A Union of Professionals

AFT Teachers

WHERE WE STAND:
K-12 LITERACY

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K-12 LITERACY

AFT CONVENTION RESOLUTION

Beginning Reading Instruction

Adopted July 1998

In today's society, the child who doesn't learn to read does not make it in life. If children don't learn to read early enough, if they don't learn to read with comprehension, if they don't read fluently enough to read broadly and reflectively across all content areas, if they don't learn to read effortlessly enough to render reading pleasurable, their chances for a fulfilling life—by whatever measure: academic success, financial stability, the ability to find satisfying work, personal autonomy, self-esteem—are practically nil.

In his 1996 State of the Union speech, President Clinton addressed this issue by declaring it a national priority to ensure that every child in America reads independently by the end of third grade. The AFT agrees. Not only is this an extraordinarily modest goal for the richest, most powerful nation on earth, it is one that must be met before any other education goal can be met.

How are we doing as a nation? According to the latest international comparison—a 1994 study from the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA)—our students are among the world's best readers. Nevertheless, state, national and international assessments, including the IEA's, also indicate there is still much work to be done. Because of differences in how various tests measure reading skill, estimates of the extent of the problem vary widely—from the IEA study that showed 30 percent to 40 percent of U.S. fourth graders performing below average for developed nations, to a 1994 California assessment that gave failing grades in reading to 59 percent of fourth graders. Whatever the correct figure for overall proficiency, reading researchers report that, by fourth grade—the first year in which most states systematically assess student achievement—about 20 percent of U.S. students are already so far behind in reading that they may never catch up.

Poor, immigrant and minority children, some of whose parents may also suffer from low literacy levels, represent a disproportionate percentage of those with the lowest reading achievement. Affluence, however, is no guarantee of reading

success. In fact, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), approximately one-third of all poorly performing fourth graders are the children of college-educated parents—indicating that reading difficulty is a national problem that extends across all socioeconomic strata. We can and must do better.

The ultimate goal of all reading and English language arts instruction is to allow students to become fluent readers, writers and thinkers, who are able to comprehend, learn from and add to the collective imagination, experience and wisdom of all human history. To accomplish this, students must be challenged to meet high academic standards and be exposed to a rich core curriculum that will give them a strong vocabulary base, broad background knowledge and ample exposure to an interesting array of narrative and expository texts. They must learn to read for understanding and be given a command of the rules of spelling, grammar and syntax, so that they may learn to write with imagination, clarity and precision. And, undergirding all of this, at a very early age, they must be given the keys to the speech-sound-symbol system of the English language that will allow them to decipher written text. In other words, they must learn the alphabetic code and how to use it to read and write words.

Sadly, it is during this very elemental stage of reading that many students encounter problems. Fortunately, we know a good deal about how to help. The first step is to apply the consistent findings of hundreds of research studies, conducted over the past several decades in such diverse fields as neuroscience, psychology, linguistics, cognitive science and education, that have helped us understand how children learn to read and what we must do to improve their early reading instruction.

Researchers have identified several basic, interconnected subskills that all children must master to become proficient readers. Young students must develop phonemic awareness—the recognition that all words are made up of separate sounds, or phonemes. They must learn phonics—the ability to link these sounds to the specific letters or combinations of letters that are used to represent them in written language. And the association between letters and sounds must become virtually automatic, so that students learn to decode words almost instantly and are able to concentrate on the meaning of written text.

Research suggests that 50 percent to 60 percent of students are able to master the first two subskills with relative ease—although systematic, explicit instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics can make them even better readers. But without such instruction, the remaining 40 percent to 50 percent—especially those without a language-rich home environment or with mild to severe reading disabilities—may experience very real problems that, unless resolved by the end of third grade, are likely to place them at a permanent educational disadvantage.

This is not to say that the ability to decode words is sufficient to make every child a proficient reader—just that it is a necessary precondition. In this sense, the nation's recurring reading wars, pitting phonics-based instruction against literature-based instruction, represent a false dichotomy. Children need a bal-

ance of both. But the way in which this balance is struck—in particular, the sequence and methods by which each is delivered—is critical. With very early exposure to systematic, explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, decoding and reading comprehension skills, say researchers, virtually every child—except perhaps those with the most severe reading and cognitive disabilities—can be taught to read. In fact, it is estimated that 85 percent to 90 percent of students who are poor readers—including many now classified as learning disabled—could increase their reading skill to average levels with this type of intensive, early instruction delivered by skilled teachers. Research also shows that the use of decodable text—books and materials containing a high proportion of new words that adhere to phonetic principles students have already been taught—can help young students at the pre-primer and primer levels to master decoding skills and increase speed and fluency. For the vast majority of students, much of this can be accomplished before the end of first grade, enabling them to tackle the vast array of interesting and challenging children's literature that can help expand vocabulary and increase background knowledge and comprehension.

It is for these reasons that the AFT believes that all students must be guaranteed a carefully crafted, and appropriately balanced, approach to the teaching of reading. This must include early, systematic and explicit instruction in the necessary subskills—including phonemic awareness and phonics—as well as an early emphasis on listening skills, language development, conceptual and vocabulary development, storytelling and writing, a deep exploration of the treasure chest of rich and challenging children's literature, and literacy-related activities that can help enhance children's love of books and of learning. Standing in the way of this goal are two great obstacles: First, most instructional staff in elementary schools have never been provided with sufficient preparation in how to teach reading in a way that reflects what is now preponderant research evidence. And second, few materials and programs, based on this research, have been developed or field tested for effectiveness.

THEREFORE, the AFT and its state and local affiliates will make it a priority to: (1) ensure that all elementary school teachers are provided with high-quality professional development in the requisite skills and knowledge of how to teach beginning reading—and ensure that all classroom paraprofessionals in these schools receive high-quality professional development in how to reinforce reading instruction and help tutor struggling students; (2) raise the preparation and licensure standards for elementary school teachers to include a core curriculum in the teaching of reading that reflects the best research evidence and calls for extensive time in field experiences; (3) develop certification standards for elementary school classroom paraprofessionals that include an appropriate course of pre- and in-service training in research-based reading instruction and tutorial strategies; (4) support the kind of quality early childhood and preschool programs and services that increase the chances of reading success; and (5) increase the availability of programs and materials in reading and English language arts that

have a track record of effectiveness. Specifically, we will work—through public advocacy, legislative activities, contract negotiations, publications, professional development programs and other means—to:

- Urge states and the federal government to fully fund early childhood programs, such as prenatal health care, child nutrition, the Home Instructional Program for Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY), Even Start and Even Start-modeled child/home instruction programs and others that work with high-poverty families to help assure children's physical and cognitive health, including information about the critical importance of daily reading to children, from infancy on, and other research-based strategies that can be used at home to ensure that all students are reading-ready when they enter first grade.
- Urge the federal government, states and school districts to provide the quality preschool and all-day kindergarten programs that can foster early literacy by developing children's language, vocabulary and conceptual skills, as well as helping to familiarize all students with books, the nature of print, the letters of the alphabet and their sounds, and the kinds of stories, information and ideas that text can offer. We also urge schools and districts to institute school-entry screening programs that can identify hearing, speech, language, vision and other problems that may impede student learning.
- Urge states and districts to fund and staff for lower class sizes in the primary grades in order to provide optimum conditions for early reading success.
- Urge all school districts and AFT locals to make it a high priority to ensure that all K-2 teachers and classroom paraprofessionals, at a minimum, are provided with professional development that reflects the research base in beginning reading. This should be followed, as quickly as possible, by the implementation of a research-based professional development program in reading and reading comprehension instruction for all instructional staff who work with student populations who are at high risk of reading failure, all other special education and remedial teachers, and ultimately, all instructional staff in every elementary school.
- Urge all teacher education programs and the organizations that represent them, such as the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education, as well as accreditation agencies, such as the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education, to support a stronger core curriculum in teacher preparation for reading instruction. This should include coursework on: the intricacies of the speech-sound-symbol system of the English language and the huge body of research about how it is best taught; how to advance students' conceptual, vocabulary and language development; how to tap students' prior knowledge and teach reading comprehension skills and strategies; how to teach English language arts, including writing, grammar; how to adapt teaching methods to accommodate the needs of linguistic minority students; and how to enhance reading instruction and build background knowledge through the use of children's literature—and to practice these skills and understandings in clinical teaching settings.

- Urge standards-setting bodies, such as the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium, and state licensing authorities to raise licensure requirements for elementary teachers to include a clear definition of what teachers should know and be able to do with regard to the teaching of reading; a stipulation of required coursework in reading instruction that incorporates the research base on effective instructional practices; and provisions for a well-supervised induction period to ensure that these instructional practices have been mastered.
- Urge school districts to enforce federal regulations, such as Title I, regarding entry-level employment standards for classroom paraprofessionals and urge states and districts to develop certification standards for classroom paraprofessionals, especially those who work with beginning and struggling readers, that clearly define roles and responsibilities, basic skills and an appropriate course of pre- and in-service training in research-based instructional and tutorial strategies.
- Urge the federal government to help fund the development of research-based materials to help improve reading instruction; ensure that these materials are field tested, using experimental and control groups, to determine how well they work to raise students' reading achievement; disseminate the resulting effectiveness and implementation data to schools and districts; and fund scale-up efforts for the most effective programs and materials.
- Urge textbook publishers and program developers to revise existing materials and to develop new materials for early reading instruction that reflect the research base and to conduct field tests on a routine basis, which can provide schools and districts with quantitative and qualitative evidence of effectiveness. Such materials should guide instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, spelling and grammar, provide decodable text at the pre-primer and primer levels, and expose students to a rich and challenging array of children's literature that can hold students' interest, help build vocabulary and background knowledge and increase comprehension. These programs and materials should also include aligned in-class assessments that are easy for teachers to administer on a periodic basis and that can be used to help monitor student progress, inform instruction, adjust student groupings and diagnose problems early.
- Urge school boards and state and district curriculum authorities to approve, for broad adoption, only those materials for beginning reading instruction that are designed to reflect the research base and that have clearly been shown to be effective in helping to raise student achievement levels, using valid, scientific field tests, and to institute a method for ongoing evaluation of the efficacy of adopted reading materials.
- Urge schools and districts to employ periodic research-based diagnostic assessments, beginning in kindergarten, that can help spot reading problems early. Results of these assessments should be used by districts to develop and implement intervention systems and by states and districts to target sufficient funds to help address any reading difficulties before students fall too far behind.

• Urge states and districts to fund, staff and fully stock a library in every school and make sure that all school libraries are accessible and convenient for students and their families.

IN ADDITION, THE AFT PLEDGES TO:

• Work with other educational organizations, such as the Learning First Alliance, to identify effective research-based reading programs and to persuade school boards and state and local legislative bodies to dedicate adequate resources to the adoption and full implementation of such programs in every public elementary school.

• Continue to disseminate information on reading research and effective instructional practice to AFT members and the general public through local and national publications.

• Continue to use the AFT Educational Research and Dissemination (ER&D) program to provide high-quality professional development to teachers and paraprofessionals in reading research and effective instructional practices in reading.

AFT CONVENTION RESOLUTION
Adolescent Literacy

Adopted July 2006

WHEREAS, to be successful in school and in life, adolescent students in middle and high schools must develop strong literacy skills and background knowledge, which together are essential for college and workplace readiness; and

WHEREAS, resolving the literacy problems of adolescents requires a simultaneous two-prong approach: delivery of rich content knowledge and literacy skills in the elementary grades coupled with intervention and support for those students in secondary schools who need them; and

WHEREAS, schools should assure that all children are acquiring grade-level reading skills beginning in kindergarten, through the use of appropriate curriculum and instructional practice and effective procedures for the early identification of weak readers and intensive intervention for them; and

WHEREAS, myriad indicators of the state of adolescent literacy in the U.S. point to cause for concern:

- Over 8 million students, close to 10 percent, in grades 4-12 are struggling readers who cannot navigate and master middle and high school content; [1]
- More than 3,000 students drop out of high school each day, in large part because they lack the literacy skills to be able to keep up with increasingly complex secondary school curricula; [2]
- Eleven percent of college freshmen must enroll in remedial reading courses and approximately 25 percent of all entering freshmen must enroll in remedial writing courses; [3]
- Literacy demands of the workplace, postsecondary education, and life are increasing while reading achievement levels for adolescents have remained stagnant for the last 10 years; and
- The shortage of basic literacy skills costs U.S. businesses, postsecondary institutions and under-prepared high school graduates as much as $16 billion in decreased productivity and remedial costs; [4] and

WHEREAS, adolescent students who are also English language learners face

even greater challenges than other struggling adolescent readers as they attempt to learn and use a new language while concurrently being expected to learn content in that new language; [5] and

WHEREAS, there is no single reason why adolescents struggle with reading: some adolescents have difficulty with decoding, some with fluency and vocabulary, some with comprehension, some with inadequate general knowledge, and still others struggle with all or with combinations of the above; and

WHEREAS, both literacy skills and background knowledge are essential to students' understanding of the content area texts; and

WHEREAS, content teachers should not be expected to be reading teachers but, instead, must be able to support students' efforts to access content through reading and to emphasize and reinforce the reading and writing skills specific to each content area; and

WHEREAS, schools that serve adolescents typically do not have the programs/supports and/or the resources with which to intervene successfully to raise struggling students' reading levels; and

WHEREAS, administrators often lack the skills and knowledge to establish and support effective literacy reform efforts in their schools; and

WHEREAS, there is significant research on what components are essential in a sound and effective comprehensive literacy program in schools and districts:

RESOLVED, that the American Federation of Teachers:

- **Reaffirm our belief in the absolute importance of early literacy acquisition and background knowledge as the foundation upon which adolescent literacy is based; and**
- **Recognize the critical role that knowledge acquisition—from early childhood forward—plays in adolescents' abilities to read and comprehend text; and**
- **Recognize the importance of school library media centers so that students can access materials of their choice to strengthen literacy acquisition, content comprehension and lifelong love of reading.**
- **Recognize the importance of literacy instruction for all adolescent students, not just for those who are struggling readers; and**
- **Recognize that literacy acquisition is complex and not properly measured by standardized reading tests alone; and**
- **Urge federal and state governments to commit to improving adolescent literacy through additional funding targeted specifically to aid in literacy acquisition; and**
- **Call for the creation of a national adolescent literacy panel to include practitioners, representatives of teacher unions, higher education faculty, and researchers to collect and analyze research on adolescent literacy and to identify and disseminate a consensus document to further our knowledge of adolescent and young adult literacy, as well as best practice and programs educators can use to improve adolescent literacy; and**

• Call for the identification and/or development of proven research-based instructional strategies, practices and materials that enable adolescents to become more literate—with a particular focus on what works in schools with large populations of struggling adolescent readers; and

• Call on states and districts to require that all secondary and elementary schools adopt a comprehensive schoolwide literacy plan—reviewed and approved by instructional staff that includes:

1. initial and ongoing assessment of all students' reading achievement levels;

2. immediate, intensive interventions for students whose reading levels must be improved if they are to succeed in content courses;

3. professional development for teachers, literacy specialists and principals on how to embed effective literacy acquisition strategies into content instruction, including how to:

a) incorporate instructional strategies (e.g., vocabulary development, note-taking and the use of advanced organizers) that provide struggling readers ways to learn the content material despite their low reading levels;

b) infuse direct, explicit, research-based instructional practices that enhance students' content area literacy and give all students practice in accessing, understanding, analyzing, and otherwise engaging with content across disciplines; and

4. a school structure, schedule and appropriate staff roles—consistent with collective bargaining agreements or through sign-off by the organization representing teachers—that support the schoolwide literacy program;

5. on-site reading specialists/coaches whose primary responsibility is to help content-area teachers modify instruction to strengthen students' content literacy; and

6. technology and diverse texts of all reading levels to facilitate students' access of content material.

• Call on districts and schools to provide intensive, concentrated, full-immersion intervention programs, i.e., "Boost-camps," for all students significantly below standards (e.g., three or more years below grade level) so that they can develop the reading ability and background knowledge necessary to access information from content area courses; and

• Call on unions, states, districts and universities to provide high-quality professional development through which teachers and administrators can develop the instructional skills and strategies necessary to facilitate their students' abilities to access content area material, including strategies that will enable students to more successfully comprehend and engage with text; and

• Call on preservice education programs to develop—and accrediting agencies and licensure entities to require—preservice education that teaches

secondary school teacher candidates the literacy instructional practices and strategies specific to their content area that would enable their students to meet the literacy demands of content areas; and

- **Call on states to develop and align literacy standards (that incorporate expectations of reading complex text) to rigorous, knowledge-rich content area curricula, instructional materials and assessments; and**

RESOLVED, that the AFT:

- **Continue to work in collaboration with other education, business, professional and community organizations as well as with federal and state governments to advocate and lobby for systemic, comprehensive, well-designed adolescent literacy programs in all middle and high schools, and especially in those schools with substantial proportions of struggling readers; and**
- **Collect and disseminate to members research on best practices and programs in adolescent literacy, with a particular focus on adolescent readers who 1) are English Language Learners; 2) may be struggling because of lack of decoding skills, fluency, vocabulary, and/or sufficient background knowledge to make sense of texts; or 3) have other reading difficulties; and**
- **Continue to develop, revise and disseminate Educational Research & Dissemination (ER&D) and other sources of professional development offerings appropriate for secondary school teachers and to identify and develop resources, such as "What Works," to improve students' reading comprehension; and**
- **Develop and disseminate a toolkit defining the components of an effective, comprehensive adolescent literacy program; and**

RESOLVED, that we urge our affiliates to adopt these policies.

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1 National Center for Education Statistics (2003). Nation's report card: Reading 2002. Washington, D.C: US Government Printing Office. Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2003521

2 Kamil, M.L. (2003). Adolescents and literacy: Reading for the 21st century. Washington, D.C: Alliance for Excellent Education. Available: http://www.all4ed.org/publications/AdolescentsAndLiteracy.pdf

3 ACT (2006). Reading Between the Lines: What the ACT Reveals About College Readiness in Reading. Iowa City, IA. Available: http://www.act.org/path/policy/pdf/reading_report.pdf

4 Greene, J. (2000). The cost of remedial education. How much Michigan pays when students fail to learn basic skills. Midland, MI: Mackinac Center for Public Policy.

5 National Governors Association (2005). Reading to Achieve: A Governor's Guide to Adolescent Literacy. Washington, D.C. Available: http://www.nga.org/Files/pdf/0510GOVGUIDELITERACY.PDF

Questions & Answers

Why the focus on reading?

Reading is a prerequisite for all other learning. Reading is also a skill that a significant percentage of U.S. students—including many with college-educated parents—have difficulty learning. Reading problems are even more widespread among children of the poor, the uneducated, non-English speakers, minorities and inner-city dwellers. The good news is that there is now a large body of research—and a consensus among the majority of researchers and educators—about what we must do to help these students succeed. The moment is ripe to take advantage of this consensus, to get good materials into the hands of teachers and paraprofessionals, and to provide them with the professional development they need to improve the reading achievement of their students.

Isn't there research to support differing views on how to teach beginning reading?

In some respects, yes. But it is the quality and quantity of research—not which side likes the results—that merits attention. Over the past few years, results have been released from a number of carefully designed and conducted national and international studies from diverse fields—such as neuroscience, psychology, linguistics, cognitive science, and education—that reinforce one another on how children learn to read and what we must do to improve their early reading instruction.

Although there are some who will accept no compromise, these strong findings have helped most experts arrive at a consensus. The full breadth of research on early reading instruction was reviewed recently in Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children, a report by a 17-member panel of eminent scholars assembled by the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences. This group, which studied the range of reading research for over two years, concluded by calling for a balanced approach to the teach-

ing of reading. This includes the use of systematic, explicit phonics; daily exposure to literature; and attention to comprehension—in other words, the kind of balance that the AFT calls for. Many other education organizations also recognize this approach. That's why the AFT—along with the NEA; the PTA; and other major administrator, school board and superintendent organizations that are all members of the Learning First Alliance—recently endorsed a position paper on beginning reading that is consistent with the AFT resolution.

Has there been enough research on regular education students and reading difficulties, or has it all come from special education research?

A number of recent, significant findings on beginning reading—but by no means all—were from reading disability studies funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) of the National Institutes of Health. But to find out about reading disabilities—which students develop them and why—many of these studies actually were conducted on a randomly selected general population of children. Thus, over 33 years, NICHD studies involved 34,501 children and adults, including 21,860 skilled readers and 12,641 impaired readers. In other words, these studies represent a source of important information about reading instruction for regular education as well as special education students.

So is achieving a "balanced approach" to beginning reading instruction the point?

Yes, as long as we understand what an appropriate balance means. It would be a shame if, after we had learned so much and reached a hard-won consensus, "balance" became just another buzzword to describe the status quo. The AFT Beginning Reading resolution and a variety of articles (see Background Reading on page 28), provide a lot of detail to ensure that AFT members are familiar with the broad outlines of research and the consensus on how to achieve a balance that will result in reading gains.

Will the steps called for in these resolutions diminish professional autonomy?

No. In fact, they have the potential to help build a research-based profession, with a full toolbox of proven teaching strategies and instructional materials. Research can give us better tools to choose from, as well as a better understanding of which tools to use when and with which students. But, as in the fields of medicine and most other research-based professions—or any field that requires a massive body of professional skills and knowledge—it will always be up to the judgment and skill of the individual practitioner to diagnose problems accurately, to choose the most appropriate tools in light of that diagnosis, and then to use those tools effectively. As in other research-based professions, it also will be incumbent upon the practitioners to practice

their profession in a way that is responsibly informed by the best available evidence of what works.

What is the role of paraprofessionals in helping children to read?

Paraprofessionals play a significant role in supporting teachers' work in the classroom. Programs like Success for All have shown that, when properly trained, paraprofessionals have been extremely effective when engaged in meaningful roles that support the educational programs designed, led, and evaluated by classroom teachers.

Is it appropriate to use diagnostic assessments beginning in kindergarten?

It's important to be very careful about how tests are used with young children. We believe, however, that school systems should start using diagnostic assessments on a routine and appropriate basis, beginning when students enter kindergarten or first grade. According to research, intensive intervention programs can help the vast majority of struggling readers achieve reading proficiency if problems are caught early enough. However, if intervention is delayed until age 9—the approximate age that most states begin to test reading proficiency—roughly 75 percent of struggling students will experience reading difficulties through high school. It's not that older students can't be taught to read, but the time and expense to help them catch up to their peers are so enormous that few school systems help all who need it.

What is adolescent literacy and why is it important to address?

Adolescent literacy is multifaceted. It builds upon the knowledge and literacy skills acquired during the elementary grades. To be successful, adolescents must be competent decoders, able to comprehend the increasingly complex texts they are required to read in secondary school, and able to learn content matter from those texts. Adolescents also must be able to write in persuasive, analytic and descriptive ways about what they have learned from their reading and from other experiences. They must be able to use language and communication skills both to convey their thoughts and knowledge to others and to respond appropriately in conversations and discussions. Each of these interrelated components of literacy—reading, writing, speaking and listening—is necessary; none is sufficient alone. However, since reading is a prerequisite for all other content course learning, it is the component on which much of the adolescent literacy resolution is focused.

The focus on adolescent literacy is a timely and natural outgrowth of the many ways the AFT has advocated, for over a decade, for research-based reading policy, practice and curricular materials. Through those efforts, the AFT has become recognized as a leader in advocating for quality reading instruction. Our previous work was focused mainly on K-4 reading instruction. There is now a pressing need for us to expand our scope. The research on secondary school achievement and high school dropouts has highlighted the

need to improve adolescent literacy in America's middle and high schools.

There is a crisis in secondary school education. Literacy demands are increasing, but millions of adolescents lack the necessary literacy skills to be able to use reading and writing effectively enough to learn from the subject-matter content they confront in secondary school. Disproportionately, struggling adolescent readers drop out of high school. The low level of literacy achievement is the pivotal issue contributing to the current secondary school crisis.

Literacy is the linchpin of standards-based reform and the gateway to achievement. It is the core issue for teachers in dealing with any school reform. This resolution will provide members with guidance and direction for improving adolescent literacy. It will inform the AFT's efforts to identify and/or develop quality initiatives, publications and resources that can facilitate members' efforts to improve adolescent student achievement.

Is there enough consensus on adolescent literacy research for us to take a position?

Researchers know a great deal about adolescent literacy and the components of it that are important to ensure that students' reading achievement improves. We know effective ways to develop and/or increase students' ability to crack the code and to read fluently, and we also have numerous research-based interventions to increase vocabulary or to help students acquire and use comprehension strategies effectively. We know that, especially for adolescents, reading is a social endeavor and one for which the reader must be motivated and engaged.

There is sufficient research on what the components are of a comprehensive system to support district and school efforts to improve adolescent literacy. Several consensus documents—each sponsored or published recently by such organizations as the RAND Corporation, the Alliance for Excellent Education, the National Association of State Boards of Education, the National Governors Association and the National Association for Secondary School Principals—delineate the essential components of a comprehensive secondary school literacy plan. At a minimum, such a plan must include:

- school staff buy-in and input;
- baseline and ongoing student assessment;
- varying levels of interventions for students who need them;
- professional development for staff; and
- the fiscal and structural resources necessary to support the schoolwide literacy program.

Nonetheless, much remains unknown. There is not yet sufficient research on such issues as:

- how much of which types of instruction will best meet the diverse needs of struggling adolescent readers;
- which configuration of interventions, instructional practices and sup-

ports works best when implemented to scale across districts and/or states;

- what works best in schools with large proportions of struggling adolescent readers;
- which literacy practices and programs are most effective to raise the literacy achievement of all adolescents;
- to what extent literacy coaches in secondary schools are effective;
- what a comprehensive adolescent literacy program that included such coaches would entail; and
- how best to provide prospective and current secondary school teachers with the knowledge and skills they need to enhance students' content area literacy.

What should be the role of content teachers in improving adolescent literacy? Does this mean that secondary school teachers will now be expected to be reading teachers too?

Content area teachers should not be expected to become reading teachers. Instead, the AFT recommends that content area teachers learn and implement instructional strategies that they can embed in their subject-area instruction to facilitate students' ability to understand and learn from content area text. Learning and applying such strategies—e.g., the use of graphic organizers—will increase students' content literacy by providing students with the understanding and skills to read, write, think about and discuss the material they confront in their content courses.

Literacy specialists or other school support service providers should intervene with those students who also need some instruction in basic decoding, fluency and/or comprehension skills.

What support does the AFT recommend for those middle and high school students whose reading levels are several years behind?

Any secondary school student whose reading achievement is several years behind grade level needs special intervention. Regular content teachers should not be expected to provide targeted literacy remediation to struggling readers. The AFT recommends that such students receive concentrated, intensive, extensive small group instruction in a "Boost Camp" within the secondary school until their reading levels have improved enough for them to meet the literacy demands of content area courses. "Boost Camps" should be staffed by literacy specialists and other support service providers, as deemed appropriate based on students' assessment data.

Background Information Related to Beginning Reading Instruction

THIS ESSAY SERVED AS THE INTRODUCTION TO A SERIES OF THREE ARTICLES ON LEARNING TO READ THAT APPEARED IN THE AFT JOURNAL, *AMERICAN EDUCATOR*, IN SUMMER 1995. IT WAS WRITTEN BY LIZ MCPIKE, EDITOR OF THE MAGAZINE.

This we can say with certainty: If a child in a modern society like ours does not learn to read, he doesn't make it in life. If he doesn't learn to read well enough to comprehend what he is reading, if he doesn't learn to read effortlessly enough to render reading pleasurable, if he doesn't learn to read fluently enough to read broadly and reflectively across all the content areas, his chances for a fulfilling life, by whatever measure—academic success, financial success, the ability to find interesting work, personal autonomy, self esteem—are practically nil.

Because of the central role that reading ability plays in children's lives, it is in this area, above all others, that the knowledge base for the practice of teaching must be most closely studied and adhered to. There is no room for either confusion or dogmatism. Too much is at stake.

Keith Stanovich, one of the world's leading reading researchers and twice the recipient of the International Reading Association's Albert J. Harris award, has applied the concept of the "Matthew effect" to describe the dramatically different trajectories followed by those children who get off to a good start in reading and those who don't:

> "The term Matthew effects derives from the Gospel according to Matthew: 'For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance; but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath' (XXV:29).
>
> "...Put simply, the story goes something like this: Children who begin school with little phonological awareness have trouble acquiring alphabetic coding skill and thus have difficulty recognizing words. Reading for meaning is greatly hindered when children are having too much trouble with word recognition. When word recognition processes demand too much cognitive capacity, fewer cognitive resources are left to allocate to higher-level processes of text integration and comprehension. Trying to read without the cognitive resources to allocate to understanding the meaning of the text is not a rewarding experience. Such unrewarding early reading experiences lead to less involvement in reading-related activities. Lack of exposure and practice on the part of the less-skilled reader further delays

the development of automaticity and speed at the word recognition level. Thus reading for meaning is hindered, unrewarding reading experiences multiply, practice is avoided or merely tolerated without real cognitive involvement, and the negative spiral of cumulative disadvantage continues. Troublesome emotional side effects begin to be associated with school experiences, and these become a further hindrance to school achievement.

"Conversely, children who quickly develop decoding processes find reading enjoyable because they can concentrate on the meaning of the text. They read more in school and, of equal importance, reading becomes a self-chosen activity for them.

The additional exposure and practice they get further develops their reading abilities.…(R)eading develops syntactic knowledge, facilitates vocabulary growth, and broadens the general knowledge base. This facilitates the reading of more difficult andinteresting texts.…"

How many American children are caught in the downward spiral that Stanovich describes? No one has exact figures, but the accumulating evidence—both quantitative and anecdotal—is indeed troubling, and an increasing number of educators are expressing deep concern. Perhaps we need not spend valuable time calculating the precise number of children affected when we know we can say with confidence that we are talking about millions.

Recent evidence of reading difficulty comes from studies by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). In April 1995, NAEP announced the latest reading scores for students across the country. Students in three grades in 39 states were tested. Overall, fewer than a third of them were proficient in reading, that is, able to handle challenging texts competently, and only a very few (2 percent to 5 percent depending on the grade) were reading at advanced levels.

While middle-class children and children with normal cognitive development have by no means been spared from the growing incidence of reading problems, the pedagogical clock is ticking most relentlessly for youngsters from low-income and disadvantaged households—those who do not come to school with thousands of hours of exposure to print and conversation and word play and informal teaching that occurs in most middle-class households: being read to, learning rhymes and songs and playing word-sound games, watching and helping as the grocery list is drawn up and checked off, manipulating the magnetic letters on the refrigerator, and so on. In contrast to these fortunate ones, as Marilyn Adams, the author of Beginning To Read: Thinking and Learning about Print, has written, there are children who "have barely even seen a book before entering school."

Also at serious risk, and again the numbers are high, are children whose cognitive architecture—for a wide variety of reasons—makes learning to read and write more difficult.

For these two groups of children in particular, as Adams has so compellingly put it, "we have not a classroom moment to waste."

What do we know about how best to help children learn to read?

1. Many elements of the Whole Language approach have brought new life to the reading and writing experience into the classrooms where students and teachers are working creatively together to open the door to full literacy. The early emphasis on writing; the deeper drawing from the rich treasure chest of good children's literature; the freedom for teachers to go beyond tightly regimented and constrained programs and to design a wide range of literacy events and activities; the recognition that prolonged periods of abstracted phonics drill, isolated from meaningful text, is not the way to teach reading; the understanding that learning depends in considerable degree upon capturing a child's interest and engaging his active participation, of setting before him a vision of something he very much wants to be part of: All of these have been invaluable contributions and a much-needed counterbalance to what in many cases was a dry and narrow approach to literacy development.

2. Whole Language means different things to different people, and for some educators it has meant combining the types of insights and activities described above with the direct and systematic teaching of all that is involved in mastering the alphabetic code. But many leaders and proponents of the Whole Language approach have so downgraded the importance of code-oriented instruction as to render it but an incidental part of a beginning reading program, if that. Direct instruction and systematic instruction are frowned upon, as is attention to individual words and the letter/sound sub-units of which they are composed. Children are advised to rely on context to figure out unfamiliar words. "Don't sound it out," warns The Whole Language Teachers Newsletter. But contextual clues are notoriously unreliable; they can't compete with skilled decoding. And the "wait-for-the-child-to-ask" orientation to decoding instruction doesn't do much for children who don't understand what to ask.

To the extent that Whole Language proponents equate learning to read with learning to talk, that is, both "natural" processes to which we are predisposed and that require little more than a rich immersion in order to blossom, they are wrong. To the extent that they minimize the role of skilled decoding in reading comprehension, they are also wrong. And the pedagogical practices that flow from these faulty premises are wrong; indeed for many children they are a disaster. All children can benefit from and many children require systematic direct instruction in the elements of the alphabetic code. Each child is different, of course, and some need more extensive instruction in decoding skills than others. But as Keith Stanovich has so succinctly put it:

> "That direct instruction in alphabetic coding facilitates early reading instruction is one of the most well-established conclusions in all of behavioral science....Conversely, the idea that learning to read is just like learning to speak is accepted by no responsible linguist, psychologist, or cognitive scientist in the research community."

Rather than being irrelevant or incidental to text comprehension, skilled decoding, it turns out, is central. Again, Marilyn Adams:

> "…[I]t has been proven beyond any shade of doubt that skillful readers process virtually each and every word and letter of text as they read. This is extremely counter-intuitive. For sure, skillful readers neither look nor feel as if that's what they do. But that's because they do it so quickly and effortlessly. Almost automatically, with almost no conscious attention whatsoever, skillful readers recognize words by drawing on deep and ready knowledge of spellings and their connections to speech and meaning.
>
> In fact, the automaticity with which skillful readers recognize words is the key to the whole system.… The reader's attention can be focused on the meaning and message of a text only to the extent that it's free from fussing with the words and letters."

A Whole Language approach that does not incorporate sufficient attention to decoding skills leaves in its wake countless numbers of youngsters who, in the words of one teacher, are surrounded by "beautiful pieces of literature that [they] can't read." As Joanna Williams of Teachers College, Columbia University, has observed: "Today, without strong direct systematic decoding instruction in regular first-grade classrooms, more and more children are being shunted into remedial classes, and even special education."

Also left in the wake are many teachers who can see clearly that some of their students are not doing well in a purist Whole Language environment but who are under tremendous pressure from their district or state to minimize the teaching of the alphabetic code. In an article in Education Week, one veteran teacher describes the environment that followed California's 1987 adoption of a "literature-based framework for teaching language arts" as one in which "officials in some elementary schools seized phonics books and spellers to ensure that teachers were not ignoring the new [Whole Language] instructional materials."

Pressures are also coming from the social dynamics within the profession. We have heard numerous stories from teachers who, labeled as "old-fashioned" or—worse yet—"resistant to change," have had to "hide their phonics books" or close their doors in order to "sneak in some phonics."

3. Systematic attention to the alphabetic code does not mean a return to the dreariness that characterized so much of the old phonics. Thanks to the dedicated work of many teachers and reading researchers, we now know a lot more than we used to about what constitute the critical elements of decoding and how to go about teaching them.

The days of the "drill and more drill" approach to phonics are over, as they should be, and no reasonable educator is suggesting a return to them. But neither do reasonable educators suggest that students do not need a reasonable amount of well designed practice.

4. A carefully crafted, balanced approach to the teaching of reading requires considerable sophistication on the part of teachers. Joanna Williams describes the rigorous demands of the job:

> "Teachers are often exhorted to be eclectic, as indeed they should be. Teaching children to read requires much knowledge and many skills. Moreover, children do not all respond equally well to the same teaching techniques. A teacher must be ready and able to switch strategies easily. A teacher must be equipped to jump in wherever required and provide appropriate feedback on the spot, whether it be with phonics information, an analogy, or a pointed question. (Of course, he or she must also know when not to jump in but rather let the child find his own way.) Teachers need good training to operate flexibly with multiple strategies and activities. They also need substantial knowledge about the way in which language is structured, particularly with respect to its orthographic and phonological features. They must be able to teach their students about phonemes and how phonemes are represented in writing, and about morphemes (the smallest meaningful units in words) and their spelling patterns…."

But teachers are not receiving this kind of training. The amount of course work in the structure of spoken and written language required by teacher preparation programs and state certification standards is woefully inadequate for the demands of classroom life, particularly classrooms with low-readiness children and a diverse range of learners. Louisa Cook Moats, director of Teacher Training at the Greenwood Institute in Putney, Vermont, conducted a survey of experienced teachers to assess their knowledge of the structure of spoken and written language. Moats found "pervasive conceptual weaknesses in the very skills that are needed for direct, language focused reading instruction, such as the ability to count phonemes and to identify phonics relationships…. Typically, about 10 percent to 20 percent…could consistently identify consonant blends in written words….Less than half of those tested could identify the reduced vowel schwa consistently. Only 30 percent could explain when ck was used in spelling."

Moats points out that teachers cannot be expected to know what they have not been taught, and she urges reform of teacher preparation programs and certification requirements. "At present, motivated teachers are often left to obtain specific skills in teaching phonology, phonetics, orthography, and other language skills on their own by seeking out workshops or specialized instructional manuals."

Moats also notes the terrible toll this takes on teachers. The lack of a firm grasp of the knowledge they need to teach beginning readers—especially hard-to-reach, hard-to-teach children—leaves many dedicated teachers deeply frustrated. Worried that they are not doing a good job, their confidence shaken, many begin to rethink their career choice. Undoubtedly, this is a significant factor in the widely documented high attrition rate of new teachers.

While there are a number of reasons that help explain why teachers are not being offered the training they need, an article in The Atlantic Monthly may

throw some light on the problem: "…in 1987 a survey of 43 texts used to train teachers of reading found that none advocated systematic phonics instruction—and only nine even mentioned that there was a debate on the issue." Programs that do not believe in the value of systematic phonics are unlikely to provide teachers with the necessary knowledge base in the structure of language. As Moats concludes, "…language mastery is as essential for the literacy teacher as anatomy is for the physician. It is our obligation to enable teachers to acquire it."

5. It is certainly motive enough to know that the lives of millions of children depend on our ability to help them learn to read well. But there may be yet more at stake here. As increasing numbers of parents witness their second and third graders struggling through basic reading materials and lacking command of foundational spelling concepts and spelling-sound relationships, they come to feel that our pubic schools are failing in their most basic mission. According to a report issued in the summer of 1994 by the Public Agenda Foundation, "First Things First: What Americans Expect from the Public Schools," 60 percent of Americans harbor deep concerns that there is "not enough emphasis on the basics, such as reading, writing, and math." Higher standards and more challenging school work are strongly endorsed by the public, but they don't understand how "critical thinking" and "higher-order" skills are possible without mastery of certain basics:

> "In focus groups for this study and other Public Agenda education projects, people express a sense of frustration and even bewilderment at the inability of the public schools to make mastery of the basics common-place among the nation's children."

Keith Stanovich describes how parents' dissatisfaction with their children's progress in reading is fueling the movement toward privatizing education in Canada: "Parents with children who have trouble in early reading and who have not been given instruction in alphabetic coding will add fuel to the movement toward privatized education in North America.

> "Parents Question Results of State-Run School System' is an increasingly frequent newspaper headline in Canadian provinces (e.g., Ontario) where phonics instruction is neglected or de-emphasized. The January 11, 1993, cover of Maclean's, Canada's weekly newsmagazine, was titled 'What's Wrong at School?' and featured numerous reports of parents seeking private education for children struggling in reading due to a lack of emphasis on alphabetic coding in school curricula.…It is reported that Canada's private school enrollment jumped 15 percent in the single year of 1992."

Of course, private schools are just as likely—and the elite ones probably more likely—to have embraced a one-sided Whole Language approach. But parents are generally not well informed about the specifics of different instructional programs. They only know that their child is not doing well in his current setting, and they begin to look elsewhere.

The Whole Language movement has brought to the forefront many complex and legitimate issues about the nature of teaching and learning and the goals of education, and it has brought fresh life to many classrooms. But to the extent that it has reduced decoding to an incidental place in the reading curriculum, it has done a terrible disservice to the children whose lives depend on mastery of that skill. As Adams and Bruck compellingly argue, the legitimate issues related to questions of teacher empowerment, child-centered education, and the reading-writing connection "are strictly independent from issues of the nature of the knowledge and processes involved in reading and learning to read. On these latter questions, the research is resoundingly clear. Only by disentangling these two sets of issues, can we give either the attention and commitment that it so urgently deserves."

And, as Stanovich warns, unless this disentangling takes place, "whole language proponents threaten all of their legitimate accomplishments. Eventually—perhaps not for a great while, but eventually—the weight of empirical evidence will fall on their heads."

We do not have to wait for such a scenario to unfold. We can create a better one—one in which a self-confident teaching profession crafts a well-balanced program that draws the best from both approaches and in the process gives all children their best hope for learning and loving to read.

Background Information Related to Adolescent Literacy

To be successful in school and in life, adolescents must have strong literacy skills. Yet, too many U.S. middle and high schools are facing a multipronged crisis (which in too many instances is neither acknowledged nor addressed effectively): Substantial numbers of adolescents read at levels below what they need to navigate and master secondary school content. Secondary schools often do not have the infrastructure and/or resources to intervene successfully to raise these students' reading levels. Relatively few secondary teachers have the knowledge and skills to teach reading to their students.

Only 33 percent of all eighth-graders and 36 percent of all 12th-graders read at or above the NAEP proficient level. That is, only slightly more than a third of students in these grades can demonstrate solid academic performance, competency over challenging subject matter, application of that knowledge to real-world situations and analytical skill appropriate to the content (NCES, 2002).

Eight million students in grades 4-12 struggle with reading (NCES, 2003). According to the NAEP 2002 Reading Report Card, 68 percent of eighth-graders and 64 percent of 12th-graders scored at or below basic. (The NAEP 2005 Reading Report Card reported fourth- and eighth-grade data only. Eighth-

graders' reading levels remained stable.) These students performed substantially below grade level; they could only demonstrate miniscule to partial mastery of the prerequisite knowledge and skills fundamental for success at their respective grades.

The structure and mission of secondary schools thwart potential efforts to meet the needs of struggling adolescent readers. Secondary schools focus on content instruction, not literacy acquisition (Cuban, 1993; Deshler, 2003); secondary school teachers and administrators tend to operate on the erroneous assumption that all students successfully acquired the requisite literacy skills in elementary school. Middle and high school course offerings and scheduling do not adequately accommodate the diversity of students' reading abilities and achievement levels. Few secondary teachers have been taught how to infuse comprehension strategy instruction into their content instruction or how to meet the needs of adolescents who lack even the basic reading skills. To an even greater extent than for their elementary school peers, secondary school teachers are likely to have never taken reading instruction coursework.

What We Know and What We Don't Know

There are many reasons why some adolescents struggle with reading. Approximately 10 percent of those who struggle with reading—about 800,000 adolescents—either lack the phonological processing skills needed to understand and apply the alphabetic principle on which reading in English is based; or they can crack the code, but decode too slowly to be fluent readers. The other 90 percent of struggling adolescent readers can fluently call out the words on the page, but they lack the vocabulary and/or the background knowledge necessary to give meaning to the words they "read" or they lack or are unable to use the comprehension strategies with which to analyze, synthesize and integrate what they have read with what they already know (Curtis and Longo, 1999; Moats, 2000). Simply put, they may be fluent, but they do not comprehend.

Researchers have identified the key elements of an effective adolescent literacy program. Those elements are reiterated in the 2004 report to the Carnegie Corporation, Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy, written by Gina Biancarosa and Catherine Snow. In this synthesis of the research and professional best practice, the following components are deemed critical:

- direct, explicit comprehension instruction;
- effective content-embedded instruction;
- motivation and student choice;
- text-based collaborative learning;
- strategic tutoring;
- diverse texts;
- intensive writing;

- technology;
- ongoing formative and summative assessment;
- extended time for literacy;
- teacher professional development;
- teacher collaboration;
- school leadership; and
- a comprehensive and coordinated literacy program.

What is not yet known—and what future research must help determine—is what combination of key elements works best, for which students, in what sequence, delivered by whom, for how long.

In addition, based on the lessons learned from our standards and school reform work, the AFT strongly urges that these critical components also be included:

- genuine and measurable staff buy-in and commitment to participate in and implement the program;
- opportunities and teacher compensation for intensive professional development (on using data to inform instruction, foundations of effective teaching, strategic reading instruction and integrating literacy instruction using content) during the summer, as well as on-going support during the school year;
- opportunities during the school day and school year for teachers to meet together by content area or grade for support and planning;
- thorough training for teachers on how to effectively use intervention materials and/or technology to support and enhance instruction and learning;
- screening and diagnostic assessment of all students in the fall and periodically throughout the school year;
- time scheduled during the school day to accommodate flexible grouping of students to provide the appropriate type and intensity of instruction;
- a school schedule conducive to facilitating the provision of intervention and enrichment services; and
- the adoption of research-based intervention materials, e.g., Scholastic 180, Language!, Reading Mastery, Corrective Reading, Reading is FAME, etc., with evidence of success in raising reading achievement.

If we are to equip all adolescents with the strong literacy ability they need to succeed in school and in life, the field must accelerate the pace of implementing what we know works on a small scale, even as researchers and practitioners grapple with learning more than we already know about what works on a more comprehensive, widescale level.

Background Reading & Resources

AFT RESOURCES

Educational Research and Dissemination (ER&D) Program

The American Federation of Teachers' Educational Research and Dissemination (ER&D) program is a union-sponsored, research-based professional development program. It was created by the AFT through collaboration between practitioners and researchers to encourage classroom educators to improve their practice and their students' achievement by becoming users of research. The program is based on a training-of-trainers model, which individuals participate in activities that prepare them to train others, who, in turn, train still others in a pyramiding effect.

As a professional development program, the ER&D process is very different from traditional in-service because it affords K-12 and postsecondary classroom educators the opportunity to gain access to research on teaching and learning in a form that gives them the ability to apply those findings effectively. ER&D offers two courses that directly relate to reading:

- *Beginning Reading Instruction:* This course is designed to give participants the knowledge and skills necessary to provide all children with the strong foundation they must have to become successful readers. It will focus on strategies to teach beginning reading, with particular emphasis on helping students develop phonemic awareness, an understanding of the print-to-speech code, fluency and comprehension. It is intended primarily for teachers of kindergarten–grade 2, but it is also appropriate for teachers of upper elementary grades whose students are still having difficulty with word recognition.
- *Reading Comprehension Instruction:* This course focuses on research-based exemplary practices in the teaching of reading comprehension. Participants explore the nature of narrative and expository text and how stu-

dents' knowledge of this can improve their comprehension. Participants also learn instructional strategies to help students comprehend, learn from, and appreciate both forms of text. The course is intended primarily for elementary grade teachers, but is also appropriate for teachers of other grades whose students are still having difficulty with reading comprehension in literature and content area texts.

Teaching Reading IS Rocket Science: What Expert Teachers of Reading Should Know and Be Able To Do

Thanks to new scientific research—plus a long-awaited scientific and political consensus around reading research—the knowledge exists to teach all but a handful of severely disabled children to read well. This report discusses the current state of teacher preparation in reading. It reviews the relevant research and describes the knowledge base that is essential for teacher candidates and practicing teachers to master if they are to be successful in teaching all children to read well. 32 pages. Item no. 39-0372. $5 each; $3 each for orders of five or more (June 1999/Reprinted March 2004). Also available on the Internet: www.aft.org/pubs-reports/downloads/teachers/rocketsciphotos.pdf

American Educator

AFT's quarterly journal, American Educator, has dedicated several issues to the importance of high-quality reading instruction:

- "Learning To Read: Schooling's First Mission (Summer 1995)
  Not available online.
- "Preventing Early Reading Failure—and Its Devastating Downward Spiral" (Fall 2004) www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/issues/fall04/index.htm
- "The Fourth-Grade Plunge: The Cause. The Cure." (Spring 2003)
  www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/spring2003/index.html
- "The Unique Power of Reading and How To Unleash It" (Summer 1998)
  www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/spring_sum98/index.html

To order any of these AFT materials, send a check payable to the American Federation of Teachers and mail to: AFT Order Department, 555 New Jersey Ave., N.W., Washington, DC 20001. Shipping and handling costs are included. Please reference the title of the publication and item number on your order.

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