

# 'Ready to read, ready to learn' needs someone 'ready to lead' [US] <sup>[1]</sup>

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### EXCERPTS:

Laura Bush will take a rare walk onto center stage Thursday, hosting a White House "summit" on early childhood development. Her ambitious aim for this two-day session with top researchers and policy leaders is "to make sure that every child has the opportunity to learn and grow."

Advancing young children's early reading skills is something Bush, a former librarian, cares about passionately by all accounts. It's a national problem that cries out for creative federal action.

The average reading proficiency of black second-graders equals that of the typical white first-grader: The African American child, at age 7, is already one year behind. This early handicap is caused, in part, by unequal access to preschool programs. The first lady will be flanked by top administration officials, including Education Secretary Rod Paige, the former Houston schools chief who pushed to expand preschools throughout Texas.

But another (potentially) supporting actor remains backstage: Mrs. Bush's husband. The motto for this week's summit is "ready to read, ready to learn." The phrase that's missing--ready to lead?--truly defines the real question facing the administration.

In his first budget, the president proposed a 1% cut in real spending for Head Start, after adjusting for inflation. He also would slash child development block grants to states, a \$2-billion program enacted by his father in 1990, by about 10% to help fund his school reform package.

While the president lobbies to reduce the government's role in advancing child care and preschool programs, Mrs. Bush is sanctioning policy chatter on the cheap. Call it "compassionate schizophrenia."

Still, the first lady's foray into this crucial policy arena could build pressure inside the White House to craft real leadership on the issue in the coming year.

What real policy options might percolate through the Bush administration's brain trust?

\* Provide strong fiscal incentives to states that equalize families' access to quality child care centers and preschools. While many states have widened access, millions of blue-collar and lower middle-class parents neither can afford \$7,000 nor qualify for financial aid.

\* Encourage states to provide full-day kindergarten programs. Just over half of all 5-year-olds nationally have access to such programs. We now know empirically, from Secretary Paige's own research office, that learning trajectories for this lucky half climb more steeply than for youngsters who attend part-day kindergartens.

\* Guarantee quality child care for working-poor parents who play by the rules. As governor of Wisconsin, Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson tripled child care spending, recognizing that without strong work supports, mothers would simply return to the welfare rolls.

\* Expand tax credits for major employers who make jobs family friendly. Until parents have more time to care for and read to their children, we shouldn't expect to see great strides in early learning.

The summit invites political risks for the president. Many conservatives oppose federal leadership in the early childhood arena. Federal action on child care or early education, they say, signals to mothers that it's OK to leave home for work.

But if Mrs. Bush's gambit proves only to be uninspired theater, congressional moderates would be disappointed, undercutting the president's long-term credibility on domestic policy areas, from school reform to welfare reform.

So as the curtain goes up and the spotlight goes on, the first lady may begin to feel the heat.

Bruce Fuller, a professor of education and public policy at UC Berkeley, is co-author of "Through My Own Eyes: Single Mothers and the Cultures of Poverty" (1998, Harvard University Press).

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