



The Transforming Power of Literacy

by Barbara Bush

Ever since I was a young girl I have loved to read. From my childhood in Rye, New York, to my life with George Bush in Texas, China, Washington, D.C., and Kennebunkport (and many places in between), I have always had a book by my side and enjoyed countless hours reading. Books have entertained me, comforted me, inspired me, and taught me a great deal about the world and its people.

While reading is an enriching and fun hobby for me and many other people, it is so much more than just a pastime. Good reading, writing, and thinking skills are vital ingredients to functioning well in our complex society. These abilities are the foundation of all other learning and help people to create brighter and more prosperous futures for themselves and their families, as well as for our nation.

I believe that if every man, woman, and child could read, write, and comprehend, we would be much closer to solving many of the problems facing our country. That is why I became committed to promoting family literacy when George was in office. I founded the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy in 1989, and today it continues to thrive. To date it has given more than \$31 million to 704 family literacy programs in 50 states and the District of Columbia. The Maine Family Literacy Initiative, a statewide initiative of my Foundation supporting the development and improvement of family literacy in Maine, has awarded 183

family literacy grants since 1996 totaling more than \$3 million.

Family literacy is an educational approach that improves the reading, writing, mathematics, English language proficiency, and life skills of parents along with their children. These programs are based on evidence demonstrating that a mother's educational level has a strong influence on her child's academic success and health and on the family's economic well-being. For example, parents who lack basic literacy skills are not able to provide their children with the necessary educational support, and their son or daughter's academic achievement can suffer. Their family has restricted access to health care due to their inability to read and comprehend printed information. Their children may not receive adequate nutrition because of their inability to understand the labels and nutrition content on food packages. And they may experience periods of unemployment due to lack of education, reducing their family's annual income.

The numbers for Maine are too frightening to ignore. According to the Maine Department of Education, 5.4 percent of adults over age 25 do not have more than an eighth grade education; 14.6 percent of Mainers over age 25 have less than a high school diploma; 7.8 percent speak a language other than English at home; and almost 20,000 families with children under 18 live in poverty. I realize the problems of many of these

people may be much deeper than their inability to read and write, but education can make a tremendous difference in the well-being and stability of families. Poor reading, writing, and math skills often lead to poverty and then hopelessness.

By offering comprehensive programs that include adult literacy, early childhood instruction, parenting education, and intergenerational literacy activities to families most in need, parents and children participating in family literacy programs are reading and learning *together*. And lives are improving.


Statistics compiled by the Maine Department of Education show that pre-school children who are enrolled in family literacy programs with their parents do considerably better on developmental tests than children who do not participate in these programs. In Maine, 91 percent of school-aged children who have been enrolled in family literacy programs showed significant progress of at least one grade level in reading on standardized assessments. Research demonstrates that children who participate are less likely to drop out of school down the road, breaking the cycle of low literacy, poverty, and unemployment that may have existed in their families for generations.

Adult participants have significantly improved their reading skills and are better prepared to be good employees. Many adults have obtained their GEDs as a result of family literacy programs and are now attending college. Also, parents often become much more involved in their children's school life. After nine months in a program, 88 percent of parents served by a family literacy program in Maine attended all relevant parent conferences and school meetings.

Literacy is everyone's business, and I encourage all Mainers to help to make

Maine a more literate state. The best place to start is in our own homes. As a parent our first responsibility is at home with our family because it is the most important job we will ever have. Parents are the child's first teacher and the home is their first school, so we must make it a peaceful, loving, and educational environment. One of the best ways to do that is to read together every day. Reading to a pre-school child promotes language acquisition and correlates with literacy development and future success in school. By reading with our children or grandchildren, we will not only help to equip them with the tools to succeed, we will be spending quality time together and creating many happy memories.

Family literacy programs in Maine, a state that George and I love and in which we have spent almost every summer for the past 63 years, are making a wonderful difference in many lives. I'm so grateful to the teachers, volunteers, and all the people at these great programs for their dedication to literacy and to building a better future for Maine.

To learn more about the work of the Maine Family Literacy Initiative, please visit its Web site at www.mainefamilyliteracy.com/. 

Former First Lady **Barbara Bush** has been a champion in promoting literacy for many years. In 1989 she founded the



Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy, which supports programs where parents and children can learn and read together. The Foundation works to bring literacy to every home by awarding money to build effective family literacy projects. She is also author of two children's books, *C. Fred's Story* and the best-selling *Millie's Book*, whose profits benefited literacy. She also wrote the best-selling *Barbara Bush: A Memoir* and *Reflections: Life After the White House*.