



RECOMMENDATION TO PRESIDENT-ELECT OBAMA'S TRANSITION TEAM

Barry Zuckerman, MD

*The Joel and Barbara Alpert Professor and Chair of Pediatrics
Boston School of Medicine/Boston Medical Center*

Problem

35% of American children arrive at kindergarten without the basic skills they will need to learn to read. This lack of school readiness is due to poverty and specifically:

- (a) Inadequate exposure to words (Hart-Risley Study demonstrated a 20 million word deficit in the first three years of life for a child in a low-income home) and print material;
- (b) Inadequate language development;
- (c) Inadequate exposure to books;
- (d) Low frequency of parents reading to children (64% of low-income children 0-5 and 52% of all children 0-5 **are not** read to daily);
- (e) Inadequate number of books in the home.

A Solution – Reach Out and Read (ROR)

- ROR is a nationwide nonprofit pediatric literacy program that trains doctors and nurses to speak with parents about the importance of reading aloud, and give an age-appropriate, brand-new children's book at every pediatric checkup.
- Founded in 1989 at Boston City Hospital (now Boston Medical Center) by pediatricians and early childhood educators.
- Works within existing health care infrastructure to maximize efficiency and minimize costs.

ROR's Innovative 3-Part Model

- Doctors give parents advice on reading strategies and encourage them to read daily to their children.
- Doctors give parents a developmentally- and culturally- appropriate book to take home at each well-child visit from 6 months to 5 years (10 visits).
- Literacy-rich waiting rooms – volunteer readers modeling reading behaviors, and connections to community resources, especially libraries.

Impact

In 2008, 3.5 million at-risk children benefited from Reach Out and Read, 4,121 hospitals and health centers participate in the ROR program, 5.7 million books distributed, 22,000 trained pediatricians, family physicians, and pediatric nurse practitioners give books to children.

Evidence

Twelve published, peer-reviewed medical studies that demonstrate ROR's effectiveness, most importantly a significant increase in language abilities (data available on request).

Cost – Dollars per child per year

ROR can provide its full, five-year program for a total cost of just \$40.00 per child. Every child in the program starts school with at least 10 books in the home, as well as parents who understand the great importance of reading aloud.

Strengths

- Engages and empowers parents to help their children develop and succeed;
- Early and continuous contact with a trusted medical professional;
- Low cost, utilizes an existing infrastructure as a delivery model



- Evidence-based;
- Establishes connections to other community efforts;
- Special initiatives that focus on Latino children, American-Indian/Alaskan Native children, and children of military families;
- Parents don't have to remember to do something because if the book is in home, the child will approach parent with book in hand and elicit the desired behavior.
- ROR is endorsed by the American Academy of Pediatrics.
- UNESCO awarded ROR the 2007 Confucius Prize for Literacy.
- American Academy of Pediatrics awarded ROR the 2008 Richmond Award.

Reach Out and Read Funding and History of Support

A public/private partnership; ROR raises \$2.00 in private funding (corporations, foundations, and individuals) for every \$1.00 received in public funding.

Reach Out and Read has received public funding from \$2-10 million during the last eight years. While in the Senate, President-Elect Obama was a strong supporter in the budget process for Reach Out and Read.

Broad Support in Congress: 43 Members of the Senate and 121 Members of the House signed the Kennedy-Grassley and McGovern-Reynolds letters (respectively) in support of restoring full funding to ROR.

Recommendation

Increase federal funding to \$15 million to enable Reach Out and Read to grow to reach all low-income children in the U.S; ensuring that all children arrive at school with the pre-literacy skills in place to guarantee success.

"Right now, children come home from their first doctor's appointment with an extra bottle of formula. But imagine if they came home with their first library card or their first copy of Goodnight Moon?"

U.S. Senator Barack Obama addresses the American Library Association, Monday, June 27, 2005
"Literacy and Education in a 21st-Century Economy"

"...ultimately we want to talk about parents reading to their kids."

President-elect Barack Obama's interview with Tom Brokaw, December 2008