

Spellings Announces First Round of Recipients of Striving Readers Funds

\$30 Million in Grants Awarded to Help Struggling Readers

A total of \$30 million has been awarded for the 2006–07 school year to support the implementation of eight projects funded by the new Striving Readers program for improving adolescents' reading skills, U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings announced recently. Over five years, the recipients are expected to receive a combined total of more than \$142 million.

"Reading is the foundation of all learning, a key factor in earning a high school diploma and a ticket to success in the 21st century," said Secretary Spellings. "The Striving Readers grants help more students get the skills they need to succeed in college, the workforce and life."



The grant-funded projects focus on middle and high schools that have significant numbers of disadvantaged struggling readers and that are working to meet *No Child Left Behind's* adequate yearly progress requirements in reading.

They include a range of research-based adolescent literacy projects serving diverse populations and rigorous evaluations conducted by independent researchers. President George W. Bush's budget for fiscal year 2007 requests a \$70.3 million increase in the Striving Readers program for a total of more than \$100 million.

Grantees may use the Striving Readers funds for activities such as: interventions for middle and high school-age students to improve basic reading skills, motivation, vocabu-

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A Night of Learning

Activity-Filled Family Meeting Leads to Increases in Parent Involvement, Student Performance at Maryland School

“What we try to do is give access to the parents.”

In the late 1990s, despite arduous efforts to draw parents out to school meetings, the faculty at Viers Mill Elementary School continued to receive a low response. “We’d be excited about the content we had to deliver,” remembered James Virga, Jr., the former principal of the Silver Spring, Md., school. “We’d publicize it, but then only eight parents would come—and some of them would be PTA [Parent Teacher Association] board members.”

Virga and his staff soon realized that the solution was in the problem. They sent out a survey in multiple languages throughout the ethnically diverse community asking for the reasons why parents were not showing up. The responses were clear: a lack of time, transportation and child

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lary, fluency and comprehension using research-based programs; professional development aligned with scientifically based reading research; valid and reliable reading assessments; and the design and

implementation of a rigorous evaluation.

The awardees include: Chicago Public Schools District #299; Danville, Ky., Schools; Multnomah County [Portland, Ore.] School District #1; Newark, N.J., Public Schools; Ohio

Department of Youth Services; San Diego Unified School District; Springfield, Mass., Public Schools; and Memphis, Tenn., City Schools.

For information about the Striving Readers program, visit www.ed.gov.

Spellings Speaks on School Choice

Last month, Secretary Spellings delivered remarks at a forum on school choice at the Greater Allen A.M.E. Cathedral of New York. (She is pictured at right with the cathedral's pastor, Floyd Flake, and fourth-grader Shannen Peters of Allen Christian School in Jamaica, N.Y.) The following is an excerpt of her remarks.

... It used to be that if a parent asked how a school was doing, we couldn't

regardless of race, income or zip code—can read and do math at grade level. And we gave ourselves a deadline to do it by 2014 because parents have waited long enough. ...

Over the last four years, we've learned a lot about what works in our schools and what doesn't. And we've reached a point where we're starting to face some tough decisions about how to fix schools that are falling short of standards [for adequate yearly progress] year after year. We're committed to working with states to help turn around these low-performing schools.

But at the same time, we have a responsibility to give parents and students in these schools lifelines to help them now.

That's why *No Child Left Behind* gives parents options like public school choice and free tutoring. These options are unprecedented in federal education law. ...

... [However,] too many parents never hear about these options because they don't see the letter that comes home in their child's backpack or they can't attend the informational meeting at the school. All of us—from the federal government to the states to districts to schools—must do a better job of reaching out to inform parents about their

options. And we must work with community groups and faith-based organizations to help spread the word. ...

... In some districts, public school choice is non-existent because no public schools are meeting state standards, and waiting lists for charter schools are out the door. I've heard stories about parents cramming into rooms like this one to draw numbers to see which students will make it off the waiting list. You shouldn't need to win the lottery to send your child to a high-performing school. ...

We've seen the power of choice in Washington, D.C., where the first-ever federally funded opportunity scholarship program has given low-income families the same choices other Americans have. Almost 1,700 disadvantaged students have received grants of up to \$7,500 to attend the private or parochial school of their choice. ...

... Before *No Child Left Behind*, we had no idea what we were getting. We could just see the system wasn't working.

Now for the first time, we know exactly what we're getting from our schools. ... We've set out to do something that's never been done before. But I know it's possible with your help. Together, we'll rise to the challenge.

Visit www.ed.gov and click on "Speeches" for the complete April 5, 2006, remarks.



Photo by Paul Wood

MORE THAN A GAME

TEAM A
A video study of eighth-grade science classrooms in the United States and four other countries found that U.S. teachers focused on a variety of activities such as games and small-group discussions to engage students, but not consistently and in a way that developed coherent and challenging science content. In comparison, classrooms in Australia, the Czech Republic, Japan and the Netherlands exposed eighth-graders to science lessons that were characterized by a core instructional approach that held students to high content standards and high expectations for student learning. For example, in Japan, which ranked the highest of the

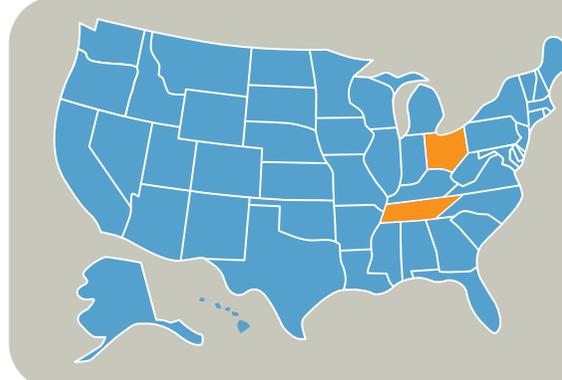
TEAM B
group on the 1999 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), the lessons emphasized identifying patterns in data and making connections among ideas and evidence. These and other findings were released last month by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics in the report Teaching Science in Five Countries: Results From the TIMSS 1999 Video Study, which draws on the analyses of 439 classroom lessons videotaped in the participating countries. For details, visit <http://nces.ed.gov> and select "What's New" for the April 4, 2006, report.

FINAL SCORE

really answer the question.

We had almost no data and no benchmarks for success. That's why when we passed our landmark education reform law, the *No Child Left Behind Act*, four years ago, our first priority was to help states develop strong accountability systems and high standards for all students. We set a historic goal to ensure every child in this country—

AROUND THE COUNTRY



OHIO—This summer, the Cleveland Municipal School District will introduce a new charter school that promises that every one of its sixth-graders will gain acceptance to a four-year college by the time they graduate. The Entrepreneurship Preparatory School, which will operate year-round, will teach 125 students the skills they need to work

care; a lack of presentations in native languages that would facilitate participation; and, simply, a lack of understanding about the importance of their attendance. Overall, added Virga, parents wanted the meetings to be “a valuable, interesting experience.”

From there, the school developed a program called Family Learning Night, which addressed the challenges listed in the survey. Scheduled once a month, it would serve as the premiere session for parent-focused meetings, including the PTA meeting, to make the most of attendance. In two power-packed hours, the evening would provide its time-strapped parents with learning strategies to use at home with their children, a block of time to discuss school priorities, and an opportunity to connect with staff and other parents.

Not long after its kick-off in 2001, attendance began averaging 160 parents and children—nearly a quarter of the school’s population. “It’s really gotten off the ground and become sort of the tradition of the school,” said Principal Matthew Devan, who replaced Virga this school year.

Empowering parents to become full partners in their children’s education, along with providing other improvement initiatives, showed immediate dividends. In 2004, Viers Mill became the first Title I school among Montgomery County Public Schools to have more than 70 percent of its third- and fifth-graders achieving proficiency in both reading and math. Moreover, when

Maryland added the fourth grade to its benchmark levels the following year, the percentage of Viers Mill’s students mastering state standards climbed even higher, to 86.4 percent.

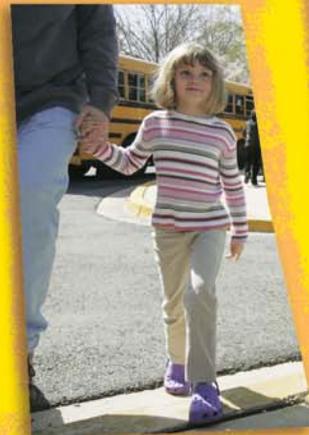
“Parental involvement is a particularly important part of education, even more so in Title I schools, because a lot of what we try to do is give access to the parents,” said Kathy MacGillivray, referring to the economic and language barriers that severely impact the low-income schools she supports with the county’s Title I services.

MacGillivray, an instructional specialist who was a classroom teacher for 25 years, said the school’s Family Learning Night provides “an excellent model” for bridging the gap between school and home. Such an approach is needed in this densely populated, suburban community of Washington, D.C.—county officials boastfully dub

from 42 different countries and speak Spanish, Vietnamese, Greek, Farsi, Bulgarian and a number of other languages. More than 30 percent of the students are designated English language learners, and another 23 percent have received language instruction but no longer need direct support.

To buttress a school’s connection to its diverse families, advised Family Learning Night coordinator Michelle Piket, “you have to do a lot more outreach to make them feel comfortable.”

Viers Mill, which won a *No Child Left Behind*–Blue Ribbon Schools Award in 2005, has been so successful in



it “Silver Sprung”—where a cultural and commercial revitalization over the past decade has attracted sundry immigrants. At Viers Mill, students come

practicing this principle that Clara Gonzalez said, “We are happy to come for any event that the school may give, because the way they

Viers

toward an individual enterprise. It plans to add a grade each year and grow to 500 students by 2013. Commonly referred to as E Prep, the school is an outgrowth of the E CITY after-school and summer program for children from low-income families, which was founded by John Zitzner, former president and CEO of Bradley Company, a Cleveland-based software firm.

TENNESSEE—Teach For America, the national corps of recent college graduates who commit two years to teach in under-resourced areas, is extending its reach to Memphis this fall. In partnership with Memphis City Schools and the Hyde Family Foundations, the organization will place 50 teachers in high-need public school classrooms. Like many large urban school

systems, Memphis serves a disproportionate number of children living in poverty, with approximately 71 percent of the students qualifying for federally subsidized meals. The expansion is part of Teach For America’s plan to expand from its current 3,500 corps members to 7,500 by 2010.

treat us in this school is great.” Each year she takes a week off from her cleaning job to coordinate the school’s book fair. “I’m losing money,” she said, “but it’s one week that I’m able to do that for my daughter’s school.”

PTA President Elisia George agreed that the reception of the 95-member faculty has made life easier for Viers Mill parents. “I think any staff member who programs a parent’s telephone number in their cell phone to reach them anytime their child has a problem is somebody who goes beyond the call of duty.”

At each Family Learning Night, the goal is to educate parents, as their children’s first teacher, on how they can help students reach their academic potential. Last month, the focus was math. For May, it will be college preparation: how to build on children’s interests and skills to create a pathway to higher education and which courses to select in middle school for an advanced education.

At Viers Mill, whose motto is “Read, Read, Read,” the overarching focus has been this gateway skill. Parents not only

Page 3, clockwise: Principal Matthew Devan with second-grader Esmeralda; Clara Gonzalez with daughter Stephanie; first-grader Nina; and kindergarteners Emmett and Michael. **Page 4, left to right:** Kindergarteners Hermela, Juverlis, Dagm, Tabraz and Corey; and first-grader Joseph. On the cover, Elisia George with daughter Ashelle. Photos by Maisie Crow.

are taught how to choose age-appropriate books but also are given tips for storytelling if they are not literate in English, engaging activities to employ in the home, and questioning strategies modeled after teachers’ lessons “so students are hearing the same language at home as well,” said Piket, who works primarily as the school’s literacy specialist. In addition, many of the parent-sponsored events—including the book fair and Project READ, a weekly activity shared by parents and students under the guidance of staff—support the common goal. Consequently, Viers Mill’s reading efforts have virtually eliminated the achievement gap in the subject: Whites (91.2 percent), Hispanics (85.9 percent), Asians (85.7 percent) and blacks (84.9 percent) scored proficiently within 6 percent of each other.

Additionally, to help build their home libraries, at every Family Learning Night children are given a new book and a

chance to win a \$25 gift certificate from Barnes and Noble. Raffle tickets are handed out at the door of the multi-purpose room when families begin arriving at

6:30 p.m. The school arranges for a bus to circulate in the

neighborhood for potential passengers and also serves dinner—which averages 29 large pizzas to feed everyone. “My kids drive me crazy because they don’t want to be late for the pizza,” mused George.

The meeting commences at 7 p.m., as children assemble into grade-level groups and are dismissed to the classrooms, while those younger than the pre-kindergarten age are whisked off to the on-site day care

center, so parents can meet alone. The next 20 minutes are reserved for the PTA meeting, followed

by a training session for home-based learning strategies, which are simultaneously translated for the Spanish speakers who account for half of the parents present.

Meanwhile, the children work on activities that are aligned with the curriculum for that marking period, before reconvening with their parents at 8 p.m. to read the new books passed out earlier. For Virga, now director of school improvement initiatives for Montgomery County, this is the best part of Family Learning Night. “That’s when you get to see the kids follow up on what they did with the teachers and the parents also practice some of the skills they learned,” he said. “It’s just a great thing to see.”

—BY NICOLE ASHBY



Mill Elementary School



- > **Grade Span:** Pre-K–5
- > **Locale:** Suburb
- > **Total Students:** 656
- > **Race/Ethnicity Enrollment:** 54% Hispanic, 23% black, 14% white, 9% Asian
- > **Free or Reduced-Price Lunch Eligible:** 69%
- > **English Language Learners:** 37%

- > **Special Education Students:** 11%
- > **Percentage Proficient:** In reading and math, 86.4% (based on third- through fifth-graders assessed on the 2005 state exams)
- > **Interesting Fact:** The Family Learning Night program at Viers Mill boosted attendance to monthly school meetings from just eight parents to an average of 160 parents and children.

May 1-5

National Charter Schools Week, a celebration sponsored by the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. For an activity tool kit, visit www.publiccharters.org. As a kick-off event, the U.S. Department of Education is hosting the “National Charter Schools Program Showcase,” May 1–2 in Washington, D.C., to spotlight successful models and provide information on Department resources for expanding the number of high-quality charter schools. Space is available on a first-come, first-served basis. To register, visit www.sei2003.com and select “Registration,” or call (240) 485-1700.

May 7-13

Teacher Appreciation Week, a celebration sponsored by the National PTA. Established in 1984, the week’s observance provides an opportunity to honor the dedicated educators who teach America’s children. For ideas on expressions of gratitude, visit www.pta.org and select “Leadership Resources,” or call toll-free (800) 307-4782.

May 18-19

Commission on the Future of Higher Education Meeting, Washington, D.C., part of a series of public hearings sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education. Convened by Education Secretary Margaret Spellings, the commission will hold panel discussions that focus on access to and the affordability and accountability of higher education. For details, visit www.ed.gov and select “About ED,” then “Boards & Commissions,” or call (800) USA-LEARN.

Q & A GLOSSARY

How can I be assured of a quality education for my disabled child?

The *Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA)* requires that all school districts provide a free appropriate public education to students with one or more of the 13 disabilities identified by the law and are thereby in need of special education.

Special education—specialized instruction designed to meet a child’s unique needs—may be delivered in regular classes or separate classrooms, or, in some cases, in separate schools, in hospitals or at home. Eligible children also may need related services such as speech therapy, physical therapy and psychological counseling to benefit from their special education. These services must fully support the involvement of special-needs students in the general curriculum that is available to their non-disabled peers.

To ensure appropriate diagnosis of

students’ education needs, school districts must conduct evaluations according to prescribed procedures. Parents should be told, in advance, about these procedures. In addition, parents must give consent for any evaluation or placement actions as well as be allowed to examine the student’s records. Once a child is found to be eligible, parents and school personnel jointly draw up an individualized education program (IEP) that describes the special services the child will receive, including annual learning goals. If parents disagree with the school’s decisions, they may request an impartial hearing or they may file a complaint with the state education agency.

For more information, visit www.ed.gov and select “Policy,” then “IDEA Reauthorized (2004)” for “IDEA 2004 Resources.”

free appropriate public education: special education and related services that must meet state standards provided to students with disabilities without charge.

News Show Explores Parent Options

The latest tools and options available to parents under the *No Child Left Behind Act* will be the focus of the May edition of *Education News Parents Can Use*, the U.S. Department of Education’s monthly television program.

The show will spotlight public school choice and free tutoring programs and the ways in which these programs—and parental options under the law—empower parents to ensure that their children have access to a high-quality education, regardless of their race, income or zip code. In addition, the May broadcast will showcase success stories from across the

country in which parents and their children have benefited from these programs as well as the education options under *No Child Left Behind*.

Each month, *Education News Parents Can Use* showcases: schools and school districts from across the

country; conversations with school officials, parents and education experts; and advice and free resources for parents and educators.

To learn about viewing options, including webcasts, visit www.ed.gov and click on “Parents,” then “News Parents Can Use,” or call toll-free (800) USA-LEARN.





The Toolbox Revisited

Completing academically challenging courses in high school dramatically increases the likelihood of earning a bachelor's degree, according to a newly released study by the U.S. Department of Education. *The Toolbox Revisited: Paths to Degree Completion From High School Through College* found that the academic rigor of a high school curriculum is the strongest indicator of postsecondary degree completion, regardless of a student's major course of study.

The Toolbox Revisited surveys the class of 1992 as it moved from high school to higher education and includes comparisons to a previous report, *Answers in the Tool Box*, which followed the class of 1982.

Using high school and college transcripts, the study examines a national sample representing 1.1 million students who attended a four-year college, including students who started out in community colleges. The data on which the study is based covers a period of eight and one-half years for degree completion—from high school graduation in spring 1992 until December 2000.

Nearly 35 tables support the 192-page study, which also cites several postsecondary factors that contribute to degree completion: entering college directly from high school; remaining continuously enrolled; and earning more than 20 credits, or seven courses, by the end of the first 12 months of enrollment.

For a free copy of *The Toolbox Revisited*, visit www.ed.gov, or call (877) 4ED-PUBS with identification number EV0143P, while supplies last.



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