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# Literacy and the Legislative Branch

**Richard Long**

My name's Rich Long and I'm the Washington Representative to the International Reading Association.

What I'd like to do today is to make my presentation to you using a new technique for us here in the office. Aided by assistant, Janet Garden who is running the camera, we are experimenting with you all using this as an opportunity to find a new and hopefully cost effective way of communicating more and better information to the members all across the United States about what we do here in Washington and how you, as members of IRA, can participate in this adventure of democracy here in the United States. However, we do more than just legislative work. We are involved in a number of special projects and one of them, we're quite proud of is International Literacy Day which is done in Paris each year where the IRA participates on an International basis and here in Washington it's become custom for the International Reading Association to have National Literacy Day at one of the National Landmarks. We've been at the Jefferson Memorial, the United States Capitol, the Library of Congress, and last year at the National Press Club with the American Newspaper Publishers Association Foundation. We had a reception for government and association members and unveiled a poster. Pat Koppman was there in her role as Vice President of IRA as the hostess. I think you'll find that this summer, the dinosaurs in the IRA poster are going to travel

in the ABC Readasaurus Campaign so this will touch on at least 20 markets and is one of the ways we're working a little bit differently with the media to enhance the reading habit.

But that's not why we are here today. What we want to do is to talk about legislation and how you can impact legislation. I'm going to talk briefly about a couple of important issues related to education funding, the rewriting of the omnibus education act which is including Chapter 1, aid to disadvantaged children and 16 other programs. Not the least of them is the National Assessment of Educational Progress which MRA has been so vocal and so helpful in approaching both IRA and the Congress.

Also, I want to touch on a few other issues. How legislation and literacy come together. The IRA has testified on numerous occasions on literacy, both on specific issues relating to adult education of literacy, on literacy relating to children and international literacy. In fact, just last year we had 14 witnesses on subjects ranging from the census and how literacy impacts the gathering of census data, to Chapter 1, Chapter 2 with John Manning testifying and intergenerational family literacy issues. So we have a lot to cover and I'm going to try to quickly go through them to give you a flavor for how legislation impacts your world and how, hopefully, you can participate in this experiment in democracy.



H.R. 5 is the house version of the omnibus elementary and secondary education act and has over 400 pages. The Senate version is equally as long. In here are changes in almost every facet of federally sponsored education programs that touch illiterate American's, both as children and adults. IRA has been working with members of the conference which has been meeting at the staff level for the past several weeks to give them a much clearer and firmer definition as to what would be best for a National Literacy Policy from the Chapter 1 Program through adult education. We have been quite successful in presenting to the Congress the arguments that Chapter 1 needs to be coordinated with the regular school program and that Chapter 2 needs to do much more in terms of being a literacy program to help people who are at the secondary school levels and beyond. One of our real points of pride has been the adoption by both houses of Congress of the Even Start legislation. Even Start provides that the children who are eligible for Chapter 1 and their parents who are eligible for adult basic education are served together so that rather than looking at literacy as a one dimensional problem that we are going to attack it on a multi-generational basis. This has been accepted by each house and from what we've learned from the conference committee, will be in the final version of the act. The same is true of changes in the adult education provision. We have been stressing the need for greater impact as professionals -- better training for professionals and the volunteers who work so closely together in the adult education movement. But back to Chapter 1. This idea of training is something that we carry through even there. We've asked that more funds be allocated for training many paraprofessionals who work in Chapter 1. We've also asked that more funds and emphasis be placed on granting professionals time to improve their skills and knowledge that they may offer better services. I think we've come a long way. We have much further to go, but it is a beginning.

One of the more unique programs being offered in H.R. 5 is the National Assessment of Education's state by state profile. Your board of directors identified for the IRA board of

directors many of the fallacies in this program. In the January/February meeting of the IRA Board, the Board decided to take a position in opposition to the state by state assessment and to direct this office to take all actions possible to inform the Congress and to hopefully get them to see our point of view. As of yesterday afternoon in meetings with the Senior Staff, House and Senate, Republicans and Democrats, we have much more unanimity of view. In fact, it looks as if there will be a compromise. Not the \$20 million program that was being looked at before but rather a much scaled down version that only a few states could participate in for one subject for one grade level to see how it works and to take the next several years to evaluate the program and see what makes the most sense. We were able to make this impact on this matter because we were able to convince the Congress that a policy driven test such as NAPE might do damage to instructionally driven testing programs like the MEAP test and, as such, would not be in the best interest of the children and that brings me to my next couple of points.

IRA is also changing its point of view. We are going to be arguing and articulating more about what is in the best interest of our students. From there we will design our legislative agenda and program to present to the Congress that members of IRA and the reading profession are interested in improving the quality of life that all students will have open to them. We hope to still maintain our attention on research and professional development as our major theme but to go a little broader than just that and look at instruction in the best interest of the child. There is no other group in Washington talking about that issue. Your group is the one addressing to the Congress these needs and in a quite creditable way. Letters from you do make a difference and it makes a difference for me to walk into a congressional office and to have even five letters from a member of Congress's district about one issue or another lends credibility. It means that IRA is more than one small office one block from Capitol Hill.

*continued on page 34*



with \$30,000. If it's true and if it's not a myth that we are graduating some illiterates, we have to raise the question of what are we getting for the \$30,000. So part of it, from a policy point of view in a time of very severe belt tightening at a state level, is to leverage what we are already spending. Now maybe it's time and I think we're taking some steps in this direction. If you look at what the Governor has been doing and, I'm very supportive of it, with the cabinet council on human resources, we're getting to a time where we are basically saying that literacy initiatives or the requirement to be literate becomes a condition of all public expenditures and all public assistance.

Like I said, I'm very encouraged with that kind of approach. I think without stating that, that's basically what the Governor's cabinet counsel on human investment is doing. I think it's bipartisan. Republicans in the house just issued a job competitive task force report, very critical of some things that have been going on in Michigan, but very supportive to of the policy initiatives that the Governor has taken in this whole area of connecting literacy to job development. I commend what you're doing. Don't forget a very important truth about politics and politicians. We are very rarely leaders. We are followers. We wait for a consensus to develop. It's the rare occasion where a politician is out front and stakes out new ground. It's a sad commentary, I think, on politics, but it's true. You are the leaders. You've already taken the initiatives and your colleagues around the country have taken the initiative on this issue. You're going to have to chart the course and show us the way. I'm convinced this is a solvable problem. Just the very little study I've done of it, I think this is a solvable problem. You're going to have to chart the course, lead the way and kindle the political spark to make it happen. Thank you very much. I'm delighted to be here.

**Ken Sikkema** is a Member of the Michigan House of Representatives.

## Literacy and the Legislative Branch

*continued from page 29*

But let's talk about another issue for a few minutes that IRA members are concerned with and that is financing. The U.S. Legislative Committee of IRA conducted a survey of leaders of state councils and found that funding was the most critical issue. On February 18, the President released his budget. This document which has in it the spending requirements for the federal government for one fiscal year, contains authorities for over \$1 trillion expenditure. The educational department only takes one small part of it. In fact, less than 2%. We're arguing, this year, that even though the President is recommending \$800 million worth of increases for the over \$20 billion worth of federal programs, that much more needs to be done. At the very least let's keep pace with inflation and \$800 million doesn't do that. It sounds like a lot of money but in fact if you looked at the line items, program by program, the President's budget is requesting over \$700 million worth of cuts. This is at a time when the American people are setting education and literacy as high priority items. We have sent letters to the Hill and we have met with members of Congress, but we need letters from you back in the field to write your delegation about education. It is a priority that should be backed up with bucks. I know you in Michigan have felt what's happened when tax dollars shrink up and I'm asking you to send a few more letters in the next couple of weeks because the House and Senate are moving quite quickly.

If we can provide you with any information or any help on how to improve your access to your state government or your access to your federal government, feel free to give us a call here in Washington at 202-347-3990 or if we can help you with any other program related to IRA.

Thank you.

**Richard Long** is involved with Legislation for the International Reading Association.