

# Draft Literacy Bill Would Boost Funds for Older Students

By [Mary Ann Zehr](#)

A draft of a bill that some members of the U.S. Senate hope to introduce this summer would replace three federal reading programs, including Reading First, and authorize nearly a fivefold increase in the amount of money the federal government provides for literacy in grades 4-12.

The draft calls for providing funds for literacy programs along a continuum from birth to grade 12.

Meanwhile, several members of the U.S. House of Representatives are crafting a literacy bill that has components similar to the Senate measure, according to Lara Cottingham, a spokeswoman for Rep. Jared Polis, D-Colo., who expects to be a sponsor.

The Senate draft bill is “an opportunity to put the country on the right path for having a comprehensive literacy plan,” said Andres Henriquez, the program officer and manager of the [adolescent-literacy project](#) of the [Carnegie Corporation of New York](#). The philanthropy is a big funder of research in adolescent literacy and efforts by national organizations to support state and federal policy in that area. (Carnegie also underwrites coverage of new routes to colleges and careers in *Education Week*.)

Carnegie has been working for many years “to get adolescent literacy on the nation’s agenda,” said Mr. Henriquez, “and I believe it has arrived.”

## Slicing the Funding Pie

The Washington-based [Alliance for Excellent Education](#), a grantee of Carnegie, is among the groups that have pushed for an increased national focus on adolescent literacy. “We wanted to make sure through funding that the higher grades weren’t given the short shrift they have had in the past,” said Jamie P. Fasteau, the vice president for federal advocacy for the alliance, referring to discussions her organization has had with congressional aides.

The Senate proposal would authorize \$2.4 billion annually for literacy for five years, with 10 percent of the money slated for pre-K programs, 35 percent for K-3 programs (the same grade span covered by Reading First), and half for literacy efforts in grades 4-12. An additional 5 percent would go to state activities, such as providing technical assistance. Currently,

Washington provides \$35 million for adolescent literacy through its Striving Readers program. If the draft bill were to become law, literacy efforts in grades 4-12 would get a huge boost in federal funds.

Senators on both sides of the aisle support authorization of funds along a continuum and funding for adolescent literacy, but they don't agree on what proportion of the funds should be appropriated for efforts beyond grade 3.

"In the past, Congress has invested in early literacy on the assumption that it would take care of students' needs," said a Democratic Senate aide. "But research shows that is not the case." She said the federal government needs to support literacy well beyond 3rd grade to ensure students can read well enough to absorb "high-level academic content."

Members of Congress hope to have the House and Senate versions of the literacy bill match each other before they are introduced, the aide said. They might be introduced as stand-alone bills, but the intent is to make them part of the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act, she said.

A GOP Senate aide said the draft bill gives grades 4-12 too large a share of the proposed funds. She suspects it won't be fully funded at \$2.4 billion, and said she is concerned that reading programs for students in K-3 could end up with even less funding than they received under Reading First, which she thinks would be a mistake.

"The allocation of the resources is a bit puzzling for us," the aide said. "The earlier you can get proper literacy skills to these students, the better they are in the long run."

Sens. Patty Murray, D-Wash., and Jeff Sessions, R-Ala., who sponsored the Striving Readers legislation, are expected to introduce the literacy bill. Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, D-Mass., the chairman of the Senate education committee, is also expected to be a sponsor. On the House side, Rep. Polis is writing the bill with Rep. Todd R. Platts, R-Pa., and Rep. John Yarmuth, D-Ky.

## **Writing Included**

The price tag of \$2.4 billion would more than double the amount of funds that went to literacy each year while President George W. Bush was in office. Reading First, the flagship reading program during the Bush administration, received zero funds for 2009 and would get nothing in President Barack Obama's proposed fiscal 2010 budget, but it was once funded at \$1 billion per year. In fiscal 2009, Early Reading First for preschoolers is slated to receive \$112 million and Striving Readers, \$35 million.

The Obama administration is proposing that \$370 million be spent on literacy in grades K-12 in fiscal 2010.

Aside from the emphasis on adolescent literacy, the Senate draft bill differs from current federal legislation in stressing writing as well as reading and for drawing attention to the needs of English-language learners.

But overall, reading experts observed, the draft bill borrows heavily from language in the No Child Left Behind Act that authorizes the reading programs currently in place: Early Reading First, Reading First, and Striving Readers.

Two reading researchers said they see a lot to like in the bill, but they also made recommendations for improvements.

Timothy Shanahan, a professor of urban education at the University of Illinois at Chicago, said he favors the boost in funding for grades 4-12 and for school literacy programs in general. "It should mean that more schools could participate, which is a good thing," he said.

But he said the draft bill reflects some changes in wording from Reading First legislation that aren't an improvement, because the new wording won't be well understood by most teachers. The new wording requires K-3 programs to provide "strategic and explicit instruction using phonological awareness, phonic decoding, vocabulary, language structure, and meaning in context." Mr. Shanahan pointed out that "language structure" and "meaning in context" replace the words "reading fluency" and "reading comprehension" in Reading First.

One of the Senate aides said the replacements were made to reflect the latest terminology that educators are using.

But Mr. Shanahan said the terminology in Reading First would be more familiar to and better understood by teachers.

Russell Gersten, the executive director of the Instructional Research Group, an educational research institute in Los Alamitos, Calif., said he, too, likes the bill's emphasis on adolescent literacy, because "that's where the heavy lifting needs to be, and there has not been much attention until recently."

At the same time, he said he's concerned that "the knowledge base is so thin in most of these areas, and we are scaling it up based on hopes, wishes, and theories."

For example, Mr. Gersten said, educators are using some promising approaches to improve literacy in the middle grades, but "a lot of these ideas will not pan out."

He said he'd like to see the bill require states to give priority to requests for funding in which evaluation is built into literacy programs. He said it should be focused on such key topics as building students' academic language.

Currently, the bill calls for providing funds to recipients to collect and report data on students' progress and participate in a five-year national study of literacy efforts.

## **No Personal Gains**

Richard M. Long, the director of government relations for the [International Reading Association](#), says his Newark, Del.-based group likes the bill's emphasis on staff development and writing instruction.

Mariana Haynes, the director of research for the [National Association of State Boards of Education](#), said she's pleased the bill includes language intended to avoid conflicts of interest concerning districts' selection of reading products.

The Reading First program became mired in controversy over allegations that consultants benefited from sales of certain commercial reading products that they promoted to states.

The draft literacy bill states that the U.S. secretary of education "shall ensure that members of the peer-review panel do not stand to benefit financially from grants awarded under this act." It makes a similar statement about members of state literacy-leadership teams.

Jack Jennings, the president and chief executive officer of the [Center on Education Policy](#), a Washington-based research and advocacy group, said any federal reading program is successful only if it influences how states and districts spend funds other than what is appropriated in literacy legislation.

"Lawmakers won't be able to get enough money in a reading program to stand alone," he said. "It has to be a program that influences a wider practice, professional development for teachers. It has to be a precipitator, a change agent."