

Education Chief Seeks Wider Role for Parents

Campaign Will Promote Family Involvement

By Barbara Vobejda
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Education Secretary Richard W. Riley yesterday announced a major initiative to actively involve families in education, saying that parents can make a significant difference in their children's academic success by reading with them, limiting their time in front of the television and making sure they attend school every day.

Riley, returning to a theme he has emphasized in the past, promised that promoting parental involvement in education would be at the top of his agenda for the next year and said the federal government would join with dozens of other groups to promote the cause. The campaign is still in the planning stages, but its organizers said they would disseminate information about successful parent-school programs, organize meetings of business and community leaders and help schools become more welcoming to parents.

"Thirty years of research tells us that the starting point of American education is parent expectations and parental involvement with their children's education, regardless of their station in life, their income level or their educational background," Riley said in a National Press Club speech.

He urged parents to find extra time to learn as a family, schedule time daily to check children's homework, set high expectations for children and encourage them to take tough courses, talk to children about drugs and alcohol and support community efforts to keep young people safe. He suggested that parents limit television viewing to a maximum of two hours on weeknights, "even if that means that the remote control may have to disappear on occasion."

The department's efforts are in partnership with several organizations, including the National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education, the National PTA, the National Alliance of Business, the U.S. Catholic Conference and the Boys and Girls Clubs of America.

On the same theme, Jesse L. Jackson and a coalition of judges, elected officials and community leaders yesterday launched an initiative in Washington to get parents to be more active in their children's education.

They are asking parents to sign

pledges to take their children to school on the first day of classes, meet teachers, exchange telephone numbers with teachers, pick up their children's report cards, look at the results of every test their children take, and turn off the television for three hours of study time each night.

Riley, who raised his concerns about the lack of parental involvement in his "State of American Education" address seven months ago, said that since then, he and members of his staff have met with 125 groups on the issue. While the department has not set aside funds specifically for this campaign, it has requested \$10 million under the Goals 2000 legislation to establish parent resource centers in every state.

Riley also released a study, "Strong Families, Strong Schools," that cited research indicating 40 percent of parents believe they spend insufficient time on their children's education.

That lack of involvement, he said, has several causes, including lack of time, inflexible work schedules, language barriers, uncertainty about how to contribute, the burdens of poverty and the "unsettling disconnection" between educators and families.

He urged businesses to find ways to allow job-sharing, flextime and on-site schools and day care. And he asked that schools create a welcoming environment and use new technology—from voice mail to computer products—to get parents involved.

The study reported that, in comparing eighth-grade math test scores, researchers found that 90 percent of the difference between high and low scores could be explained by three factors under a parent's authority—student absenteeism, the variety of reading materials in the home and excessive television watching.

The department cited successful programs around the country, including the MegaSkills Program, which helps parents work with children at home, and is being used in the D.C. public schools. In Virginia, the department pointed to the Even Start program in Richmond, which brings disadvantaged parents into their children's preschool classrooms. In Maryland, the department cited a Baltimore public school program to send home parenting tips.

Staff writer Hamil Harris
contributed to this report.