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AUTHOR Denton, David R.  
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ABSTRACT

Schools should be able to teach every child to read, and achieving that goal will require changes in reading instruction at many levels. Six key areas must be addressed: (1) early assessment to identify each child's individual needs and detect problems early; (2) classroom reading instruction that meets the needs of all children; (3) early intervention to help children who are at risk of not learning to read; (4) intervention for students in the middle grades and high school who are not reading at grade level; (5) teacher education that makes reading a top priority and prepares new teachers to meet every child's reading needs; and (6) professional development that focuses on identified problems and helps teachers continually improve their skills in teaching reading. Reading reform as it took place in Alabama beginning in 1996 is cited as an example. (EF)

## SREB

David R. Denton

# Teaching All Children to Read

Reading is fundamental. This message is not new, but in the last decade research clearly has shown that our schools should be able to teach every child to read. Achieving that goal will require changes in reading instruction at many levels.

## WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO TEACH ALL CHILDREN TO READ?

## WHAT DOES COMPREHENSIVE READING REFORM LOOK LIKE?

To teach all children to read, six key areas must be addressed:

- **early assessment** to identify each child's individual needs and detect problems early;
- **classroom reading instruction** that meets the needs of all children;
- **early intervention** to help children who are at risk of not learning to read;
- **intervention for older children** who are not reading at grade level;
- **teacher education** that prepares new teachers to meet every child's reading needs; and
- **professional development** that helps teachers continually improve their skills in teaching reading.

Each area requires individual attention, just as children do, but it also is important to recognize that they all are closely linked and that the last two — teacher education and professional development — are central to each of the others.

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592 10th St. N.W.  
Atlanta, GA 30318  
(404) 875-9211  
www.sreb.org

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This report is based in part on a session at the 1999 SREB annual meeting in Wilmington, Del. Contributors were:

**Ed Richardson**, *superintendent*, Alabama Department of Education, and vice chairman, SREB;

**Darrell Morris**, *professor of education and head of The Reading Clinic*, Appalachian State University, Boone, N.C.;

**Louisa Moats**, *project director*, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Intervention Project, Washington, D.C.;  
and

**David Denton**, *director of Health and Human Services Programs*, SREB.

## EARLY ASSESSMENT TO IDENTIFY READING PROBLEMS

Research on how children learn to read clearly shows that effective reading instruction needs to address certain basic issues. In particular, all children need to understand the relationship between sounds and letters (phonemic awareness) and must know how to use phonics to sound out unfamiliar words. They also must learn to recognize words automatically, including a core vocabulary of irregular words that cannot be sounded out. The best way to become a fluent reader is to read a lot — to practice reading quality texts that match each student's reading level but also challenge him or her to learn new vocabulary and new forms of language.

But children are different, and no one lock-step curriculum can produce the same results for all of them. Some will master word-recognition skills quickly and easily: these children will be ready to progress quickly to reading higher-level material. Others will require more — sometimes much more — intensive instruction in phonics before they can read effectively for meaning. To teach every child effectively, teachers need to provide a balance of learning experiences that is consistent with each child's needs. Achieving the appropriate balance will be possible only if teachers have reliable, meaningful ways of assessing children's reading needs and can use these results in deciding how to teach each child.

*No one lock-step  
approach to teaching  
reading can produce  
the same results for  
all children.*

States have taken various approaches to early assessment in reading. Alabama has developed a single reading assessment that will be used by every school in the state. North Carolina developed a reading assessment but gives each local district permission to select an alternative assessment that meets the same objectives. Texas developed a reading assessment that many districts have adopted but also allows them to choose from a list of approved alternative assessments. Mississippi does not specify which assessments schools must use but instead provides detailed *Reading Instructional Supplements* to guide both instruction and assessment.

While their approaches to identifying acceptable assessments differ, these and other states share a commitment to two key principles for effective assessment. They recognize that assessment must be a continual process until children reach and remain at grade level in reading. They also recognize that consistently reliable results for individual children cannot be expected before the second half of kindergarten and that early intervention will be most effective if it begins no later than the middle of first grade.

While some assessments could provide results that are useful both for decision-making about individual children's needs and for school accountability purposes, the importance of flexibility in how and when children are assessed makes such a dual use problematic. So far no SREB state has made reading assessment prior to third grade a part of its statewide school-accountability program.

## EVERY CLASSROOM TEACHER NEEDS A FULL TOOLBOX

Even the best assessment will be useful only if classroom teachers are able to use the information to meet all children's needs. This task requires them to possess a broad range of skills and knowledge about the structure of language, the process of learning to read and the teaching strategies that are effective for different children.

*Question: What percentage of elementary school teachers have all the skills and knowledge they need to teach all children to read?*

*Moats: Perhaps 20 percent of new teachers are very well-prepared.*

Providing students with individualized instruction does not mean that teaching must be one-on-one, although some children with serious reading problems may require one-on-one instruction. Teachers do need to be attentive to each

*States should recognize that continual assessment is necessary until children reach and remain at grade level.*

*Teachers need to find the right balance of learning experiences to meet each child's needs.*

*Flexible grouping  
can help meet  
individual  
students' needs.*

*Repetition of the  
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child's rate of progress and should have an individual instructional plan for every child who has problems reading. One of the most effective ways to meet individual needs is through flexible grouping of children based on regular evaluation of each child's progress. Flexible grouping should not be confused with tracking. With flexible grouping children may be in different groups for instruction in different areas of reading, and the groups should change as children progress at different rates.

Teachers also need to recognize that reading instruction needs to be taught as a system. While children learn at different rates and require emphasis in different areas, all of them need teachers who understand the relationship between speech sounds and written language and who are able to communicate that understanding to their students. Unlike speech, reading does not develop naturally but must be learned, even though it may appear natural for some children.

## EARLY INTERVENTION PREVENTS LATER FAILURE

Early intervention for children with reading difficulties is essential to prevent them from falling far behind their classmates. Intervention can take a variety of forms — from intensive one-on-one tutoring to activities in small groups. It can be offered in the regular classroom or outside of it. Most important, even more than with everyday classroom instruction, the intervention must be designed specifically to meet the individual child's needs and must be provided by a teacher who truly understands those needs.

Many states have made ending social promotion a high priority. While this goal is worthwhile, it is important to recognize that repeating the same instruction that failed the first time dooms children to continued failure as surely as does promoting them when they have not achieved grade-level objec-

*Question: How much phonics instruction is enough?*

*Moats: The minimum is what it takes to teach the child to read any new word quickly and accurately.*

*Morris: While they are learning phonics, it is essential that they be provided with as many opportunities to read at their own levels as possible. Phonics is an essential skill, but the only way to become an expert reader is to do lots of reading.*

tives. In many cases, early intervention during the school year in first or second grade and/or appropriate summer programs can eliminate the need for retention. When retention is unavoidable, it is essential that children's experiences during the repeated year be designed to correct what did not work the first time.

The Oklahoma Legislature clearly recognized the relationship between early intervention and an end to social promotion in its 1997 Reading Sufficiency Act. The act requires that each student who does not read at grade level be provided with a plan for intensive instruction to remedy reading deficiencies. This intervention program is to continue until the student reads at or above grade level, and the student may continue to progress from grade to grade while working within the plan. Several states have passed similar legislation in recent years.

## INTERVENTION FOR STUDENTS IN THE MIDDLE GRADES AND HIGH SCHOOL

Improving classroom instruction in reading and providing effective early intervention to children who need it ultimately should reduce dramatically the number of students in the middle grades and in high school who cannot read adequately. Unfortunately, many poor readers already have reached these higher grades, and more will do so before meaningful change comes to all elementary classrooms.

The longer a reading problem persists, the more difficult it is to correct. Years of reading difficulties not only make grade-level material far too difficult but also leave students with significant gaps in the basic knowledge needed to comprehend advanced content. Although it is difficult to overcome the cumulative deficit from years of reading below grade level, research has proved that it is possible to help older students correct serious reading problems. To do so requires a correct diagnosis of the problems and appropriate intervention measures.

**Question:** *Can we expect classroom teachers to correct students' reading problems in the middle grades and high school?*

**Moats:** *Teachers in those higher grades need to be better trained in reading, but students who are many grades behind in reading will need intensive one-on-one help from expert reading teachers.*

*Deferring intervention until third or fourth grade should be avoided at all costs.*

— The National Research Council

*It is much harder to correct serious reading problems in older students, but it can be done.*

*It is absolutely essential that teachers at all grade levels understand what is involved in learning to read.*

— The National Research Council

## COMPREHENSIVE READING REFORM IN ALA

In November 1996 the Alabama State Board of Education appointed 25 people from schools, colleges and universities, business and industry, and grass-roots support groups to serve on the Alabama Reading Panel. The panel reviewed reading research and developed a plan that targets students' reading performance on three fronts:

- beginning reading instruction to ensure that kindergartners and first-graders learn to read quickly and effectively and to prevent reading failure in future grades, when intervention efforts are more costly;
- instruction explicitly designed to expand reading power in grades two through 12, with students expected to read frequently, broadly, strategically and thoughtfully; and
- intensive, effective intervention, designed to accelerate reading significantly, for struggling readers in kindergarten through 12th grade, with intervention to be provided as early as possible and by well-trained reading specialists.

Together, these three target areas form the basis of the Alabama Reading Initiative: Literacy for All, which focuses primarily on "retooling the teacher corps."

In early 1998, 16 elementary schools and middle schools were selected from a pool of applicants to serve as literacy demonstration sites for 1998-99. Each school had to agree to set a goal of 100 percent literacy for its students; attend an intensive 10-day training program during the summer before the school year; adjust reading instruction accordingly; serve as a model of effective reading instruction for other schools; and be examined by an outside evaluator. In order for a school to be considered, 85 percent of its faculty had to agree to these conditions.

More than 600 teachers and administrators from the 16 selected schools participated in the 1998 Summer Reading Academy, where they received research-based instruction in reading from 60 certified trainers. Another three-day session provided 100 teachers with additional instruction in how to teach struggling readers. Principals, because they were expected to be instructional leaders, received the same instruction as teachers.

The faculty at each literacy demonstration site left the summer program with specific plans to fine-tune and adjust the school's reading program to meet local needs. For

## MA: ONE STATE'S EXPERIENCE

example, one elementary school decided to implement a systematic phonemic-awareness and phonics component, while another focused on strategies to connect writing and reading instruction more effectively. A middle school identified its primary need as providing intervention for 80 struggling readers.

Colleges of teacher education were involved in the reading initiative from the beginning. Many instructors at the summer academy were faculty of teacher education programs, and they were expected to work with the literacy demonstration sites as mentors during the school year. In March 1999 more than 100 additional faculty in teacher education programs attended a five-day seminar to learn more about the reading initiative and the research on which it is based.

The Alabama State Department of Education contracted with a commercial publisher to develop the **Alabama Diagnostic Reading Assessments** for kindergarten, first grade and second grade. In addition to providing information that teachers could use to identify individual students' instructional needs, these standardized assessments also provide statewide information on Alabama children's readiness for school at each grade level. The assessments were tested by a statewide sample as well as by the literacy demonstration sites during 1998-99 and were administered statewide in the fall of 1999.

In 1998-99 the University of Alabama at Birmingham and the University of Alabama at Huntsville conducted a third-party evaluation of the reading initiative. Preliminary results suggest the literacy demonstration sites as a whole experienced improved teacher behavior and gains in student achievement.

It is important to note that the Summer Reading Academy and literacy demonstration sites that were part of the Alabama Reading Initiative during the first year had no direct funding from state appropriations. Instead, contributions totaling \$650,000 came from businesses, professional organizations and other government agencies, including the Alabama Commission on Higher Education. Private contributions of about \$800,000 funded a second reading academy for 65 additional schools in summer 1999.

In 1999 the Alabama Legislature appropriated \$6 million for the reading initiative, enabling it to expand to 160 more schools in 2000-01 and to all Alabama schools by 2002-03.

*Supplementary  
programs can  
neither substitute for  
nor compensate for  
poor-quality teaching  
in the classroom.*

— The National  
Research Council



*Teaching reading  
is rocket science!*

— Louisa Moats

*In the typical  
teacher-education  
program, the amount  
of time given  
to reading  
is insufficient.*

— The National  
Research Council

Just as with elementary teachers, teachers in the middle grades and high school need to understand the complex process of learning to read. They need to be able to distinguish between reading difficulties that result from deficiencies in basic skills and those that stem from other sources, such as lack of motivation and/or low expectations. Teachers also need to realize that these different types of problems often are interdependent so that they can provide struggling students with the combination of intervention services they need to begin to catch up. Teachers in the middle grades and high school also need better training in reading so that they can help all students progress steadily to more advanced reading levels.

## TEACHER EDUCATION MUST MAKE READING A TOP PRIORITY

We know more than ever before about the process of learning to read. Although many children seem to learn to read relatively easily, the process by which they do so is actually quite complex, and teachers need to understand it in order to help struggling students.

It is increasingly clear that the teaching of reading is important enough and difficult enough to require much more in-depth attention than it commonly receives in undergraduate teacher-preparation programs today. Many states require students in elementary education to take only one or two courses in teaching reading, while those planning to teach the middle grades or high school often take none at all. Further, despite growing evidence about what it takes to teach all children to read, there remain significant differences in what actually is taught — not only among teacher education programs but also among faculty members teaching the same course. While most faculty members say that they teach about phonics, all too many graduates lack adequate understanding of the critical role that phonetic word recognition plays in learning to read successfully.

*Question: Most reading professors in teacher education programs say they teach phonics, but many teachers say they did not learn much about phonics as undergraduates. What is going wrong?*

*Morris: A great many of today's reading professors are interested primarily in helping teachers learn how to help good readers grow into expert readers. Far too few have focused their academic careers on finding ways to help struggling readers succeed, and we need to change that.*

States have taken various actions to address the problem of inadequate instruction in teaching reading. Maryland now requires all teachers in the elementary grades to have at least 12 credit-hours in reading; teachers in the middle grades and high school are required to have six credit-hours in reading. These requirements apply to both current and future teachers. In North Carolina, reading is now an acceptable undergraduate concentration, just as science or social studies might be. The Georgia Board of Regents will require all future teachers who major in early childhood education (certification for prekindergarten through grade five) to minor in both reading and math. In addition, many states have taken steps to require reading instruction to be consistent with the latest scientific research on learning to read.

A traditional view of teacher education sees three distinct phases: undergraduate coursework; student teaching; and professional development. Too often, there is little or no coordination among these phases. Teacher education instead should be viewed as an ongoing partnership between schools and colleges that is designed to make novices into expert teachers. Well-organized, high-quality teaching experiences in real classrooms should play a critical role in helping students evolve from undergraduates to expert teachers. Unfortunately, this kind of cooperation rarely occurs, but some SREB states have begun trying to make changes.

North Carolina's university/school partnership program is intended to ensure that students in colleges of education get more hands-on experience in classrooms. In some cases, classroom teaching assignments have been expanded to a full school year; these future teachers are assigned mentor teachers who have received special training in mentoring. The Kentucky Teacher Internship Program requires all new graduates to spend one year of postbaccalaureate internship working with a specially trained mentor teacher before earning a full teaching certificate. The University of Mississippi takes a different approach with the MENTOR Institute, a pilot program designed to provide support and increase the skills and knowledge of new teachers who have just completed their first year.

*States are seeking ways to increase the amount of reading content in the teacher education curriculum.*

*Teacher education should be a partnership between universities and schools.*

*Undergraduate teacher-education programs must do better in reading, but we should not expect new graduates instantly to become expert reading teachers.*

— Darrell Morris

*Principals must understand both reading and child development to be effective leaders.*

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT THAT FOCUSES ON IDENTIFIED PROBLEMS

Professional development for teachers often has been ineffective and largely unrelated to teachers' real needs. To be meaningful, professional-development efforts in reading should:

- focus on developing specific skills and filling identified gaps in skills and knowledge;
- include opportunities for experts to demonstrate effective teaching strategies in real classrooms;
- be led by principals who have at least a basic understanding of reading and child development; and
- recognize that many younger teachers have had little or no exposure to phonics as undergraduates and that many veteran teachers have become confused by years of being forced to adopt one new program after another.

Effective professional development does not have to take place in a traditional adult-education setting or in large groups. It also can happen within the school day. Several states have taken steps to provide schools with reading specialists who are prepared not only to assist children who have serious problems but also to work directly with classroom teachers who need to improve their skills in teaching reading.

Texas has developed a program to encourage teachers to become certified as master reading teachers to work with students and other teachers. In some cases, these master teachers would be eligible for an annual bonus, currently \$5,000. An Arkansas program uses Reading Recovery's teacher-training model to prepare "literacy coaches." To help principals design professional development that responds directly to real problems, the Georgia Department of Education has developed a set of videos for use in assessing teachers' skills in reading instruction. These tapes, which include vignettes of children demonstrating different kinds of reading problems, can be used both to evaluate applicants' skills in teaching reading and to identify areas in which experienced teachers need help.

## THE HARD PART: PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Addressing one or two aspects of reading reform may improve reading performance to some degree, but real change requires addressing each of them as an integral part of a larger problem. Only through taking on that challenging task can states accomplish meaningful change. States that have attempted it — notably Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina and Texas — can vouch for the enormity of the task, but they have persisted and are beginning to see results.

Setting high goals is especially important in reading, but expectations about the pace of change also must be realistic. There are no “silver bullets” that can produce needed changes overnight. Because of its importance in learning to read and because it too often has been neglected, phonics has received much of the attention in recent years, but phonics alone cannot teach all children to become good readers. A necessary emphasis on phonics should not come at the expense of other areas. After all, the main purpose of learning to read is to get meaning from printed words, and, as with phonics, comprehension skills must be taught. Only truly comprehensive efforts to reform reading instruction can improve reading achievement enough to meet the demands of the 21st century.

*Question: How much of a role can technology play in helping to solve reading problems?*

*Moats: Technology can be helpful, especially in providing practice in specific areas, but technology must be seen as one more tool that must be used within the context of good, scientifically based classroom instruction.*

*There are no  
“silver bullets.”*

*What does the  
research really  
tell us?*

## THE NATIONAL READING PANEL

In 1997 Congress mandated the establishment of the National Reading Panel under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Education and the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development (NICHD). The panel was charged with determining just what we have learned (or have not learned) from rigorous scientific research about how children read and how they can be taught to read.

The panel also is charged with communicating its findings to Congress and to the public in ways that will be useful both in elementary school classrooms and in teacher education programs. The chairman of the panel, Donald Langenberg, is chancellor of the University System of Maryland and a member of the Southern Regional Education Board.

After conducting public hearings nationwide and hearing from a range of reading experts, the National Reading Panel released an interim report in February 1999 in which it described its work to date. Included in the interim report was a summary of public testimony. The panel now is determining what information is relevant and useful in the research "in order to influence the quality and form of reading instruction in our nation's classrooms." A final report is expected in early 2000.



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