



**International Reading Association's  
2009 Policy Recommendations**

# Keeping Our Promise to All Students



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## Learning to Read Is a Basic Right

The next president is challenged to change how the federal government influences how well or poorly citizens will be prepared for their future. We believe that the key to making a difference is supporting policies that enhance the teacher as the key provider and decision maker in reaching all students with the literacy education necessary to be successful.

All children are entitled to be taught by high-quality teachers who are prepared to provide effective reading and writing instruction in schools with administrators who are prepared to support students' reading and writing development. Sufficient resources are needed to strengthen preservice preparation programs and inservice professional development of classroom teachers, administrators, and teacher educators if we are to close the persistent achievement gap and life opportunity gap as demonstrated by educational and social indices. Research reports continue to show that elementary and secondary school teachers who teach reading and writing well significantly affect student achievement. Additionally, there are clear indicators that well-developed teacher preparation programs yield effective reading and writing teachers. Providing high-quality reading and writing instruction for both low- and high-performing students and improving the quality of both teacher preparation programs and inservice professional development for teachers and administrators require urgent attention and should be at the forefront of future education policy in the United States.

*The International Reading Association believes that many education reform efforts have missed the mark by emphasizing lockstep accountability, assessments that provide little or no information to improve instruction or lead literacy reform efforts, and curricula that reflect effectiveness under some but not all conditions. It is time to focus on teaching and instruction in classrooms and improving school-level literacy leadership. The classroom is the place where teacher knowledge, resources, and students come together to make a difference.*

## The Centrality of the Classroom Teacher

For decades, research has pointed clearly to the centrality of the classroom teachers' impact on students' literacy growth and achievement. Children who fail to learn to read well in first grade tend to fall behind and stay behind their peers throughout their schooling experiences unless middle school and high school teachers are prepared to support struggling readers and writers. Failure to learn to read is related to a number of negative social and economic outcomes, including underemployment, unemployment, social and welfare program dependence, and incarceration. The ability to process and use language (oral and written) effectively is foundational for maintaining our democracy and for engaging in the technological world of the future. Those who cannot process and use language are effectively denied their civil rights, are unable to fully participate in society, and are denied economic opportunities that affect their socioeconomic mobility.

*The International Reading Association believes the classroom teacher, in collaboration with administrators and colleagues, should be the central decision maker in determining how instruction is provided, what materials are used, who needs and gets extra services, and how time is allocated.*

## Professional Development

Professional development is the means by which teachers, administrators, and teacher educators receive continuing education to update and refine their professional training. It helps them to remain current in evidence-based practices as well as to increase the effectiveness of their

instruction. Literacy professionals require continuing education to update and refine their knowledge and skills in ways that will increase student motivation and achievement in schools.

Research and experience clearly highlight that teacher quality gaps contribute enormously to the achievement gaps separating different groups of students. Since student achievement is positively correlated with teacher participation in quality professional development, successful schools make excellent professional development in reading instruction a priority. High-quality professional development is one of many conditions that will result in better schools; however, there are other factors that contribute to high-quality instruction:

- Establishing clear literacy standards for each grade
- Establishing literacy leadership teams for shared decision making
- Establishing a schoolwide assessment system to inform reading instruction
- Implementing a schoolwide core instructional program of validated efficacy
- Implementing a schoolwide plan to allocate sufficient literacy instructional time
- Adjusting group size, instructional time, and instructional programs according to learners' assessed needs
- Providing resources and personnel to support reading instruction for all students
- Providing ongoing professional development to support teachers in the implementation of effective literacy instruction

For teachers to provide effective reading and writing instruction and close the student achievement gap and life outcome gap, professional development must require more than sitting through a session or "seat time." Teachers and administrators benefit when supports are provided to help implement effective practices in reading assessment and instruction. There

must be follow-through to practice and implementation and a demonstration of the new knowledge and practices in the classroom. Teachers and administrators should certify they have participated in a specified number of hours, credits, or days of quality continuing education every three to five years, which includes classroom and school supports. Literacy coaches are also instrumental in providing greatly needed support for teachers and administrators who are striving to provide more effective literacy instruction.

Further supports for teachers to successfully increase student achievement include providing resources such as para-

professionals, books, computers, and other literacy instructional tools. Parent and community involvement must also be a part of any efforts to remedy the reading achievement gap among at-risk students. This may also point to the need for making early care and education more universally accessible for the parents of at-risk students.

*The International Reading Association believes that when professional development is sustained and focused on academic content and research-based instructional strategies, both teaching practice and student achievement will improve. In the past*



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*decade, research has described best practices in the reading process and has enhanced our understanding of various teaching strategies that are effective in raising reading achievement across K–12 classrooms. No single instructional strategy has been found uniformly successful; instead, teachers and administrators who are familiar with a wide range of evidence-based approaches and can implement these skillfully are typically most successful.*

## **Teacher Education**

To ensure that teachers are prepared to teach reading well, changes are needed in preservice teacher preparation programs and inservice teacher professional development. Some beginning teachers have as many as 24 semester hours of work (8 courses) related to reading instruction while others have as few as 3 semester hours (1 course). The national average ranges between 1.3 courses for primary teachers to 2.2 courses for all elementary teachers. The results are more dismal for other educators, particularly middle school and high school administrators. This is clearly insufficient preparation for teachers and administrators who will spend significant portions of their time and resources to improve reading and writing instruction. Reading course work in teacher preparation programs must be required for all teachers to become certified. Classroom-related field experiences with high-needs students, as well as modeling and mentoring, must be included as an integral part of preservice teacher education programs.

*The International Reading Association believes that improved reading instruction must be continuously aligned with effective reading principles throughout the teacher preparation, licensure, and professional development process. Moreover, administrators must be trained as instructional leaders who support and understand teachers' efforts to improve reading instruction. States must invest in a combination of incentives to recruit and retain teachers for hard-to-staff and low-performing schools. Teacher educators must provide not only a solid knowledge base but also extensive supervised practice to prepare excellent beginning reading teachers.*

## **Preparing Students for the New Reading Comprehension and Communication Skills of the 21st Century**

The Internet is this generation's defining technology for reading and learning in an online, global community. The Internet also requires different reading comprehension and communication skills. Examples include reading search engine results; critically evaluating the source of a webpage for reliability, bias, and stance; or communicating with wikis, blogs, e-mail, instant messaging software, and other tools. These new literacies have yet to systematically appear in state reading standards or in state reading assessments. As a result, many schools have yet to include them, and a generation of students has yet to be prepared for the reading skills that will define their future.

*The International Reading Association believes that state and national standards and assessments should include these new literacies if we hope to inform effective instruction. Reading instruction should include these skills, teacher education programs need to prepare new teachers to teach them, and professional development programs need to prepare teachers to integrate these new literacies into ongoing instruction.*

## **Accountability and Assessment**

As professionals, the members of the International Reading Association welcome accountability. Accountability structures should use multiple reliable measures of school success, recognize

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public schools and districts for promoting students' academic growth over time, and provide support for teachers and students. Unfortunately, under No Child Left Behind, we have seen increased reliance on single test scores to make important decisions about students.

Assessment should not be used to label and sanction schools. Experience demonstrates that more effective policy would be to use assessment to inform instruction and to provide rewards or incentives for schools and teachers that meet established goals and benchmarks annually. New accountability systems should be encouraged—systems in which data collection utilizes the four federally recognized purposes of assessment: (1) screening, (2) diagnosis, (3) progress monitoring, and (4) transparent outcomes. Formal assessments that are valid and reliable and informal assessments aligned to state standards and curricula that are used by classroom teachers to make daily intervention decisions should be allowable as evidence for documenting and supporting effective literacy instruction.

*The International Reading Association believes assessment should be used to improve instruction and benefit students. Policymakers should design assessment plans that reflect the complexity of teaching and learning, base decisions on multiple assessments, and avoid using test scores to sanction but rather to inform and improve instruction.*

## Adequate Funding

The federal government should invest in the systems needed to provide teachers, administrators, and teacher educators with high-quality, sustained professional support and resources that will ensure high-quality professional practice. The critical need for investment in learning has been made clear over and over again in efforts to improve schools. The federal government needs to work in conjunction with states and local school districts to provide flexible funding to support professional development that will enable teachers, administrators, and teacher educators to meet the literacy instructional needs of their continually changing students. It is in our national self-interest to do so because ultimately it will be teachers who lift the literacy achievement of our nation's most at-risk students without neglecting high-performing readers and writers.

*The International Reading Association strongly recommends that the federal government take an active role in funding high-quality professional development for preK–12 teachers, administrators, and teacher educators so that effective reading and writing instruction can become a reality for all students in our nation's schools.*

## Conclusion

Improvement in teaching reading is a life-long enterprise that requires mentoring, observation, follow-up evaluation, and problem solving with peers. The nation needs a comprehensive literacy care plan that supports professional development sufficiently to ensure that all students are provided continuous high-quality reading instruction throughout their schooling experiences. The experience of the last two reauthorizations of the Elementary and Secondary Education

Act, the recent rewrite of the Higher Education Act, and the revisions to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act have all begun the process of supporting high-quality teachers but do not provide sufficient focus on improving classroom literacy instruction and school literacy leadership.

*The International Reading Association recommends a major national investment in teacher preparation and professional development to ensure that every teacher is competent to teach reading to all students of various ability levels. Our students deserve nothing less than a comprehensive effort to support their continued development as readers and writers.*

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