



POWERFUL WORDS

Roughly six weeks after her husband's 1989 inauguration, Barbara Bush hosted a luncheon in the White House to launch her eponymous foundation. "After learning about literacy issues during eight years as second lady, she was ready to hit the ground running," says Andrew Roberts, the interim president of the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy (barbarabush.org). "As a national literacy organization providing resources for families in all 50 states, we're proud to be headquartered in DC."

For the nonprofit's first 25 years, it made small grants to support family literacy programs nationwide. "Today, we're a fully operational 501(c)(3), powered by the generosity of thousands of supporters. Mrs. Bush's daughter, Doro Bush Koch, leads our efforts to carry on the work that her mother began by serving as our honorary chair," says Roberts.

Roberts notes that his organization is one of the few national foundations focused on family literacy—both adults and children—and approaches the issue from both ends of the continuum. "We believe literacy is critical to fuel economic and educational recovery nationwide," he says. We caught up with Roberts to discuss the foundation and its ambitious goals.

Andrew Roberts, the interim president of the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy, spells out the organization's mission. It's as critical as any in America right now.

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How has the foundation's mission expanded since its founding in 1989?

Our founder, Barbara Bush, was ahead of her time when she selected literacy as her cause more than three decades ago. She chose it based on the belief that, in her words, 'If more people could read, write and comprehend, we would be that much closer to solving so many of the problems that plague our nation and society.'

Since that time, research has proven her right. Literacy is an intersectional issue impacting our quality of life—not just as individuals but as a society—in many ways. As we continue to deepen our understanding of how literacy connects to issues like poverty, economic growth, public health and civic engagement, it has become increasingly clear that literacy is the key to a life of equity, dignity and prosperity for every one of us.

Andrew Roberts is interim president of the Barbara Bush Foundation.

I'm guessing literacy has multigenerational implications.

That's right. A National Institutes of Health study found that a mother's education level is the most significant determinant of her children's future academic success. But today, 54% of American adults—130 million people—read below the equivalent of a sixth-grade level, and as a result, struggle to earn a family-sustaining wage or fully participate in our society as parents, workers and community members. With such a huge percent of the population in need, we're continually seeking ways to serve more learners more quickly.

What are some recent initiatives your foundation has launched to combat this cycle?

We've increasingly focused on helping learners overcome barriers to access. This means piloting and scaling technology tools that allow low-literate adults to learn anytime, anywhere, and making our programs and resources available online to expand the number of learners we can serve.

We've doubled down on that approach in the wake of the pandemic, which had an unprecedented impact on education nationwide. When schools shut down, we immediately transitioned as many in-person programs as possible to serve students online so that they could keep progressing. Since then, we've worked to scale up those programs to help even more students catch up with their peers.

Please share a little about your mentorship programs.

ReadSquad and Book Explorers pair struggling readers in grades 1-3 with trained teen mentors who meet weekly to boost literacy skills and confidence. These programs achieve impressive results.

For example, students participating in ReadSquad have achieved three times the literacy gains of their peers learning in the classroom alone. We currently have

these programs in seven states, and we're actively looking to expand them to serve more students and families.

What about digital literacy?

Another effect of the pandemic was an increased awareness of how digital literacy impacts our lives. I'm sure many of us experienced issues with helping our children log onto Zoom for virtual school or participating in a telemedicine visit during that time. Imagine how much more challenging those activities would be for someone with lower literacy or digital literacy skills.

Digital skills are also increasingly necessary to advance in the workforce. Research shows that 92% of jobs across industries in the U.S. labor market require digital skills, but one-third of workers lack the foundational digital skills needed to enter and thrive in today's jobs.

For all those reasons, we believe it's vital that adults are equipped to live, learn and work in today's increasingly tech-driven society. We've created a digital literacy resource guide and accompanying training materials—available for free on our website—helping teachers, mentors and coaches nationwide work with their learners to build these critical skills.

What are the foundation's primary goals and initiatives in the next few years?

We hope to continue scaling our

programs to reach even more learners nationwide. Right now, we're working in 17 states, but we know that millions of families across the country need our help. We have solutions to serve them, but we need the funding and the program partners on the ground to help us meet that demand. That is our core focus.

We're also looking forward to celebrating Barbara Bush's centennial in 2025 with a yearlong campaign to further her legacy, raise awareness of literacy issues and increase support for the work she began.

You must have countless stories that inspire you and your team. Could you share one?

One story that comes to mind is a mother from Maine named Tasha. She realized her eighth-grade education made it a challenge to provide for her family and serve as a role model for her children. She found an adult education center that the Barbara Bush Foundation supported and earned her GED.

But she didn't stop there. She went on to earn her bachelor's and her master's—and became a nurse practitioner. What I love about this story is that it shows the impact that helping a single person gain literacy skills can have. By pursuing her dreams, Tasha has been able to better support her children, both financially and educationally, and her healthcare career is positively impacting her community.

I also love the full-circle moments we've seen in our reading mentorship programs for youth. For example, an advisor in one of our Florida programs is a former ReadSquad mentor. She has shared that serving as a reading mentor during high school helped mold her into the teacher she is today. Now, she oversees teen mentors in one of our programs, and she says it's incredibly fulfilling to see the program's impact from that vantage point.

I love that the foundation has a podcast. What prompted its launch and growth?

We released Mrs. Bush's Story Time podcast for the Foundation's 30th-anniversary celebrations in 2019-2020. The podcast features select archival recordings of Mrs. Bush reading children's stories with special guests like Winnie the Pooh, Daffy Duck, Elmo, Grover and celebrities including Oprah Winfrey. We added updated stories and literacy tips from bestselling authors for the re-release, and we've been pleased to hear that families have enjoyed listening together.

The podcast is one example of our website's free family literacy resources. Families might also like to check out our ReadLife Bookshelf collection, an online library for parents and children. It's filled with digital English and Spanish books tailored to various reading levels, including adults with lower literacy skills. We release new books and activities every month with seasonal themes.

This is our Giving Issue. How do our readers support the foundation?

We are a 501(c)(3) public charity and depend on private and corporate donors to fuel our work. You can visit barbarabush.org/donate to make a gift to support our mission, learn more about the issue and advocate for literacy in your community. We also encourage you to sign up for our newsletter to avoid missing out on information about upcoming events. o



First Lady Barbara Bush in 1992