the DOE has not required grantees to outline a plan for how they will serve DLLs. An ERF grant award should be contingent upon the extent to which applicants articulate an appropriate plan for DLLs, including the extent to which grantees build on the children's home languages.
- **Safeguard ERF program integrity.** There is no greater threat to the credibility of the Obama education agenda than perceived or actual conflicts of interest, which were prevalent during the past administration. The conflicts of interest listed in the Preschool Curriculum Evaluation Research study's 1.5-page disclosure statement certainly undermined the credibility of the study. Rigorously applying the recommendations of the Inspector General's Reading First report to all DOE programs, including ERF, will safeguard the integrity of DOE programs and ensure the credibility of the Obama education agenda.



ⁱ *America's Vanishing Potential: The Case for Prek-3rd Education*, Foundation for Child Development, New York, New York: October 2008. Retrieved December 12, 2008 from http://www.fcd-us.org/usr_doc/2008AmericasVanishingPotentialFINAL.pdf

ⁱⁱ *The Reading First Program's Grant Application Process Final Inspection Report*, Office of Inspector General, U.S. Department of Education, ED-OIG/I13-F0017, September 2006

ⁱⁱⁱ Russell Jackson, McCoy, Ann, Pistorino, Carol, Wilkinson, Anna Burghardt, John, Clark, Melissa, Ross, Christine, Schochet, Peter and Swank, Paul. *National Evaluation of Early Reading first: Final Report*, U.S. Department of Education, Institute for Education Sciences, Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2007.

^{iv} <http://www.ed.gov/programs/earlyreading/abstracts03.doc>

^v http://www.house.gov/ed_workforce/testimony/022807RossThompson testimony.pdf