Poor Writing Costs Taxpayers Millions

By JUSTIN POPE, AP Education Writer

States spend nearly a quarter of a billion dollars a year on remedial writing instruction for their employees, according to a new report that says the indirect costs of sloppy writing probably hurt taxpayers even more.

The National Commission on Writing, in a report to be released Tuesday, says that good writing skills are at least as important in the public sector as in private industry. Poor writing not only befuddles citizens but also slows down the government as bureaucrats struggle with unclear instructions or have to redo poorly written work.

"It's impossible to calculate the ultimate cost of lost productivity because people have to read things two and three times," said Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, vice chairman of the National Governors Association, which conducted the survey for the commission.

The commission, established by the College Board, drew attention with its first report in 2003. That outlined problems with how writing is taught in American schools and proposed remedies. The group's second report, last year, tried to drum up support for writing education by highlighting the value that business and industry leaders place on writing skills.

This year, the commission surveyed human resource directors who oversee nearly 2.7 million state government employees, and found writing skills even more important than in the private sector.

While two-thirds of companies surveyed in the 2004 report said writing was an important responsibility for workers, 100 percent of the 49 states responding to the anonymous survey said it was. More than 75 percent said they take writing skills into account when hiring.

But while 70 percent of state managers said large majorities of their professional employees had adequate skills, just one-third said clerical and support staff did. The report estimates the states spend $221 million annually on remedial writing training, sometimes sending workers to $400-per-employee classes.

"You have to be able to write, convert an idea and turn it into words," said Bob Kerrey, the former U.S. senator and governor from Nebraska, who is chairman of the commission.

In public office, "I read things that were absolutely incomprehensible," Kerrey said. He shudders to think how Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence, published 229 years ago Monday, would have read in standard, government-worker bureaucrat-speak.

"It would be 10 times as long, one-tenth as comprehensive, and would have lacked all inspiration," Kerrey said.

In a conference call interview last week, Kerrey, Huckabee, and Gaston Caperton — a former West Virginia governor who now leads the College Board — said many of the costs when state employees

cannot express themselves clearly are hard to pin down. E-mail, which is so easy that workers can fire something off without thinking it through, may compound the problem.

"Increasingly as more things are done electronically, or via e-mail or blackberry, I think we tend to almost get even more sloppy," Huckabee said. "The truth is we need to get clear and concise. That adds to productivity."

Another hidden cost is that good ideas may never see the light of day.

"I see that all the time in writing and political speaking," Huckabee said. "There are some really bright people who can't communicate and as a result their ideas probably aren't given the attention they deserve."

The commission is calling for more Congressional funding for the National Writing Project, a professional development program for teachers, and what Kerrey says are proven methods for improving writing instruction in classrooms.

But the biggest boost to writing instruction may come from the decision by the College Board, under Caperton, to add a written essay to the SAT college entrance exam. The essay, which debuted in March, is expected to cause many high school English teachers to put more emphasis on composition. Critics, however, say the essay is formulaic, coachable, and a poor way to test the kind of writing skills students need in college.