
Early Reading Success Panel Report

Executive Summary

Teaching children to read is a central—arguably *the* central—mission of formal schooling. Learning to read is critically important to children's success in school, and, in many ways, to their success in adult life. Good classroom reading instruction in the early grades is key to creating strong, competent readers and to preventing the development of many reading difficulties.

The state legislation that mandated the creation of the Early Reading Success Panel (Public Act 99-227) was motivated by a desire that all Connecticut teachers be prepared to teach reading effectively to a wide range of children. Members of the panel represented many constituencies with an interest in reading, including elementary school teachers, school administrators, librarians, reading specialists, bilingual educators, state legislators, and early childhood and higher education experts knowledgeable in the field of reading research. Their charge was to identify the knowledge and skills important for Connecticut teachers in the primary grades (kindergarten through Grade 3) to teach reading. To meet this charge, panel members worked with nationally recognized researchers, reviewed a great deal of research literature on reading, and struggled with the complexities of meeting all children's needs in reading. Their efforts led them to a number of fundamental conclusions.

Conclusions

- **Reading instruction in the primary grades must be comprehensive—that is, it must effectively develop a wide range of competencies in children.**

There is no opposition between phonics instruction and teaching higher-level comprehension abilities, or between teaching basic skills and fostering motivation to read – all of these must be part of a high-quality primary reading curriculum.

Issues involved in the teaching of reading frequently are cast in terms of the so-called “reading wars.” Typically, the reading wars pit whole-language approaches to teaching reading, which emphasize comprehension, reading children’s literature and motivation to read, against phonics approaches, which emphasize the importance of learning to decode individual words accurately and rapidly. However, there is clear agreement among researchers and scientists who study reading that good reading instruction in the primary grades must be comprehensive (National Academy of Education, 1985; National Reading Panel, 2000; National Research Council, 1998), because learning to read draws upon a wide range of competencies. In other words, the “reading wars” involve a false dichotomy. There is no opposition between phonics instruction and teaching higher-level comprehension abilities, or between teaching basic skills and fostering motivation to read—all of these must be part of a high-quality primary reading curriculum.

- **Primary teachers must know how to adapt reading instruction to meet individual differences.**

Tailoring instruction is important for all students, not just those who are at risk for reading difficulties.

Children enter kindergarten with large individual differences in the experiences and competencies that are important for learning to read, so primary teachers must know how to adapt instruction for a wide range of youngsters. Instruction should focus on the strengths and weaknesses of the individual student and should be tailored to result in that student’s growth in reading achievement. Meeting the instructional needs of a wide range of children requires teachers to have a broad repertoire of instructional strategies and an extensive knowledge base about reading acquisition, as well as about the nature of early reading problems and how to address them. Ongoing assessment is key to determining which children require special attention, and in which areas.

Tailoring instruction is important for all students, not just those who are at risk for reading difficulties. For example, when children are particularly advanced in reading, their skills and motivation to read must be fostered by providing them with appropriately challenging books. And teachers who have a detailed understanding of reading acquisition and of different instructional strategies can use this understanding to meet the needs of high- and middle-achieving students, as well as the needs of those experiencing difficulties.

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- **High-quality reading instruction in the K-3 years can prevent many reading difficulties from developing in the first place.**

To detect those students who, nonetheless, experience difficulties, early screening and ongoing assessment are essential. Without timely intervention, children who struggle in reading in the primary grades are at high risk of long-term reading failure (National Reading Panel, 2000; National Research Council, 1998). A “wait and see” approach may be disastrous for these youngsters. Young children should be screened for early signs of reading difficulties, and those at risk should receive prompt help.

- **Because facility with and awareness about oral language provide an essential foundation for learning to read, developing these competencies is critical in reading instruction.**

Learning to read in any language depends upon a strong foundation of oral competence in that language. Not only are specific oral-language competencies important, but oral language also is a crucial vehicle for acquiring general knowledge about the world. When adults engage children in conversation, encourage them to attend to new words, tell them stories, read to them regularly or promote language learning in myriad other ways, they help children to develop a base of knowledge about spoken English, and about the world in general, that is essential to learning to read. Although this oral-language foundation usually is first established during the preschool years, the value of developing children’s oral-language competence does not diminish throughout the primary grades.

Oral-language competencies that are important in reading achievement include vocabulary, listening comprehension and grammatical skills. For example, if children do not understand the meaning of a sentence when they hear it, they also will not know its meaning when they read it, even if they are capable of recognizing the printed words that compose the sentence.

Another particularly important oral-language skill is phonemic awareness, or awareness of the individual sounds in spoken words—such as being able to segment the spoken word “man” into its component sounds: /m/, /a/, /n/. Phonemic awareness plays a key role in children’s development of word-identification skills—that is, their ability to read individual words accurately and effortlessly, including the ability to decode unfamiliar words.

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- **Primary-level reading instruction must involve explicit, systematic teaching of word-identification skills, including phonics instruction and instruction in phonemic awareness.**

Instruction must include explicit teaching of word-identification skills.

Good word-identification skills are indispensable to reading comprehension. Children who cannot read the words on the page, or who have to struggle too hard to read them, will not comprehend what they are reading. Because most children do not acquire word-identification skills spontaneously, simply through exposure to books and reading, these skills must be explicitly and systematically taught. Teaching of word-identification skills must include teaching of phonemic awareness, as well as instruction about the relationships between the letters in printed words and sounds in spoken words, commonly termed “phonics instruction.” Effective phonics instruction requires an understanding of the nature of written English, especially that English is a complex alphabetic system in which readers frequently must attend to patterns of letters within words. This instruction can (and should) emphasize engaging, hands-on activities that are enjoyable for children, rather than large amounts of passive seatwork or rote drill. Children also need both guided and independent practice applying their developing word-identification skills in context (e.g., in reading books), as well as practice identifying words out of context.

- **Primary reading instruction must include explicit teaching of a wide range of comprehension competencies, as well as opportunities for children to read widely in a variety of interesting texts appropriate to their grade and to individual children’s reading levels.**

Instruction must include explicit teaching of a wide range of comprehension competencies.

Good word-identification skills are essential for reading comprehension—but so are many other competencies, such as vocabulary, background knowledge, the use of context to aid comprehension (e.g., using context to infer the meanings of words), inferencing and evaluation, comprehension monitoring, and the use of comprehension strategies. Like word-identification skills, these competencies must be explicitly taught. Wide reading of books and other text, such as newspapers and magazines, also is necessary for success in reading. Reading widely gives children practice applying word-identification skills in context, helps them build ease and speed of reading, exposes them to new vocabulary and background knowledge, and helps to foster motivation for reading. Fostering motivation is important because, among other reasons, children who enjoy reading are more likely to spend time in wide reading.

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- **Effective reading instruction requires coordinating and integrating the teaching of word-identification skills, comprehension, spelling and writing.**

Although there is certainly a progression in children's reading abilities over time, many reading skills do not develop in a simple step-wise manner, but rather in tandem. For example, although beginning readers must learn to decode individual words well, children acquire word-identification skills not only from explicit teaching of phonics, but also from encountering new words in books, from having an opportunity to apply phonics skills in context and from writing individual words. Likewise, explicit teaching of spelling is important, but children also learn spelling from having their attention drawn to words they encounter in reading and from writing activities that encourage them to communicate their ideas clearly. In other words, oral language, reading, spelling and writing all are interrelated and reinforce one another. Effective reading instruction involves coordinating these areas—word identification out of context, fluent and accurate word identification in context, comprehension (oral **and** reading comprehension), spelling, and writing—into a well-integrated, comprehensive curriculum.

- **Teaching children to read demands extensive knowledge and skill on the part of primary-level teachers.**

Primary teachers need an extensive knowledge base about areas such as language and reading development, the nature of the English writing system, and individual differences that affect learning to read, such as poor facility with spoken English and poor phonemic awareness. They must know how to teach important reading-related competencies, including both word-identification skills and comprehension, and how to manage a classroom. They must be able to assess children's progress on an ongoing basis and to recognize early signs of difficulty. They must be effective motivators of children, whether those children are high or low achievers. And they must collaborate with other professionals and with parents.

- **In order to teach a wide range of children effectively, primary-level teachers must have adequate resources, including both human and material resources.**

Within schools, various specialists—including reading specialists, speech and language specialists, library media specialists, bilingual specialists and special educators—can aid classroom teachers in establishing a high-quality, comprehensive curriculum of reading instruction. In particular, these specialists can serve as valuable resources for classroom teachers.

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Teachers must be effective motivators of children.

Reading specialists, speech and language specialists, library media specialists, bilingual specialists and special educators can significantly aid classroom teachers.

For example, reading specialists and special educators have knowledge about how to adapt instruction for struggling readers; speech and language specialists have knowledge about how to promote various language competencies; and library media specialists have knowledge about books on a wide range of topics and at a variety of reading levels. Although all of these specialists are not found in every school, schools should capitalize as much as possible on any resources already available to them by using the knowledge base of various specialists in designing and individualizing reading instruction.

Adequate material resources include various instructional tools (e.g., manipulatives such as unifix cubes, plastic letters, and letter cards for developing phonological awareness and word-decoding skills), writing supplies, games, and especially, **access to a wide variety of books**. Without sufficient access to a variety of books involving different reading levels, genres and topics (including books with multicultural themes and characters, and nonfiction as well as fiction), teachers cannot place children appropriately for instruction or foster motivation to read.

- **School districts, boards of education, parents and communities all have important roles to play in ensuring that children learn to read.**

Responsibilities for high-quality reading instruction should be shared widely.

Individual administrators, boards of education and school districts must take a leadership role by making high-quality reading instruction a priority. They should recognize the importance of beginning reading instruction, make sure that adequate time in the school day is allocated to reading and ensure that teachers have the resources they need to teach children effectively. They should use results of assessments of children in the district to guide decision making about instruction, as well as about teachers' and administrators' professional development needs.

In a broader sense, ensuring that children learn to read involves partnerships among schools, parents and the community. Parents should give their children a strong start in reading by (among other ways) talking with them, telling them stories, taking them to libraries, reading to them regularly, and demonstrating enthusiasm for reading and for learning in general. In addition, once formal reading instruction begins, parents should continue to read to children, as well as listen to their children read. Whether parents read to children or children read to parents, it is extremely important to take the time to discuss what has been read. Communities also should play a role in ensuring that children learn to read—for example, by supporting adequate funding for local school districts, special literacy programs and public libraries.

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- **Schools of education must provide prospective teachers with adequate preparation to teach reading well to children with diverse needs.**

Wherever beginning teachers are employed, they will encounter children with extremely diverse instructional needs in reading. Adequate preparation includes extensive knowledge about language and literacy development, about individual differences, and about how to teach important reading-related competencies, including **both** word-identification skills **and** comprehension. Schools of education must provide programs that: are grounded in current scientific knowledge about reading (e.g., National Reading Panel, 2000; National Research Council, 1998); emphasize a variety of ways to teach important reading-related competencies rather than a “one-size-fits-all” approach; and include adequate opportunities for preservice teachers to work with children, under appropriate supervision and guidance.

- **Effective teacher education requires ongoing professional development as well as rigorous preservice preparation.**

Given the depth and breadth of knowledge required by primary teachers, as well as the fact that the scientific knowledge base about reading is continually increasing, it is not possible to give prospective teachers all the knowledge they need in a four- or even five-year program. Rather, teacher education should be viewed as a process that involves not only rigorous preservice training, but also continuing professional development throughout an individual’s career. Experienced teachers should be provided with a variety of opportunities for professional development in order to stay current with research findings. Professional development should include in-service training, professional conferences, visits to model programs, mentoring from other educators and continued support while attempting to implement new ideas and programs into the classroom.

Schools of education must emphasize a variety of research-based ways to teach reading rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.

Teacher professional development opportunities are critical.

About This Report

The 12 conclusions outlined in *Connecticut’s Blueprint for Reading Achievement* provided a base for members of the panel to address their charge of establishing what effective primary teachers of reading should know and be able to do. Section I of this report elaborates in detail the research findings that led to these conclusions. The research findings include the reports of various national scholarly panels (e.g., National Reading Panel, 2000; National Research Council, 1998), as well as presentations made to the Early Reading Success Panel by many recognized experts on reading. Section II of the report lists the specific competencies important for primary teachers. However, panel members thought that, **in order to specify competencies required of teachers, it was neces-**

sary first to consider the competencies required of children in kindergarten through third grade. Section II, therefore, also outlines basic reading and reading-related competencies important for children to achieve in each of the first four grades, along with useful assessment techniques and specific indicators for teacher intervention with children who are experiencing difficulties in reading. The children's competencies are a logical progression from previously specified preschool language and literacy benchmarks (see Connecticut State Board of Education, 1999b), but their focus involves reading and aspects of other areas—such as oral language, spelling and writing—that are most strongly linked to reading. The K-3 children's competencies are not meant to constitute a complete language arts curriculum.

Making recommendations about specific children's and teachers' competencies also involved examining relevant documents already in use in Connecticut (e.g., Connecticut State Board of Education, 1998, 1999a and 1999b), in addition to similar documents in use in other states. In framing their recommendations, panel members wanted to achieve the right level of specificity. That is, they wanted to express children's and teachers' competencies in a way that was specific enough to be clear and educationally useful, but not overwhelming in detail. Also, they did not want to present children's and teachers' competencies in an overly prescriptive manner. Rather, local districts should have flexibility in choosing or developing a variety of instructional activities that best meet different children's needs, and schools of education should have flexibility in designing educational programs that best prepare prospective teachers to meet the teachers' competencies.

As specified in Public Act 99-227, this report, along with assessments of the needs of priority school districts, will be used in the design of a state-wide Early Reading Success Institute, to commence operation in the 2000-01 school year. The institute will provide professional development to primary-level teachers, elementary principals, school librarians and other school personnel, initially in priority school districts, but ultimately in all districts. This report is only a first step in ensuring that Connecticut teachers have the knowledge and skills needed to provide effective reading instruction to children with diverse needs. Many other steps must follow. For example, detailed discussions of specific instructional activities, or of various instructional sequences that might be used in reaching a particular competency, were well beyond the scope of the report. Similarly, although the report refers to many broad issues in providing high-quality reading instruction, such as the need for effective preservice teacher education, for adequate human and material resources, and for collaboration between classroom teachers and a variety of specialists, it is beyond the scope of a single report to address all of these important issues in detail.

This report is only a first step.

What this report does provide is a blueprint for all stakeholders with an interest in ensuring that every child is taught reading well. For example, schools of education should use the lists of children’s and teachers’ competencies to direct the preparation of teacher candidates; administrators and school districts should use the competencies as an aid in assessing instructional and professional development needs; and individual teachers should use the children’s competencies as a guide for reading-related proficiencies that are important to address in the classroom. The members of the Early Reading Success Panel hope that *Connecticut’s Blueprint for Reading Achievement* will be useful to everyone with a stake in the teaching of reading—and that it will help to form a foundation for high-quality reading instruction for all Connecticut children.

