

## RAISING READERS:

### The Importance of Early and Sustained Literacy for School Success

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#### Preface

A substantial body of research points to the importance of early language development, early mastery of reading, and the ongoing development of reading skills for academic success.

The purpose of this document is to serve as a primer, a brief introduction to the topic of early language development and reading mastery for academic success. This brief does not strive to be an exhaustive review of the literature on this topic, but rather is a compilation of information relevant to the interested layman.

As an independent advocacy organization, the Worcester Education Collaborative works to ensure that students in the public schools in Worcester are given the opportunity to succeed at the highest possible level and to acquire the skills and knowledge to master the challenges of the 21st century. The Collaborative is committed to supporting, facilitating, and developing a wide variety of partnerships among families, schools, community organizations, and businesses that will both enhance the quality of public education in Worcester and the quality of our common life. As a non-profit, non-partisan education organization, the Collaborative's independent voice speaks for the children and for the community as it supports a system of effective schools in which every child is prepared for success in college, career, and life.

The work of the Collaborative flows from the belief that excellence results from a meaningful partnership among schools, families, and the community. We advance our mission by serving as:

- A partner to the public schools
- An advocate for and champion of public education, teaching excellence, and students
- A disseminator of best and promising practices in education for all children
- A supportive critic of our schools and our community in the work to educate children
- A cultivator of leaders.

We look forward to your thoughts and comments on this primer.

# WHAT IS LITERACY?

## literacy

### Definition

### NOUN

#### 1. ability to read and write: the ability to read and write to a competent level

Literacy refers to the development of children's love of and enthusiasm for reading, creating the ability to communicate clearly and thoughtfully in writing and speaking, and ensuring the ability to listen with an open mind.

In a position paper, "What is Evidenced Based Reading? (2002); The International Reading Association claims that there is nothing more important than teaching children to read. "The consequences of low achievement in reading are costly both to individuals and society. Low achievement correlates with high rates of school dropout, poverty, and underemployment. The far-reaching effects of literacy achievement have heightened the interest of educators and non-educators alike in the teaching of reading."

## READING FIRST

An essential component of *No Child Left Behind* was the *Reading First* initiative. It provided incentives to ensure that schools use only effective, research based instructional methods to teach reading. The goal of this program was to have every child reading by the end of grade 3. In a policy attempt to address the highly politicized debate during the 1990's of whole language versus phonics, both educators and politicians began to insist on research based evidence for literacy reforms.

The National Academy of Science conducted the first major report stressing the importance of the science of reading. *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (1998) explored in detail "how literacy can be fostered from birth through kindergarten and the primary grades, including evaluation of philosophies, systems, and materials commonly used to teach reading." The report concluded that "excellent instruction grounded in phonics was essential for overcoming barriers to literacy." *Reading First* specifies that "teachers' classroom instruction decisions must be informed by scientifically based reading research." These findings based on scientific evidence led the way for revising and judging the rules for literacy reform.

Because of the concern that too many children were struggling with learning to read, *Reading First* supported the findings of "*Teaching Children to Read*" and emphasized instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension to help meet the goal of having every child be a reader by the end of third grade.

## EARLY EDUCATION FOR ALL: AN ACT RELATIVE TO THIRD GRADE READING PROFICIENCY

Early childhood literacy intervention is essential to address a persistent gap between the achievement of low income and more affluent children, and to ensure reading proficiency for every child. Strong language skills and a well developed vocabulary are good predictors of future school success. Differences in vocabulary growth between children of low socio-economic households and those from higher socio-economic households begin to appear as early as 18 months. As children grow toward school age, the differences become larger in the absence of strong early childhood interventions. In order to have the skills for higher level reading proficiency that is required to use literacy for critical thinking and problem solving, attention must be paid to language acquisition and reading readiness at an early age for all children.

A 2010 research report sponsored by Strategies for Children and written by Nonie K. Lesaux, a nationally recognized literacy expert at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, produced the document, *Turning the Page: Refocusing Massachusetts for Reading Success*. The report states, "Reading means accessing, evaluating, and synthesizing information, and it therefore creates a foundation for learning across all academic domains, including math, science, and social studies. It is inextricably linked to overall academic success. Effective reading is at the heart of being an engaged, global citizen who is able to grapple with complex issues... When we read successfully, we absorb literature and non-fiction for pleasure, to acquire information, and to broaden our horizons. Skilled readers also have the sophisticated oral and written communication skills needed to respond to ideas – whether presented on screen, in print, or via audio – and to generate new thinking." Additionally, the report states that reading is a lifelong process; it is the interaction between context and the purpose for reading that requires continual growth.

Despite Massachusetts being recognized as a national leader in education, 43 percent of third graders scored below proficient on the most recent MCAS reading test. Of those 43 percent, 65 percent are low-income, emphasizing the link between family income and reading proficiency. In Worcester, 55 percent of third graders are below proficient in reading. Lesaux's work highlights research indicating that by third grade, struggling readers are likely to have later school difficulties, as well as behavioral problems, depression, and negative peer relationships. Additionally, she notes that research indicates the children whose reading skills are less than sufficient by third grade have a drastically reduced likelihood of graduating from high school. She states, "as a result, these children are unlikely to develop the skills essential for participating fully in this knowledge-based economy and for experiencing life success."

Lesaux reports that the process of becoming an effective reader is a "dynamic and complex one that must begin at birth and continue into adulthood." She adds, "growth [in reading] depends upon strong and supportive interactions among adults and children, to build children's language and knowledge, and to increase the amount of time their eyes spend on print." She further defines the necessity of the interaction of the home, early education and care settings, schools, and the community, including museums and libraries. She states that high quality experiences and relationships provide children with opportunities to talk and learn. "Quality interactions help children build their language skills and the essential background and conceptual knowledge that they will need not only to read high school and college texts, but compete successfully in this knowledge-based economy."

In a brochure for care givers entitled *A Child Becomes Reader*, the National Institute for Literacy poses the question, "When does a child learn to read?" Many people might say, in kindergarten or first grade. However, the results of research on early literacy indicate that children begin learning to read and write long before they enter school, actually from the day they are born. Children begin to learn spoken language early on as their family members and care givers speak, coo, laugh and sing; they begin to respond to all the sounds in their world. Adults read to them and they begin to grasp the notion of the written word; they watch adults reading books, magazines, and newspapers, and develop concepts of print and the written language. Thus, the researchers tell us, early experiences from birth on set the stage for children to become successful readers and writers.

Several decades of research have informed us about how children learn to read and write, and the conditions that provide readiness for successful literacy experiences. This is what we know about how to become skilled and confident readers over time. Young children need plentiful opportunities to:

- Build spoken language by talking and listening;
- Learn about print and books;
- Learn about the sound of spoken language;
- Learn about the letters of the alphabet;
- Listen to books read aloud.

Children need to listen and talk a lot. "Children who do not hear a lot of talk and who are not encouraged to talk themselves often have problems learning to read." Research also concludes that "Reading aloud to children has been called the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for success in reading. Reading aloud, with children participating actively, helps

children learn new words, learn more about the world, learn about written language, and see the connection between words that are spoken and words that are written." Dianne Bruce, director of Edward Street Child Services in Worcester reinforces these findings and the need to provide language and print environments that are cognitively stimulating. This is based on the demonstrated concept that a highly developed vocabulary and broad language acquisition are among the best predictors of academic success.

On January 21, 2011, two legislators, Representative Marty Walz and Senator Katherine Clark filed An Act Relative to Third Grade Reading Proficiency (S.188/H.1853) in the Massachusetts legislature that would focus state efforts on ensuring that the Commonwealth's children would be proficient readers by third grade. The bill would implement several key recommendations in Strategies for Children's 2010 research report "*Turning the Page.*"

Additionally it would establish the Massachusetts Early Reading Council to advise state education departments on statewide early language and reading strategies for children from birth to third grade. The council provides guidance to ensure that:

- Professional development is on-site, data-driven, linked to practice, collaborative and sustained over time to create a culture of continuous improvement.
- Curriculum is language-rich, engaging and rigorous.
- Assessment is comprehensive, developmentally appropriate and used to inform practice.
- Family engagement is open and ongoing, and supports children's language and literacy development.

## READING NEXT

### A VISION FOR ACTION AND RESEARCH IN MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL LITERACY

*Reading Next* was a 2004 report commissioned by the Carnegie Corporation of New York from the Alliance for Excellent Education, and authored by Gina Biancarosa and Dr. Catherine Snow. The report considered the current research on adolescent literacy and urged strategies that would turn research into practice. The authors noted that, at the time, approximately eight million young people between fourth and twelfth grade struggled to read at grade level. They stated that, unlike younger readers, the problem is not that they can't read the words on the page, but rather inability to comprehend what they read. "Getting third graders to read at grade level is an important and challenging task, and one that needs ongoing attention from researchers, teacher educators, teachers, and parents. But many excellent third grade readers will falter or fail in later grade academic tasks if the teaching of reading is neglected in the middle and secondary grades." They concluded, "Meeting these needs will require expanding the discussion of reading instruction from *Reading First*—acquiring grade-level reading skills by third grade—to *Reading Next*—acquiring the reading skills that can serve youth for a lifetime." The report identified fifteen key elements of effective adolescent literacy intervention suggesting to practitioners that they identify their particular school and student needs, and combine and implement "what works" for them in order to "flexibly try out various combinations in search of the most effective overall program."

In *Spreading the Word*, an Education Update from the Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD 2005), Stanford education professor Michael Kamen, pointed out that "when manufacturing ruled the US economy, high school graduates clever at using their hands, could make a living as well as those clever at using their heads."

The council would be:

- Established within the Executive Office of Education.
- Co-chaired by the Secretary of Education and a recognized expert in children's language and literacy development, and comprised of state legislators, early educators, parents, elementary school principals, superintendents, reading specialists, school committee members, teachers' unions, pediatricians, and advocates.

It would be responsible for:

- Developing recommendations focused on family engagement and home-visiting programs; high quality infant and toddler programs, pre-kindergarten and full-day kindergarten;
- Aligning curriculum and, instruction from pre-kindergarten to grade three and
- Facilitating interagency collaboration and communication.

In speaking to Governor Deval Patrick's commitment to improving and supporting early literacy, Massachusetts Secretary of Education Paul Reville stated, "If we are serious about this aspirational goal of reading proficiency, we have no choice but to build out our system. It's a system of education...that begins at birth. It begins with providing service to children in their earliest years... It's not only a moral obligation. It's an economic imperative. If we want to be competitive in the 21st century, we're going to compete on the basis of brain power. And brain power starts with early childhood."

In this increasingly information based society, the demand for improved comprehension and content area reading and writing skills is high since most professions will require that students excel as readers and writers. He notes that in high school preparation, students need to learn that different disciplines require different purposes for reading and writing – for example, a summary for a lab report demands different thinking, organization, and writing than a history summary or an English critique.

A brief compiled for the Alliance for Excellent Education in 2007 reports that a recent review of the research on secondary literacy instruction expands on the findings of Reading Next. Their conclusions suggest that in grades 4 – 12, literacy instruction should address six key areas: fluency, vocabulary knowledge, content knowledge, higher level reasoning and thinking skills, reading comprehension strategies, and student motivation and engagement.

## **STRIVING READERS**

In a continuing effort to raise the reading skills of all readers, President George W. Bush proposed the initiative, *Striving Readers*. The goal of the federally funded grant program is to raise student achievement in middle and high schools by improving the literacy skills of struggling adolescent readers and to help build a research base around specific strategies that improve the literacy skills of adolescents. As with earlier attempts to improve results for young readers, this program aims to make competitive grants to develop, implement, evaluate, and to require research based reading interventions for middle or high school students. The program gives priority to schools at risk of not meeting annual yearly progress requirements under NCLB or that have significant percentages or numbers of students reading below grade level.

*Striving Readers* programs include three key components: (1) research based literacy interventions, targeted to students who are reading significantly below grade level, including specific strategies to accelerate the development of literacy skills and to monitor student progress; (2) classroom based strategies for improving student literacy that may include professional development for subject matter teachers and training in the use of research based reading and comprehension strategies across subject areas; and (3) a rigorous experimental evaluation component.

A *New York Times*, March 3, 2011, article extended the conversation about literacy deficits from high schools to community colleges. They reported, “The knowledge gap at community colleges is increasingly being recognized as a national problem. About 65 percent of all community college students nationwide need some form of remedial education, with students’ shortcomings in math outnumbering those in reading by 2 to 1,” said Thomas R. Bailey, director of the Community College Research Center at Teachers College at Columbia University. They added that nationwide fewer than half the students required to take remedial courses complete them. The Obama administration has begun a series of “community college summits” at campuses across the country to gather ideas on how the schools can produce more graduates. The more remediation required as a result of limited literacy skills leaving high school, the greater the likelihood that students will fail to graduate, leaving them lagging behind in the workforce.

The focus of literacy instruction in the last decade has emphasized scientifically based research compelling educators, parents, and policy makers to critically examine literacy instruction for all students. Reading research emphasizes the importance of a comprehensive approach to literacy including both direct instruction of skills and more child-centered



literature rich environments that encourage strategies to comprehend text. State and national standards have also affected how literacy instruction takes place ensuring that instructional strategies facilitate what students should know and be able to do. Although the definition of literacy still encompasses reading, writing, listening, and speaking; the definition has expanded considerably to ensure that as a lifelong learning process, students develop the skills necessary to solve problems, think critically and creatively, and to evaluate ideas.

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