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Posted: March 15, 2011 11:29 AM

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Congress Decides Literacy is a Bridge to Nowhere

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I'm told George Burns once said, "I've been reading so much about the dangers of smoking cigars, that I've finally decided... to give up reading."

Apparently, many in Congress find Burns' perspective compelling. House Republicans recently pushed through mid-year budget cuts that eliminate support for major literacy programs. One of the programs is called [Reading is Fundamental](#) (RIF). RIF costs taxpayers \$24.5 million (that's 25 cents a year from every U.S. taxpayer) and it provides 4.4 million mostly low-income children with free books and programs to support their learning to read at over 17,000 locations across the country. Studies show the approach works.

Another of the programs whose budget would be zeroed out mid-year is the [National Writing Project](#) (NWP). It costs \$25.6 million and it reaches 130,000 teachers and more than 1.4 million students in over 3,000 districts. Similarly, [studies](#) find that NWP promotes meaningful gains in writing performance. It does this by delivering professional development and by working with teacher leaders to develop high quality curriculum tailored to local communities' priorities and needs.

For example, Robert Rivera-Amezola, a fourth-grade teacher in Philadelphia, is part of a NWP initiative that supports reading and writing in the digital age. His students conducted research about contaminated water and about water conservation. They wrote scripts and recorded audio podcasts that were then published on the Internet. Because they were sharing their research and writing with a real audience, they could see how important it was to produce quality work.

And that's the point. We all know what a huge difference it makes when a teacher finds powerful ways to motivate and educate. And we all know -- or should know -- the enormous cost for both individuals and society when children don't learn to read and write well. How can we say with integrity that we want all students to have the core skills they need to succeed at the same time that we wipe out programs that provide powerful support for millions of children in cost-effective ways?

Last year, Republicans used the power of the filibuster to ensure extension of tax breaks for the wealthiest Americans. Now they are demanding cuts that wipe out children's literacy programs in the name of fiscal responsibility.

If the legislation isn't changed, Reading is Fundamental, the National Writing Project, and several other important literacy initiatives (like the Even Start Family Literacy Program) will close altogether or be crippled by massive cutbacks.

The real cost, of course, will be borne by our children.

This false bravado and careless policy must be stopped. Both Democrats and Republicans have supported these programs for more than 20 years. Many have already written letters, but much more action is needed to reverse this legislation. [Contacting](#) One's congressional representative is a good place to start.

Will legislators act to save these programs? Perhaps it will help if we, their constituents, confront them with what their recent actions imply -- that reading isn't fundamental and that learning to write is a bridge to nowhere.

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