

EDITORIALS

Challenge to be met

Citizens must play role in helping students learn; one way to do it is by joining Waco 1000

Gov. George W. Bush has issued a challenge to Texas that's not impossible, but which cannot possibly be achieved by schools alone.

The challenge: That at the end of the third grade every student be reading at or above grade level.

In the Waco Independent School District, that challenge equates to this: 169 of last year's second graders, 14 percent of those tested, finished the school year at below grade-level reading skills on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills.

Some of those students were retained, based on low grades. Some went to summer school to catch up. Some will start third grade Monday with deficient skills.

By the end of May, Waco must have made a difference for those 169. We must have brought the number down. The governor's challenge is down to zero — no new fourth-graders entering that grade without the requisite reading skills.

To that end, Waco has another challenge and another number to watch. It should not stop counting at least until it reaches 1,000.

Waco philanthropist Bernard Rapoport last year challenged members of the community to step forward as tutors in the Waco 1000 program — to commit one hour a week during the school year.

Combined with tutors participating in the WISD's Adopt-a-School program, which is collaborating with the Bernard and Audre Rapoport Foundation on this effort, Waco had at school year's end about

500 of the 1,000 volunteers sought, each giving at least an hour a week.

So Waco has two crucial numbers to track and manage: How much of 169 can it whittle down by spring? How much of 1,000 can it summon this fall to achieve that, and to help this year's second-graders make the grade by May?

As testified to by seven Waco 1000 volunteers on the opposite page, one can make a major difference by working with a child in the early grades.

The end of third grade is cited as crucial because in the grades ahead a child who cannot read sufficiently is going to be lost in dealing with more complex subject matter.

Early intervention

Of course, to meet the challenge issued by the governor, not only must we concern ourselves with those third-graders-to-be but also with second- and first-graders who lack grade-level skills. Some of these children don't have nurturing homes or educated parents. They need role models, mentors and inspirations.

The Waco 1000 effort isn't confined to reading. Volunteers also can tutor in math. In that area, the numbers Waco needs to confront are even higher. About 17 percent of last year's second-graders scored at below grade level.

To the end of making sure that every fourth-grader is armed with the tools for fourth grade, social promotion must cease.

Once again, however, schools cannot make up for the deficit some children face at home. The value of volunteers toward literacy cannot be overstated locally, whether it's in the Waco 1000, in Adopt-a-School interaction, in or tutoring of illiterate adults through the Central Texas Literacy Coalition.

To be a part of the Waco 1000, call the Rapoport Foundation at 756-4199 Monday, the first day of school, and find out what you can do.

The numbers are 1,000 and 169. The assignment is clear, and urgent.

