

2 Early Literacy

The Urban Education Task Force recommends the implementation of a comprehensive system of supports for K–3 literacy, with a focus on English language learners.

Introduction

In 2005, Rhode Island adopted a pre-kindergarten to grade 12 comprehensive literacy policy that emphasizes the need for differentiated instruction to meet the needs of each learner. As part of the policy, Rhode Island emphasized four key elements:

- Strong literature, language, and comprehension instruction that includes a balance of oral and written language
- Explicit and systematic instruction of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension skills
- Ongoing assessment that informs teaching and ensures accountability
- Proven intervention programs that provide support for students at risk of failing to learn to read

Implemented effectively, these policies help to ensure that not only do children learn to read and write, but they also comprehend a variety of texts. Comprehension, not just rote skills, is the overarching goal.

The Task Force supports this policy and believes it should serve as the foundation for our literacy efforts. However, additional supports and guidance must be provided to ensure literacy success for all students. This support is particularly critical at the earliest grades and for English language learners: research has shown that children who are not fluent readers and writers by grade three are much more likely to drop out of high school (Snow, Burns & Griffin 1998; full references in appendix 2S).

In our information-based economy, the consequences of limited literacy skills and dropping out are much more dire than they were in the past.

To augment our current policies, we must acknowledge that second-language literacy differs from native-language literacy in important ways. For English language learners (ELLs), the background knowledge students bring to the classroom differs greatly. ELLs draw on first-language skills and experiences to break into English, and they continue to draw upon the home language when they need to, even at advanced stages of literacy development, to facilitate reading and writing in English (August & Shanahan 2006, Riches & Genesee 2006). For ELLs, comprehension is even more critical. According to the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth (August & Shanahan 2006), comprehension must be given priority to ensure that students see reading and writing as meaningful and functional activities. Skills and strategies need to be taught in a meaningful context, not in decontextualized, rote ways devoid of meaning.

Because of the large proportion of English language learners in the five cities that are the focus of this Task Force, we feel the state must take an active role in providing specific supports for this population of students. And while we have focused in these recommendations on the role educators must play to support early literacy, it is important to note that the responsibility is not theirs alone. As a state, we must also support parents, libraries, colleges and universities, community centers, and hospitals as partners in early literacy development.

Recommendations, Action Steps, and Partner Responsibilities

The Task Force believes that universal pre-kindergarten is an essential step toward early literacy. We support the development of the pilot program that is already under way in our state and urge the state to move forward as described in our recommendations for Pre-Kindergarten Education. It is our hope that the pre-kindergarten pilot will support providers' efforts to include students' home languages in instruction in order to ensure a strong oral-language foundation in kindergarten.

Along with universal pre-kindergarten, the Task Force recommends the following actions be taken to improve early literacy in urban areas throughout the state.

RECOMMENDATION Develop a comprehensive, guaranteed, viable early literacy curriculum and mandate its use in districts in corrective action.

There are no easy answers or quick solutions for optimizing reading achievement. But there does exist an extensive knowledge base that articulates the skills students must learn in order to read well. These skills provide the basis for sound curriculum decisions and instructional approaches for all students. The five critical components of reading as defined by the National Reading Panel (2000) include: phonemic awareness, phonics instruction, reading fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. When working with English language learners, the importance of first-language learning to second-language learning is also critical. A comprehensive literacy curriculum should utilize a multi-tiered approach, including a strong core program with differentiated instruction and intensive intervention.

By making this comprehensive literacy curriculum “guaranteed and viable” (Marzano 2003), the Commissioner of Education could ensure that – no matter who teaches a given course or grade level specific topics, skills, concepts, and strategies will be addressed and that this content can actually be covered in the time available. *Guaranteed and viable* means that every teacher in every classroom at every school is providing consistent, high-quality instruction to every child every day. A guaranteed and viable curriculum promotes coherence, consistency, and equity across a system.

Action Steps Short-term

- ▶ The five urban districts should develop a comprehensive curriculum for early literacy, guided by the above description of good early literacy instruction and supports and based on Rhode Island grade-level expectations, Rhode Island Early Learning Standards, PK–12 literacy policy, and the WIDA Consortium’s English Language Proficiency Standards for English Language Learners. This curriculum would build on ongoing efforts to develop curricula in the five urban districts, with an emphasis on sharing existing work and best practices. Partners developing the curriculum would also address the following areas:
 - Maintaining high expectations for all students
 - Instructing students based on their developmental needs
 - Monitoring progress
 - Developing growth models
 - Using data for assessment and decision making

Long-term

- ▶ Upon completion of this curriculum, each district in corrective action should have a viable curriculum. This can be achieved without legislative intervention; it is within the current power of the Commissioner.

RECOMMENDATION Strengthen oral-language development to support early literacy.

Research on brain development has identified a clear connection between early learning experiences and later success. Traditional schooling is important, but so is exposure to books and stories at home, as well as experiences that expand children’s real-world knowledge (such as trips to parks, zoos, and museums) and opportunities to interact with language by talking with peers and adults, singing songs, and drawing and writing. These experiences are critical to children’s development and serve as the foundation for literacy.

A lack of vocabulary is a huge barrier to reading proficiency. One of the most persistent findings in reading research is that the extent of students’ vocabulary knowledge relates strongly to their reading comprehension and overall academic success (see Baumann, Kame’enui & Ash 2003).

Hart and Risley (1995) identified a “30 million-word gap” in language experience between three-year-olds in professional families and those in families who receive public assistance. The effect of this early gap in words heard grows exponentially throughout schooling (Stanovich 1986). Therefore, it is imperative that we focus on oral language and vocabulary in pre-kindergarten and in the early grades.

The Governor, the Board of Regents, and

the PK–16 Council should emphasize and promote the importance of verbal interaction – that is, just plain talking – between children and adults. It is the foundation of literacy. Adults in homes, community centers, libraries, and schools should encourage children to ask questions, discuss ideas, describe their likes and dislikes, etc. As a first step, on a statewide basis, this can be accomplished through public service announcements that help people to understand the relationship between language development and later literacy development and the important role of first-language development in the ability to read, speak, and write in a second language.

Action Steps

Short-term

- ▶ The Governor should engage a public relations partner to develop early literacy public service announcements to appear on television and radio, on buses, and in libraries and community centers. The public service announcements should be printed/broadcast in multiple languages and should highlight the importance of talking with children to expand their oral-language base and background knowledge.

Long-term

- ▶ Professional development on early literacy is weak statewide. The Commissioner should consider bringing Rhode Island’s urban communities together with the regional education collaboratives and other experts to share resources to support cross-district or statewide early literacy activities, such as developing library programs like Every Child Ready to Read, in multiple languages. These activities would be developed in partnership with schools, libraries, hospitals, and community centers and would seek to educate and provide services to parents and children that emphasize the relationship between first-language learn-

ing and second-language development and the importance of verbal interaction between children and adults in literacy development.

RECOMMENDATION *Develop expertise in teaching emergent literacy.*

The latest research about effective literacy practices for English language learners indicates that the components of effective reading instruction that are critical for all early learners – phonemic awareness, phonics, oral-language fluency, vocabulary, text comprehension, and writing – also benefit ELLs, but with necessary adaptations. Such adaptations include extensive vocabulary instruction and oral English language development, cognate connections, and the explicit instruction of idioms and words with multiple meanings.

High-quality instruction is one of the best investments our state can make to ensure that all our students develop sound literacy skills. Classroom teachers should be proficient in teaching beginning readers and writers and specifically prepared to work with ELLs. Beyond the basics of English phonology and grammar and of competence in reading instruction, certified teachers should be required to know the basics of first- and second-language acquisition and understand cultural diversity from a positive, additive perspective. The current requirements for preparing teachers to teach reading and diverse learners need to be strengthened and guaranteed.

Action Steps

Short-term

- ◆ In their review of licensing policy, RIDE and the Board of Regents should review current certification requirements for Elementary and Early Childhood teachers and recommend how expertise in teaching

English language learners to read and write can be incorporated into the requirements. This might include additional pre-service coursework for the initial Certificate of Eligibility for Employment or the incorporation of professional development on English language learning in the Individual Professional Development Plans (or I-Plans) of those seeking a Professional Certificate.

- ◆ Requirements for recertification, as well as for alternate certification, in Elementary and Early Childhood Education should also be reviewed in a similar manner. Renewal of a Professional Certificate might be predicated on teaching English language learners or on participating in specific professional development related to emergent literacy or to appropriate use of assessment data.

Long-term

- ◆ The Commissioner should consider bringing Rhode Island’s urban communities together to explore sharing resources to support cross-district or statewide professional development efforts on early literacy. Ongoing school- and district-based professional development planned specifically to support the curriculum (as recommended earlier) should be required of all educators engaged in early literacy instruction and should adhere to the principles of professional development outlined in appendix 2S.
- ◆ Since this commitment to professional development is a considerable investment in individuals as well as teams of educators who work together, adequate support for and stability in staffing individual schools should be a very high priority. As much as

possible, staffing for early literacy should be guided by the description in appendix 2S. When coaches, teachers, specialists, and assistants have the opportunity to collaborate and grow expertise in a common practice, their students are provided with consistent instructional methods and objectives from year to year. This reduces the confusion that results from frequent shifts in teaching approaches and permits students to focus on learning to read and write rather than on changing routines in the classroom.

- ▶ Because of the relationship between pre-service preparation and the quality of instruction, higher-education institutions that prepare teachers should be engaged to build pre-service and in-service professional development opportunities in early literacy.