

ADDRESS UTAH'S READING WOES

The Deseret News. Salt Lake City, Utah: November 20, 1998

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Few skills are as important as reading. Not only is reading vital in the business world and necessary to getting a quality education, it's essential for anyone who wants to fully enjoy life. Reading a good book is to most television shows what prime rib is to a hot dog.

Unfortunately, perhaps because of the emphasis on technology, reading does not seem to be as prized a possession now as it was in the past. Utah Gov. Mike Leavitt is correct to be concerned about the drop in reading scores in the Beehive State's elementary schools. For the first time, reading test scores are descending. And it's of little consolation to the governor that most other subject areas are improving.

He is absolutely on target when he states, "I don't think you can tolerate any type of erosion in reading scores. That kind of thing feeds through the system and the kids never catch up."

Leavitt wisely plans to do more than just talk about the problem. He is enlisting ideas from a number of his colleagues at the Republican Governors Association meetings in New Orleans this week. In addition, he is working with the State Office of Education on a plan and is reworking parts of his proposed budget for fiscal 2000 to accommodate parts of it.

Like Leavitt, a number of the 32 governors have identified education as a key issue for America. Leavitt's comments came following a comprehensive session titled "Education in the states: An exchange of ideas."

Leavitt believes -- and he's correct -- that the idea of states working together on a national agenda makes more sense than a federal agenda, which presumes the federal government has to do something for positive change to occur. As Leavitt notes, "The major and real progress in education has to happen at a level where you can really get something done."

Leavitt has talked with Texas Gov. George W. Bush and Michigan Gov. John Englar about their reading reform programs and envisions an aggressive, results-oriented approach for Utah.

Bush has a goal to teach every Texas child to read and has secured \$32 million for intensive reading academies throughout the state. Beginning this fall, every school in Texas is required to evaluate the reading progress of students in kindergarten through third grade.

Leavitt intends to announce a strategy in a couple of weeks that will address Utah's reading deficiencies. Other state officials, educators and especially parents, need to give reading just as high a priority as the governor.