

The Importance of Educational Leadership and Policy: In Support of Effective Instruction

By Donna Wilson, Ph.D.

*Head of Academic Affairs, Center for Innovative Education and Prevention
& BrainSMART*

September 2011

The Importance of Educational Leadership and Policy: In Support of Effective Instruction

Effective instruction is one of the most critical factors in increasing student achievement (Schmoker, 2006). In fact, the effectiveness of their teachers has 6 to 10 times more impact on students' academic outcomes than all other factors combined (Mortimore & Sammons, 1987). As a result, the top priority for resources at the local, state, and national level for education should be to support the recruitment and development of a first-rate teaching force for all U.S. schools. To accomplish this aim, communities need well-educated and committed school administrators, superintendents, and instructional directors who can effectively lead their schools, advocate for youth, and connect with parents and the community at large. Additionally, policy makers should become familiar with current research in support of the development and retention of teachers who take the lead in advocating for and modeling effective education that supports gains in student achievement.

Developing reading skills in the early grades is essential for continued academic and life success. One of the keys to increasing reading achievement is ensuring that reading teachers have the knowledge and skills they need to reach all the students in their classrooms. While some 90% to 95% of all students have the academic potential to read on grade level, currently in many school districts approximately 40% of students are failing to do so (Allington, 2009). This shortfall cannot be attributed primarily to lack of academic potential or socioeconomic factors, but to the fact that these students have not received the high-quality reading instruction they need.

This assertion is not intended to dismiss the wide variation in the readiness to "do school" among students today. Research (Fielding, Kerr, & Rosier, 2007) indicates that on the first day of school, there is a 6-year gap in kindergarten classes from the highest to lowest performers. This gap underscores the importance of effective teaching in the early elementary grades. Children who come to school unprepared to learn and without the regular exposure to literacy and print materials that is at the foundation of reading readiness need to experience two to three years of academic gains to learn to read and to catch up with their peers by third grade.

According to research cited by the U.S. Department of Education (1999), parents' income and education levels are directly related to their children's reading readiness. Parents with a college education are more likely to talk, listen and read to their young children regularly than those whose education ended at high school. Children in high-income homes are exposed to an estimated 30 million words at home by age 3, compared to 20 million words in medium-income and 10 million in low-income households. The simple acts of conversing with young children and reading to them every day literally wire their brains for literacy. If parents choose to do just one thing so their children learn to read, they might consider these words from Nancy Kerr, President of the National Children's Reading Foundation: "From birth to kindergarten a child who is read to at least 20 minutes a day absorbs 600 hours of structured language. With this wonderful daily experience, most children will acquire the pre-literacy skills, necessary for learning to read" (Fielding et al., 2007, p. 219).

The connection between income and education appears clear: People with college degrees, especially graduate and professional degrees, earn more than their less-educated counterparts. Another clear connection is that more educated parents understand the value of academic success—and their role in helping prepare their children for school and in continuing to support their learning.

What this means for teachers is that they must be equipped with effective strategies to help children who come to school unprepared for learning catch up with their peers. The goal must be to teach all children to read well before the emphasis shifts from “learning to read” to “reading to learn,” typically around fourth grade. This focus is especially critical in high-poverty schools where, according to a 2010 report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, 85% of fourth-graders fail to meet the “proficient” level in reading tests.

One example of effective teaching practice is encouraging children to read materials at their independent reading level—that is, texts that they can read with 95% to 98% accuracy. Research and classroom applications over the past six decades (Betts, 1949, as cited in Allington, 2009; Partnership for Reading, 2001; Routman, 2002) show that, to become motivated and proficient readers, students need to spend time reading text at their independent level to continue to develop fluency and automaticity and improve their reading skills. However, in many schools students are assigned texts that they simply cannot read. Predictably, this results in a significant lowering of student motivation and learning and is a large waste of taxpayer money.

In the United States, K–12 students spend an estimated 85% of their school day on lessons and assignments that require reading from text (Fielding et al., 2007). It follows logically that students who are not taught the reading skills they need to read on grade level do not benefit from the vast majority of instruction that goes on around them in their classrooms.

The good news is that this problem is not insurmountable. The high rate of students reading below grade level can be corrected. Children can succeed in school and in life, if they receive high-quality, high-intensity reading instruction in the primary grades 1–3 (Allington, 2009). The persistent obstacles lie not in students and their teachers, but in the unfulfilled need for teacher training and support and leadership toward these means to the end of effective instruction for all students.

Many critical policy decisions today appear to have been made without student learning, reading improvement, and academic achievement front of mind. Though costly curriculum kits, texts, technologies, school buildings, and athletics may be part of the formula for student success, these components have not been found to be as important as teacher effectiveness. Often teacher training and professional development are overlooked at budget time and in a school or district’s efforts to improve student achievement. As an informed citizen, educator, or policy maker, YOU can make a difference through your influence. Now is the time.

References

Allington, R. L. (2009). *What really matters in response to intervention: Research-based designs*. Boston, MA: Pearson Education.

- Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2010). *Early warning! Why reading by the end of third grade matters*. Retrieved from <http://www.aecf.org/~media/Pubs/Initiatives/KIDS%20COUNT/123/2010KCSpecReport/Special%20Report%20Executive%20Summary.pdf>
- Fielding, L., Kerr, N., & Rosier, P. (2007). *Annual growth for all students: Catch-up growth for those who are behind*. Kennewick, WA: New Foundation Press.
- Mortimore, P., & Sammons, P. (1987, September). New evidence on effective elementary schools. *Educational Leadership*, 45: 4–8.
- Partnership for Reading. (2001). Fluency: An introduction. Retrieved from <http://www.readingrockets.org/article/3415>
- Routman, R. (2002). *Reading essentials: The specifics you need to teach reading well*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Schmoker, M. (2006). *Results now: How we can achieve unprecedented achievement in teaching and learning*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- U.S. Department of Education. (1999). Start early, finish strong: How to help every child become a reader. Retrieved from http://www2.ed.gov/pubs/startearly/ch_1.html