

**BETWEEN THE LIONS American Indian Head Start Literacy Initiative**  
Testimony for U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs  
May 25, 2006

Hello, my name is Beth Kirsch, and I'd like to thank you for the opportunity to speak before this Committee. I am the Series Producer for *Between the Lions*, the award-winning PBS children's show created specifically to help children learn to read.

In addition to the broadcast series, which reaches 4 million weekly viewers nationwide, *Between the Lions* is committed to reaching those children most at risk for reading failure. We began with a project in Mississippi, which has the lowest literacy rates in the country, and most recently have been working with American Indian tribes in New Mexico and Montana. The results so far have been very encouraging, and I will tell you more about the work we've done in a minute. First I'd like to give you a little more background about *Between the Lions*.

The TV series premiered in April 2000 and airs daily on PBS stations around the country. To date, we have produced 90 episodes, all focused on building children's love of reading and improving key literacy skills, such as phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency. The series is produced by WGBH — the public TV station in Boston, along with Sirius Thinking in New York, and Mississippi Public Broadcasting.

*Between the Lions* was created with reading experts from around the country, and every character and segment of the show draws on scientific research about how children learn to read. Scientifically-based research has also demonstrated that children who view the series gain more literacy skills and at a faster rate than children who don't watch the show. *Between the Lions* was one of the first new PBS series supported by Ready To Learn funding, and we are very grateful to Congress for continuing to support the Ready To Learn program.

Through our initial work with two communities in Mississippi, we learned three important lessons:

1. It is essential to focus attention on preschool literacy, because so many children enter kindergarten well behind their peers -- in vocabulary, letter knowledge, and even such basic skills as knowing how to handle a book. When you start out so far behind, it is very, very difficult to catch up.
2. Preschool teachers often have little or no early childhood education or training in how to teach literacy. In fact, many are not even aware of the critical role they play in helping children become good readers once they enter kindergarten.
3. Preschool teachers need easy-to-use, sequenced materials that help them plan and carry out literacy activities.

With all this in mind, we decided to create a project for American Indian children in New Mexico, because we saw a tremendous need based on national reading scores, and because we would have the opportunity to develop our materials with the input of many different American

Indian tribes. We saw this as a pilot that, if successful, could then be offered to other American Indian Head Start programs.

When we first presented the idea to tribal Head Start directors we were greeted with much enthusiasm as well as a strong interest in helping us shape the materials so that they would be culturally appropriate to each of the tribes. In partnership with KNME, the public TV station in Albuquerque, we spent considerable time with directors, teachers, and cultural specialists from the tribal Head Start programs, getting their input on the content and approach for all the materials we provided. In fact, at their suggestion, with KNME we filmed several new segments featuring American Indian children, so they would see kids like themselves in familiar landscapes reflected in the materials they viewed. The tribes also gave us significant input on the design of the research study and the measures that were used, again to make sure they were culturally sensitive.

For example:

- A typical drawing of a house would be instantly recognizable to anyone here, but that's not what a house looks like in Cochiti Pueblo. So, a standardized test might show that that child doesn't know the meaning of the word "house."
- Some tribes have prohibitions against children pointing to pictures of certain animals, so a child won't point to that picture even if it's the right answer. We avoided pictures of any animals that fell into this category.

Eleven tribes agreed to participate in the project, which began in fall 2004, with federal funding that Senator Domenici helped secure. For each of their Head Start classrooms we provided:

- a set of 3 DVDs, with 16 of our episodes edited so that they were better suited for preschool children
- a DVD player
- a teachers guide, with extensive lessons designed to meet Head Start literacy outcomes and state preschool standards
- a companion set of 32 children's books, 2 per lesson, carefully selected to feature many authentic American Indian stories based in the Southwest
- a bin of classroom materials, including alphabet strips, poem charts, songs, magnetic letters, word cards, flannel boards, etc.

We also provided considerable training for the Head Start teachers, to familiarize them with the materials and how to carry out the lessons. KNME and WGBH provided follow-up support and visited the classrooms throughout the school year.

Dr. Deborah Linebarger, Assistant Professor at the University of Pennsylvania, conducted a research study to determine whether this intervention improved the children's early literacy skills. She will be presenting her full findings at a meeting with the tribes in New Mexico at the end of this month. The initial findings are very positive, with the participating children making statistically significant gains in several key areas of literacy, such as:

- letter knowledge
- picture naming: oral language/vocabulary
- phonemic awareness: blending sounds to make words

Perhaps the most impressive finding is that the number of children at risk for reading failure decreased from 39% to 12%, and the number of children scoring above average increased from 23% to 64%, based on the Get Ready to Read screening tool.

The Head Start teachers have told us that they have seen a real difference since they began using the Between the Lions materials. The children use more complex and expressive language, they're enthusiastic about what they're learning, and the teachers find it easier to plan and organize their day.

We are seeking to expand the materials from 16 lessons to 32, to cover a full school year. We are also interested in expanding the project within New Mexico, and to other American Indian tribes nationwide. Already we have begun working with the Cree tribe at the Rocky Boy Reservation in Montana.

Since the beginning of the project, we have benefited from the support of Native American leaders in the state. One of the people who has helped make the project a success is Bernie Teba, who will talk more about the impact of this Between the Lions American Indian Head Start Literacy Initiative in New Mexico.

Thank you for your interest.