

LITERACY LEADERSHIP BRIEF

Exploring the 2017 NAEP Reading Results

Systemic Reforms

Beat Simplistic Solutions

Concerns that reading scores of U.S. students have remained flat for the past decade have surfaced again along with suggestions about the source of this problem and how it might be remedied.

With the release of the 2017 NAEP and 2016 PIRLS results, concerns that reading scores of U.S. students have remained flat for the past decade have surfaced again along with suggestions about the source of this problem and how it might be remedied. The release of the 2017 NAEP results in April 2018 included a panel of reading experts charged with responding to the question of how curriculum and instruction needs to change to improve reading performance. Collectively, the panelists' responses emphasized the need for curriculum and instruction to focus more on knowledge building because of the primary role played by knowledge and vocabulary in comprehension performance.

Curriculum and Instruction

As a means of increasing the emphasis on knowledge building, two panelists agreed that curriculum and instruction should require students to read more challenging, grade-appropriate materials rather than materials at their instructional level. A third panelist also advocated for a "knowledge-based" curriculum with a defined sequence of content but acknowledged that establishing such a curriculum is easier said than done because of the many difficult decisions that need to be made about what knowledge should be included and when it should be taught.

Several days after the NAEP release, journalist Natalie Wexler published an article in *The Atlantic* magazine that expanded on the panelists' comments by suggesting that the reason students are not acquiring the knowledge they need for good comprehension is largely a function of the way comprehension is taught. Specifically, Wexler argued that comprehension is taught as a set of separate skills and that student reading materials are chosen to reflect these skills as opposed to using reading materials that provide the content to be learned in literature, history, science, and the arts.

Both *The Atlantic* article and the comments of at least one state superintendent in response to the NAEP reading results extend the issue of students' lack of background knowledge as a reason that reading scores aren't improving to concerns about tests of reading comprehension. The current approach to addressing differences in students' background knowledge in tests of reading comprehension is to include a number of passages on a variety of topics. This approach is based on the assumption that background knowledge will vary across students, and therefore

using a variety of passages will result in an “equalization” of the effects of prior knowledge on comprehension performance.

Those concerned with the lack of progress on measures of reading comprehension believe that the current approach does not take into account the inequities in general knowledge and vocabulary that result from differences in life experiences for different populations of students. And it is these inequities that are responsible for flat comprehension scores. The suggested solution is to use passages on topics from common standards in the disciplines, assuming that simply having topics identified in common standards will ensure all students equal access to learning those topics.

No Single Solution

Each of the suggestions and recommendations described previously is likely to address one piece of the puzzle that is reading comprehension performance. However, any single explanation or solution is likely to be too simplistic to effect real, sustainable improvements in students’ reading comprehension.

For example, the idea that we can improve reading comprehension by teaching more science and social studies at the elementary level does not mean that instruction on comprehension strategies can be ignored or that learning from content materials happens just by reading. In fact, as one panelist noted, subject area materials provide excellent opportunities to learn about comprehension strategies as they apply to different content areas. Similarly, the idea that students should primarily read grade-level materials pits two important areas for instruction—improving students’ ability to read independently and ensuring experience with age-appropriate materials—against one another. Others have argued persuasively that both items are critical dual commitments teachers must make to their students. In an ideal world, texts at the instructional level would be the same as those that are age appropriate. In the actual world, that is not the case for a significant number of students. Depriving students of interactions with text at their instructional level virtually guarantees they will not have opportunities to develop fluency, stamina, and strategies for building knowledge from text.

Further, the suggestion that reading comprehension assessments should use passages based on what students are expected to know ignores the reality of significant differences in the

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quality of instruction students receive on common subject matter standards across schools, districts, states, and the nation. This is illustrated by a study conducted by the Education Trust on standards and instruction in mathematics. An analysis of the quality of over 1,800 classroom mathematics assignments from across the United States indicated that roughly three fourths of all assignments were at least partially aligned with the Common Core mathematics standards. However, these assignments also tended to have low cognitive demand and overemphasized procedural skills and fluency. Worse, the study results indicate this tendency is significantly more likely to occur in higher poverty schools.

Inequities in tests of reading comprehension will not be eliminated by using passages based on what students are expected to know because there will likely always be inequities in instructional implementation of common goals and standards. A discussion of how to address inequities created by background knowledge in tests of reading comprehension is beyond the scope of this brief. However, it is likely that test developers will need to renew efforts to measure prior knowledge as a means of tackling this issue.

It is true that knowledge building that takes place in content area instruction has taken a back seat to reading and mathematics instruction as a result of the emphasis on these areas in high-stakes accountability systems, and this shift likely contributes to the problem of flat comprehension scores. However, beyond the reasons suggested earlier, a number of additional explanations are equally plausible.

Prominent among other reasons for flat reading scores is the changing demographics of the school-age population that have occurred in recent years with regard to the proportions of students currently being tested who are living in poverty, or are English learners, or who have disabilities, as well as the limited access to school and district resources and opportunities to learn that are available to these students. As previously suggested, each of the posited explanations and remedies is likely to address just a single piece of a problem that exists within a multidimensional system.

Systemic Approaches

After years of experience with unidimensional efforts to improve curriculum, instruction, and assessment in reading

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comprehension, it is clear that addressing literacy learning within the larger contexts of school and district organization and administration is a more promising pathway. There is considerable variation across schools and districts with regard to organization and leadership, and these differences have a significant impact on efforts to improve curriculum, instruction, and assessment in reading.

At the NAEP release, a panel of superintendents of large, urban districts with improved NAEP scores emphasized the importance of district and school organization in improving performance. These panelists spoke of how coordinated efforts within their districts and schools were at the heart of the improvement they had seen and acknowledged the significant role of district and school leadership, funding, community engagement, and formative assessment in bringing about improved performance.

Improving Reading Performance

To reach and then sustain higher reading levels, schools must follow a pattern of systemic improvement attending to both communication and work structures within the school as well as the more conventional areas of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. This approach addresses three key challenges: (1) school infrastructure reorganization, (2) teacher buy-in, and (3) a staircase or coherent curriculum within and across grade levels and school subjects.

School Infrastructure to Support Sustainable Improvements

Capable school leadership is essential to creating the organizational structures needed to carry out a multiyear curriculum improvement effort. This structure consists of three pillars: the principal, a key curriculum leader, and a team of teacher leaders representing each significant constituency in the school. In many elementary schools, these constituencies include grade level, special education, and resource staff. The three pillars receive professional development on the leadership skills needed to guide their school successfully while gaining a shared understanding of the research on reading curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

The primary reason schools fail to improve students' literacy learning in a sustainable manner is that they are either

reluctant or unable to put in place a well-functioning organizational structure consisting of all three pillars—the principal, a key curriculum leader, and a team of teacher leaders. This takes hard work and determination, for example, if a longtime but ineffective curriculum coordinator needs to be replaced, or if teachers have been discouraged by previous failed initiatives. Many schools falter at this point, which often results in the appearance but not the reality of change. As has been noted, change in schools is technically simple but socially complex.

Teacher Buy-In

Most teachers with more than four years in the classroom have experienced a revolving door of reading programs, as leaders seek to identify that perfect program, one that does not exist. As a result, teachers are understandably cautious or even skeptical when a new initiative begins, which is often characterized as “resistance.” This situation is characteristic of naïve approaches based on the belief that the primary reason schools fail to improve their reading scores is because they aren’t trying hard enough to change their reading instruction. To the contrary, many unsuccessful schools are vigorously adjusting their reading instruction, in major ways and with alarming regularity. Typically, such schools adopt a new reading program or initiative about every three years.

Similarly, schools often entertain the illusion that they are going to turn things around by changing one specific feature of their reading effort. For example: “We’re focusing on reading comprehension strategies.” “We’re going to implement new assessments.” “We’re starting an after-school tutoring program.” One of these might be an important piece of the reading achievement puzzle at a given school, but it might not. The right elements can be determined only with reference to the school’s vision of the excellent reader who graduates from that school. That is, effective schools are guided explicitly by their commitment to what students graduating from the school should know and be able to do as readers.

A frequently asked question is, Should our school do A or B to improve students’ reading? In contrast to having a universal answer, responses to such a question must be grounded in deep understanding of the situation at the school. Thus, the best response may be to pose central questions: What is your vision of the excellent reader? How would A help your school reach this vision? How would B help? As the witticism goes, if

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you don't know where you're going, you're sure to get there. A school that lacks a vision of the excellent reader cannot proceed in a principled manner. And, to be clear, this does not mean a vision drafted by a small committee, then displayed on posters in every classroom. Rather, it refers to a vision of the excellent readers to which every grade level and teacher has contributed and that everyone—students and families included—owns and understands.

Principals often cite teacher buy-in as their biggest challenge during reading improvement efforts. They always ask about how they will get teachers' buy-in and commitment to the vision of the excellent reader. This is exactly why schools must have the buy-in of the three pillars of the principal, a key curriculum leader, and a team of teacher leaders in place *before* moving forward with the details of reading improvement. The buy-in of these three pillars needs to be in place to lead the discussion of the vision of the excellent reader and then align the work at all grade levels so there is a coherent, staircase curriculum that makes this vision a reality.

The principal and key curriculum leader cannot and should not do the job alone or even with a small committee. The teacher leadership team is needed to make sure that each constituency in the school contributes to and understands the vision and is committed to its implementation. To make the vision a reality, the three pillars need to engage the entire faculty, help teachers at each grade level coordinate their efforts, and facilitate conversations between adjacent grade levels.

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“Staircase” Curriculum

Each school needs to develop its own coherent curriculum, strategically selecting resources and programs on the basis of their students' needs. The curriculum builds from year to year like a staircase, each step representing a grade level, with stairs that are steep enough to achieve the vision of the graduate and with no gaps between stairs through which students might fall. The vision of the excellent graduating reader or writer is the top of the staircase and each grade level or school subject team constructs its end-of-year goals or benchmarks—in effect, they are the steps on the staircase to the vision of the graduate. The benchmarks capture each team's contribution to student progress. The teams then develop common assessments to serve as a monitoring system for tracking students' progress

and informing instructional decisions throughout the year. Progress and instructional decisions are shared with the whole school at the beginning, the middle, and the end of the school year to inform schoolwide planning, identify issues, and examine progress.

Some might ask, Why not just buy a preset program as a means of improving reading performance? That would be a handy shortcut, but studies show that buying a preset program does not ensure consistency in philosophy and practice—only deep and frank professional conversation can do that. A preset program may be a useful tool, but it is not a solution for raising reading achievement in and of itself. In fact, purchasing a program may be counterproductive if it leads to the assumption that teachers are thinking and acting along the same lines, when in fact they are not.

There is no universal, one-size-fits-all solution. When it comes to improving reading achievement, the practical implication is that each school's path to success will be somewhat different. That is, the manner and the rate at which each school accomplishes the goals will necessarily be somewhat different, although similarities will be seen in the overall progression of schools successful in sustaining improved reading achievement.

Most schools seeking to improve reading performance would benefit from first addressing internal communication and organizational structures. If the commitment of the principal, key curriculum leader, and teacher leaders is not already in place, that is the first order of business, followed by the vision of the excellent reader. If teachers' knowledge of literacy research is not current, professional development to establish this foundational knowledge should precede the vision work. Professional conversations about the vision of the excellent reader become the starting point for building the schoolwide professional learning community, dedicated to achieving this vision for all students. From there, grade levels collaborate to build the staircase curriculum leading to the vision, with each grade level committing to specific student outcomes related to the vision.

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Balancing “On Our Own Path” With District Vision

Reading performance improves when district policy and leadership support steady progress at the school level and suffers

when district leaders knowingly or inadvertently are unsupportive. Of the many situations in between, district support is neither necessary nor sufficient. The ideal situation is a strong coordinated effort within a district that emphasizes collaboration and coordination within and across schools.

District leadership must be knowledgeable about or supportive of progress at the school level. It is too common to see districts barraging schools with top-down, unfunded, or poorly funded mandates that function to disrupt steady progress at the school level. In this way, a district's implementation of policies can contribute significantly to continued poor reading results for students.

Too often, a high-ranking leader from the state department of education presents details of multiple initiatives to be implemented at the school level. Without additional guidance on implementation priorities, principals are apt to react with a mixture of dismay and frustration. This is true of federal policy as well as district and state policy. Similarly, a multischool initiative may have an unintended negative impact on one school within the group. Allowing for and accommodating a reasonable level of principal discretion with respect to the implementation sequence will go a long way toward supporting curricular enhancements that bolster reading achievement.

In sum, systemic reform is an important avenue for advancing the quality of literacy instruction and improving reading achievement. Simplistic interpretations and recommendations for solving the complex problem of improving reading comprehension have not resulted in sustainable improvement in the past and are unlikely to do so in the future. Reading processes, instruction, and contextual differences are simply too complex to address with simple solutions.

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MOVING FORWARD

- Coordinate organization and administration across schools and districts to improve curriculum, instruction, and assessment in reading comprehension performance.
- Create a well-functioning organizational structure of principal, curriculum leader, and teacher leaders to guide schools successfully.
- Secure buy-in of principal, curriculum leader, and teacher leaders before presenting reading improvement efforts to teachers.
- Commit as a school to a shared vision of the excellent reader.
- Develop and commit to a staircase curriculum that builds year to year, with each step representing a grade level, to assist student progress toward the end goal of the excellent graduating reader.

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