



Date: June 17, 2009

To: Joseph C. Conaty, Acting Assistant Secretary for Education for Elementary and Secondary Education

From: Bill Goodling, Former House Education Chair

Thank you for responding to my letter to Secretary Duncan. Of course, I was saddened by the response, since we have spent more than 350 billion dollars on all the programs you mentioned and what are the results? A growing drop-out rate of children whose parents and older brothers and sisters were also 'dropouts'; 50 of our largest city school districts can't graduate 50% of their students, with one at 26% and several at 30 and 40 %; 75 % of those sitting in prisons are 'school dropouts' and most if not all participated in the programs you mentioned—that the Administration apparently wishes to reward with more tax dollars.

Having heard the Secretary and President talk favorably about Family Literacy, it was my hope that this Administration was finally going to 'break the mold' that has trapped all administrations from Johnson on through Bush II. Each Administration apparently believed if you threw enough money at the problem and began at a much younger age, you could substitute government programs for the parent being the child's first and most important teacher. They believed—and continue to believe—that you can leave the parent behind and, because of the child's participation in those government programs, the child will survive and prosper. Spending 350 billion dollars on the programs you mentioned proved that it doesn't work. Reading First, for millions of children whose parents cannot supplement what the program is doing, is failing and will continue to fail. The previous Secretary of Education called Striving Readers a new program. It is exactly what I tried to do with my Title I money 36 years ago as a Superintendent of Schools—that's how new it is. I failed in that effort for several reasons, all of which still exist today. There was no creditable research to guide me, which is still the case today. There were no teachers prepared to teach teenagers to read, which is also true today. There were no successful programs I could replicate, which is also true today. Finally the one thing a teenager doesn't want his peers to know is that he or she has a reading problem. I always warned my teachers they better not let me catch them asking a teenager to read out loud in front of his or her peers if he or she has a reading problem. That can only move up the teenager's dropout date.

After failing that effort, with the help of an outstanding Early Childhood person, we used our Title I money to work with the eligible preschoolers and their parents—working to improve the parents’ literacy skills and parenting skills in one room while providing the reading readiness programs to the children in another, and then bringing them together so the parents could practice their new-found skills in front of the mentors. These parents, for the first time in their lives, became full partners with the school in the education of their children.

In your second paragraph you mention that Family Literacy services are being provided through larger programs. More accurately you should have said ‘lip service’ is being given to these services by all the programs you mentioned. You also say the program supports only a small number of grants. At 66 million dollars available for the entire country, that is true and the waiting list is a ‘mile long.’ Even Start is serving the poorest of the poor, many of whom also have language barriers.

Please, please, please don’t continue the failed course of the last 50 years. Have one gigantic Family Literacy Program. Call it the Michelle Obama Family Literacy program.

P.S. I am sure you are aware there has been no evaluation of Even Start since the reforms were enacted in 2000. I am also sure you are aware that all the credible evaluators have indicated how flawed the last evaluation was. A very small sample was used and how that small sample was selected made the evaluation results questionable.