



*Standards-Based
Literacy
in the Northeast*

The Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory
a program of The Education Alliance at Brown University

The LAB, a program of The Education Alliance at Brown University, is one of ten educational laboratories funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement. Our goals are to improve teaching and learning, advance school improvement, build capacity for reform, and develop strategic alliances with key members of the region's education and policy making community.

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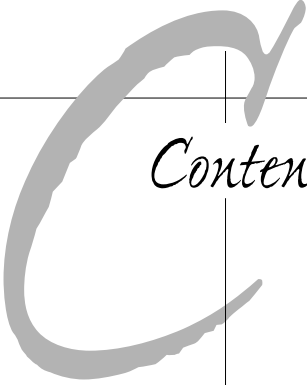
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Contents

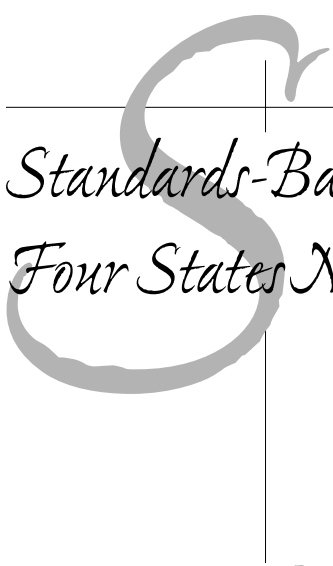
<i>Standards-Based Early Literacy: Four States Making Progress</i>	1	
Background	1	
 <i>Implementing Standards for Early Literacy:</i>		
<i>Summaries of Four State Studies</i>	5	
Connecticut	6	
Maine	9	
Massachusetts	11	
Vermont	13	
 <i>Converging Regional Early Literacy Practices</i>		17
Lessons Learned: What should we teach and how should we teach it?	19	
No Magic Bullet	20	
Phonemic Awareness and Other Skills	20	
Coaching and a Variety of Strategies	21	
Literacy as a Mosaic of Thought	22	
Comprehension and Higher Order Thinking	22	
Multiple Teaching Strategies	23	
Frequent Use of Curriculum-Based Assessments	24	
Flexible Grouping	24	
 <i>States, Districts, and Schools Working Together to Implement Standards</i>		27
Setting Standards	27	
Supporting Standards through Alignment	28	
Using and Understanding Test Results	29	
More Authentic Assessment	31	
Looking at Data by Groups	31	

Measuring Success and Reporting Results	32
Attracting and Supporting Quality Teachers	33
Attention to Low-Performing Schools	34
<i>Fostering Coherence and Learning Community</i>	<i>37</i>
Collective Vision and Ownership	37
Teachers as Learners	38
Benefits to Student Achievement	39
Coaching and Networking	41
New Strategies for Teacher Development	41
Collaborative Models	42
Time and Context for Collaboration	42
<i>Questions for Ongoing Inquiry through Research and Reflection</i>	<i>47</i>
<i>Bibliography</i>	<i>51</i>
Works Cited	51
Additional Resources	55

Appendices

<i>Position Statement On Measuring Success</i>	<i>57</i>
(adopted by the Connecticut State Board of Education)	
<i>A Primer on Alignment</i>	<i>61</i>
(from Education Week)	

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Standards-Based Early Literacy: Four States Making Progress

Background

Public standards and assessments are changing American schools by making school work public and by linking school accountability to the performance of all children on tests. Nationwide, pressure is on for schools to raise test scores.

During the mid-1990s, following the lead of the federal government and national professional organizations, state departments of education in the Northeast began to develop and implement state frameworks and standards-based instruction. The change to standards means a change in expectations. Now all students must master grade-level material that meets standards, and schools will assess learning accordingly. The new emphasis on school accountability and assessment based on test data poses a dilemma for schools: Can they improve test scores and improve learning at the same time?

Several key questions must be answered in order to improve early literacy in the United States:

- ▶ How do we teach all students so they achieve high literacy standards? What do we know about how to do it?
- ▶ All children can learn, but what are the necessary supports in and outside of school for students to reach proficiency?
- ▶ What are the essential curricular elements and how should we teach them?
- ▶ What are the fundamental opportunities to learn to read and write that schools must offer children by the end of third grade?
- ▶ What are the supports that children need in and outside of school? That teachers need? That schools need from families?
- ▶ What are the supports that a school needs from the district and from the state?
- ▶ What is the balance of accountability and autonomy that promotes and sustains effective schools?

The answers to these questions affect how we can move from high standards to high performance. This report provides important clues to the answers of these questions.

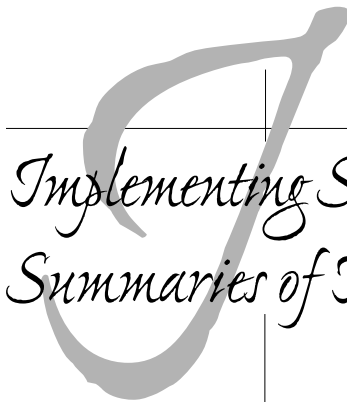
Educators and policymakers have increasingly come to understand that all education depends on achieving the national goal that all children read independently and well by the end of grade three. This report offers a synthesis of recent regional research and practice within a context of standards-based education.

This report

- ▶ Summarizes the findings of four separate studies that were undertaken in four states
- ▶ Describes and discusses the converging—and diverging—elements of effective regional literacy practices and their connection to national studies on effective practice
- ▶ Synthesizes the specific “lessons learned” regionally that are reflected in the national studies about what to teach and how to teach it
- ▶ Observes the roles and interplay of the state department of education (SEA), the local school district (LEA), and schools and their classrooms, especially with regard to literacy standards implementation
- ▶ Examines the importance for literacy of fostering coherence and learning community, a familiar theme in high-performing contexts
- ▶ Reflects on the various implications for ongoing practice and inquiry that these studies suggest

Describing progress in literacy practice at the school, district, and state levels in Vermont, Maine, Connecticut, and Massachusetts, this guide synthesizes research to provide a discussion and planning guide for school and district personnel.

Literacy demands today are far greater than those placed on the vast majority of literate individuals schooled a quarter-century ago.



Implementing Standards for Early Literacy: Summaries of Four State Studies

A collection of studies on literacy in the Northeast—from Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts and Vermont—asked what fosters high achievement and early literacy development and give some clues to what works:

- ▶ A broad array of interventions
- ▶ Personalized approaches to connecting an individual student's learning with his or her needs and experiences
- ▶ Intensive and coherent attention to whole school efforts to raise achievement.

Quoting the National Research Council's 1998 report, Maine's report states, "The demands are far greater than those placed on the vast majority of literate individuals schooled a quarter-century ago," (Center for Inquiry, 2000, p. 7). Schools have to organize instructional resources to support students' families and professional development for faculty and staff. Although good schools may be primarily a collection of good classrooms (Allington and Cunningham, 1996), they are not only that. When schools are effective, their district and state policies and resources converge to support teaching practices and student achievement.

In 1999, The National Education Goals Panel, an independent federal agency, asked Joan Boykoff Baron to study Connecticut's high and improving performance in reading. The NEGP reports "on promising or effective actions being taken at the national, state and local levels to achieve the National Education Goals." Baron identified three state policies that helped educators in the communities with the most improvement on the state test, and she described the local district policies and classroom teaching practices of the most improved districts. Data from the Connecticut Mastery Test reading tests in grades 4, 6, and 8 served as the measures of school improvement. The author interviewed the ten districts that made a gain of at least ten index points in two or more grade levels and enrolled a cohort of 100 or more students per grade.

Connecticut's percentage of fourth-grade students at or above "Proficient" on the 1998 NAEP is significantly higher than any of the other states participating in the assessment (Baron, p. 7). Researchers have long demonstrated the strong statistical relationship of two variables—family income and parents' education levels—to student achievement. Connecticut's improvement in reading, however, cannot be explained by the high income and education levels of its parents (Baron, pp. 10–11). Rather, Baron found that educational policies and practices, including state and district practices, are very likely to have contributed to the improved reading scores.

Large gaps exist in the Connecticut Mastery Test scores by "educational reference groups"—in reading, 88.7 for the most affluent districts compared with 38.9 for the urban poor districts (Baron, Figure 5, p. 17). The gaps also exist by racial/ethnic group (Figure 7, p. 19). Nevertheless, the index score gain for black and Hispanic students was greater than the gain for white students (p. 20). The study states that all socioeconomic groups in Connecticut have made progress in reading as measured by both the NAEP and the state tests, while similar progress has not occurred nationally on the NAEP (p. 21).

The study identified three particular state policies that schools and districts reported help them improve:

- ▶ Detailed data on student performance
- ▶ Additional resources to the neediest districts
- ▶ An infrastructure to encourage quality teaching

The state provides detailed data on student performance to districts, schools, parents, and newspapers. Principals and teachers use this information to monitor performance and to improve instruction. Connecticut also reports data that has been disaggregated by educational reference group (ERG) and by statewide averages. Seven socioeconomic indicators determine the nine ERGs across the state. The state provides additional resources to the neediest districts—those defined as the poorest and lowest achieving. The state provides an infrastructure to encourage quality teaching including high salaries, continued professional development, and support and assessment of beginning teachers.

Local district policies and practices that support high and improving reading achievement are:

- ▶ Data analysis of the Connecticut Mastery Tests
- ▶ Linking school improvement plans with teacher evaluations and student reading achievement
- ▶ Providing extra time for reading
- ▶ Making available professional development opportunities for administrators and teachers to learn the skills they need to improve students’ reading

Classroom teaching practices in the most improved districts are

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- ▶ Instruction in phonemic awareness
- ▶ The use of different kinds of reading material
- ▶ A balance of word analysis and comprehension skills
- ▶ The reinforcement of reading and writing (and spelling)
- ▶ Continual assessment
- ▶ The early identification of students with delayed reading skills
- ▶ The provision of intensive interventions for these children by the end of first grade

Like Connecticut, Maine's fourth graders achieve at or near the top in reading and writing portions of the NAEP. Yet Maine Educational Assessment (MEA) data in fourth grade reading show considerable variation in student achievement both between schools and within individual schools. In 1998 the commissioner of education charged a committee to investigate current literacy practice in Maine and to focus on those schools whose MEA scores in reading indicated successful student performance. The committee surveyed schools throughout the state that performed "average" and "above average" on statewide literacy assessment and hosted a conference to which 11 high-performing schools were invited to explain their school histories and practices in literacy. The resulting study was undertaken and published by the department of education's Center for Inquiry on Literacy. It is also available at the Center's website, <http://janus.state.me.us/education/cil/litrpt/Literacy%20Report.htm>

The study systematically identifies six common characteristics that are evident in schools with successful early literacy programs:

- ▶ Professional development is shared, ongoing, and supported in a number of ways.
- ▶ Student performance data are used to improve student achievement.
- ▶ School staff work together to find solutions to instructional issues.
- ▶ Effective leadership is present, though it can come from people in different roles.
- ▶ Parents and community are engaged in multiple ways.
- ▶ Various resources are used to respond to students' needs.

The study concludes by highlighting major challenges and opportunities for literacy educators:

- ▶ Ongoing professional development is critical.
- ▶ Teachers must be given opportunities to learn from each other.
- ▶ Schools must be organized around literacy for all.
- ▶ Assessing children’s work to inform instruction is a powerful tool for improvement.
- ▶ Literacy starts before school and continues for life.

It also offers a format for discussion for all stakeholders—high school students, teachers, university educators, and policymakers—for a richer dialogue. The researchers emphasize that Maine will realize gains in student achievement through building the capacity of teachers to understand their students’ needs and providing supports for teachers’ efforts to meet those needs.

At the request of the commissioner of education of the Massachusetts Department of Education, the Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University (LAB) designed a two-phase study to examine literacy practices in the Bay State. In partnership with RMC Research Corporation, the LAB looked into why a select group of high poverty, urban elementary schools obtained higher assessment results than other similar schools in their districts on state administered standardized reading tests.

Phase I of the study, *Indicators of Capacity for School Reform Project Massachusetts Literacy Study*, selected twelve Massachusetts elementary schools that scored significantly higher than other schools in their districts on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills in third grade reading during the 1996–97 school year. The 1998 study provides information on the school level gathered through an extensive survey of literacy instruction, professional development, and program models. Additional information was gathered in meetings of school personnel, parents, district and state education department representatives, and local school board members. Based on this information, the study offers nine themes that support literacy instruction in these twelve schools. Phase II of the study identified four low-performing schools for comparison. At the time of the study, statewide curriculum frameworks and assessments were under development.

The study identified nine effective literacy practices in Massachusetts elementary schools:

- ▶ The schools are student-centered organizations with clear academic expectations for students.
- ▶ Professional development supports real change in instruction and continuous deepening of teacher knowledge.
- ▶ School staff view parents as literacy partners and have defined important roles for them to play.
- ▶ School staff have created effective ways to work together and support each other; principals demonstrate their appreciation for the experience and dedication of staff and support them in many ways.
- ▶ Literacy is taught through a range of techniques that combine literature-based and phonics approaches and that provide students with continual opportunities for applying literacy skills.
- ▶ Reading instruction occurs in small groups so that teachers can focus on students' individual needs.
- ▶ The school emphasizes reading and literacy through literacy instruction and extending reading and writing activities that increase exposure to literacy.
- ▶ School staff review student work, assessments, and other data to inform and improve instruction.
- ▶ Test preparation, practice testing, and test taking skills are taken seriously at these schools.

The Vermont study, *Elementary Schools Where Children Succeed in Reading*, selected for case studies six schools whose students performed well on statewide literacy tests. Using demographic and socioeconomic data, the authors, researchers at the University of Vermont, first divided the state's schools into three distinct clusters—"country schools," "main street schools," and "uptown schools." The authors clustered the schools by indicators that included school size, type of community, and resources available. The study examines two schools from each cluster in which at least 80% of the students performed at or above the Vermont standard in reading. The Vermont Developmental Reading Assessment had been administered in 2nd grade and the New Standards Reference Exam Reading Subtests had been administered in 4th grade during the spring of 1998. (Lipson, Mikkelsen, Mosenthal, Russ, & Sortino, 2001)

By the study's criteria, approximately 6% of country schools were high performing, as were 8% of main street schools, and 14% of uptown schools. Uptown schools are characterized by their relatively larger size, greater affluence, better educated adult population, higher teacher salaries, and larger class size than country or main street schools. Uptown schools have the lowest percentage of special needs students and the highest percentage of limited English proficient students.

The study found that across the six successful schools, certain characteristics of reading instruction are associated with high performance:

- ▶ Opportunities and time for students to read and discuss books in school
- ▶ Teachers with a high level of expertise
- ▶ A long-term commitment (8–10 years) to improving instruction in reading and writing
- ▶ Strong stable leadership
- ▶ Extensive professional development
- ▶ A school community defined by communication and sharing

The study found a variety of approaches to instruction. Both successful country schools implemented Reading Recovery and guided reading strategies. On the other hand, one of the uptown schools adopted a basal reading program while the other employed an individualized approach. The main street schools used more eclectic approaches and had well-trained instructional assistants.

The Vermont case studies provide a close look at individual contexts for successful performance in reading: “What is needed are clear descriptions of successful schools” (Mosenthal and Lipson, 1999, p. 1). The authors find a great diversity of practices in successful schools and find “high-performing schools manifest a significant degree of autonomy for teachers within schools to make decisions about how to shape their literacy programs” (p. 5).

It is the responsibility of teachers to work together and school or district leadership complements teachers’ autonomy. District level administrative support was not a factor across sites, but “external influences promoting development and improvement” were a significant common factor across successful schools (Table 3).

Using the same selection methodology, the researchers identified one school from each cluster that performed poorly on the assessments and found that those schools were much less stable and coherent in key areas of their programs than were successful schools.

The authors of the study challenge assumptions about what successful schools should look alike:

[T]he conditions and practices of successful schools are not uniform; they develop over time in ways particular to their community environment, and are the direct result of a balance of teachers’ autonomy and collaboration within a framework of school and district support. (Lipson, et al., 2001, p. 1)

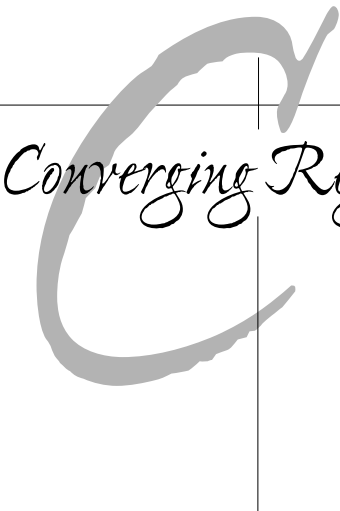
The practice: Students can attain high levels of literacy when the school staff actively and frequently uses student data to inform and improve instruction.

At Smith School

- ▶ Use of student data makes instruction increasingly based on student needs.
- ▶ Ongoing development of curriculum aligns with the state's framework and aligns itself with state assessments.
- ▶ Students use rubrics to develop their writing abilities.
- ▶ Teachers use a child's current instructional level in reading to guide instruction and to provide reading materials.

Smith School's ongoing development of curriculum is derived from the state's framework and aligns itself with state assessments. For writing, both teachers and their young students have learned to use rubrics. For reading everyone uses running records for reading instruction and students are given the Developmental Reading Assessment. Teachers pace difficulty and challenge using the child's current instructional level. A student returns to his/her third teacher for grade four and an important year for statewide testing. Through looping, no time is lost identifying skill sets that need bolstering.

Traditional comprehension activities have expanded to include higher order thinking, more diverse reading materials, and greater consideration of the social dimensions of learning.



Converging Regional Early Literacy Practices

The Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University (LAB) drew from the four studies summarized to map the lessons learned about high-performing schools in our region. Based upon these state findings, the LAB mapped nine similar and overlapping practices that seemed central to developing early literacy.

Students can attain high levels of literacy when

- ▶ Teachers believe that all students can succeed and instruction is guided by student needs for literacy instruction.
- ▶ Learning environments are varied, rich, and balanced.
- ▶ Time is dedicated to instruction, practice, application, and enjoyment of reading and writing.
- ▶ Teachers are well qualified to teach, especially through excellent pre-service preparation and through ongoing and substantive professional development.
- ▶ School staff and parents are partners.
- ▶ School staff actively and frequently use student data to inform and improve instruction.
- ▶ There is quality leadership that champions literacy.
- ▶ School staff work together toward a shared vision and have genuine respect for each other.
- ▶ Attention is given to tests and test taking.

These and similar principles are found in other research studies, including Allington (1996), Taylor, et al. (1999), and Snow & Burns (1998). These research-based principles and a research summary for each one have been posted at <http://knowledgeloom.org/elne/index.shtml>. Also included at this site are descriptive “success stories” of several of the schools discussed in the four reports.

The four reports provide evidence supporting similar kinds of instructional practices, school-wide organization, and district or state practices and policies that support literacy. The Vermont analysis is a refinement of earlier studies that focused on creating statewide standards for reading performance and looks more closely at classroom and school-level practice. The Connecticut study adds a comprehensive picture of how district and state policies work together to support school practices.

The studies by Massachusetts, Vermont, Connecticut, and Maine take different approaches to standards and assessments, reflecting to varying degrees the different assumptions that underlie the purpose of schooling and notions of good practice. These assumptions lead to patterns of decentralization in Vermont, for example, versus more centralized forms of teacher preparation and curriculum assessment in Connecticut. The emphasis in the United States and in the Northeast, in general, is on highly individualized student goals and teacher practice situated in democratically organized schools that are governed locally. This belief contrasts with those held in some other countries that schools should contribute to overall social cohesion and that national standards, curriculum, and assessments should organize teacher preparation and practice.

Lessons Learned: What should we teach and how should we teach it?

Although the states demonstrate varying degrees of centralization, there seems to be less divergence in their assumptions about how the teaching of reading and writing can best occur. State by state, they honor certain “lessons learned”:

- ▶ There is no single “best method” for teaching reading.
- ▶ Phonemic awareness plays an essential role in reading acquisition.
- ▶ Very early screening of abilities in phonemic awareness and diagnosis of gaps in phonemic development play an important role in teaching beginning reading.
- ▶ Small and flexible grouping enables teachers to coach beginning readers “opportunistically.”
- ▶ Decoding is regarded as the use of a repertoire of strategies rather than as a set of skills.
- ▶ Early intervention for struggling readers tends to occur before the end of grade one and continues through subsequent years if necessary.
- ▶ Traditional comprehension activities have expanded to include higher order thinking, more diverse reading materials, and greater consideration of the social dimensions of learning.
- ▶ More writing activity accompanies reading, and reading is taught to promote writing ability.
- ▶ Reading progress is guided and supported by classroom-based and curriculum-based assessments, and tools previously regarded as exclusive to a reading specialist are increasingly a part of the repertoires of all teachers.

These regional practices reflect thoughtful use of both their own informed practice and their knowledge of the national research.

No Magic Bullet

Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children (Snow & Burns, 1998), The National Research Council's commissioned study by a group of reading specialists, does not specifically address how reading skills should be effectively taught and what instructional methods are most beneficial. Instead, it proposes that a balanced approach to literacy is effective, and that such an approach includes explicit, systemic instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics, early and continued exposure to quality literature, and many opportunities to read and write. Similarly, a study by the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA) concludes that "there is no single quick answer to the question of how best to reshape a school's reading program and the repertoire of instructional practices teachers employ in the quest of helping all children read well by the time they leave the primary grades" (p. 50). Children need the sheer opportunity to read and write a great deal in order to become readers and writers, a daily practice that can be missing in remedial programs.

Phonemic Awareness and Other Skills

In effective schools, teachers teach decoding skills and phonics skills, but the goal of teaching these skills is always to help children develop strong independent decoding skills. There is no evidence of one best way to teach these skills. The best teachers teach phonics in "planful, direct and opportunistic ways" (Allington, 1997). In the CIERA study, Taylor and colleagues (1999) found that a majority of teachers in grades 1 and 2 across all schools teach phonics explicitly.

Coaching and a Variety of Strategies

“What distinguished the most accomplished teachers and the majority of teachers in the most effective schools from their peers was their use of coaching to help students learn how to apply word recognition strategies to real reading” (Taylor et al., 1999, 45–6). Coaching involves prompting children to use a variety of strategies as they are engaged in reading text.

Typical coaching prompts include phrases like these:

- ▶ What do you do when you come to a word you do not know?
- ▶ Does that make sense? (e.g., *tease* for *teach*)
- ▶ What do the letters *ea* say?
- ▶ How do you know it cannot be *dripped*? (for *dressed*)
- ▶ Do you see a chunk you recognize (in *nothing*)?
- ▶ Let’s sound it out and think of what would make sense.
- ▶ Let’s reread like good readers do.

(Taylor et al., 1999, 20)

Good readers use multiple strategies and make use of multiple language conventions (sounds, grammar, setting), knowledge about decoding, linguistic conventions and their applications (Taffy Raphael at <http://www.readingonline.org/critical/houston/mainsp.htm>). Reading strategies work together. Because reading is complex, and each child and teacher different, there is no one best way to teach reading and writing (Allington & Cunningham, p. 55). Some children need more support than others, and so teachers need to monitor student learning.

Literacy as a Mosaic of Thought

Competent reading is interacting with a variety of texts, using prior knowledge, and using the context and multiple strategies to make meaning. Classroom literacy environments must be print rich, with multiple opportunities to engage children in reading and writing. Teachers Keene and Zimmermann (1997) explore teaching reading comprehension in their book, *Mosaic of Thought*.

Unfortunately, in too many classrooms, it is assumed there are only two kinds of reading problems: failure to decode words and failure to understand word meanings. If we can understand the more subtle features of the reading obstacles themselves, the solutions we teach will be more effective and tailored. (p. 204)

The authors create a “cueing system,” to help students solve reading problems and help teachers teach students how to become independent readers. Good readers use multiple systems or strategies: grapho-phonetic, lexical or orthographic, syntactic, semantic, schematic, and pragmatic. Many theorists believe these cueing systems operate simultaneously in good readers; Keene and Zimmerman believe they must be modeled and taught to emerging readers.

Comprehension and Higher Order Thinking

Fielding and Pearson (1994, reported in Allington, 1996, p. 23) summarize four components for successful programs of comprehension instruction:

- ▶ Large amounts of time for actual text reading
- ▶ Teacher-directed instruction in comprehension strategies
- ▶ Opportunities for peer and collaborative learning
- ▶ Occasions for students to talk together to a teacher and to one another about their responses to reading

In the later CIERA study of “effective schools” that “beat the odds,” Taylor, Pearson, Clark and Walpole found that across all schools, comprehension instruction was minimal in grades 1–3. Researchers observed 68 teachers (grades 1–3) using a particular comprehension technique. Only five teachers were frequently observed providing instruction (not including worksheet completion) about a comprehension skill or strategy (p. 42). Other observations were as follows:

Comprehension Technique	Frequently observed	Occasionally observed
Doing a picture walk	5	9
Asking for a prediction	6	20
Asking text-based questions	29	22
Asking aesthetic response questions	11	16
Having children write in response to reading	27	26
Doing a story map	2	20
Having children retell a story	5	22

Multiple Teaching Strategies

Allington and Cunningham indicate that to develop concepts about print stories and literacy, children need to be immersed in reading and writing activities using balanced and varied materials. This requirement calls for multiple teaching strategies and print-rich classrooms. Story circles, big books, writing tables, and drawing and labeling activities characterize print-rich early literacy environments. A balanced literacy program promotes multiple kinds of reading and writing, including various forms of reading aloud, shared reading, guided reading and independent reading, shared writing, interactive writing, guided writing or writing

workshop, and independent writing. For a comprehensive resource on these and other activities, see the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English and Communication: http://www.indiana.edu/~eric_rec/comatt/litedres.html #EVAL.

Frequent Use of Curriculum-Based Assessments

In the CIERA study, systematic assessment correlated with student growth in reading fluency and with retelling performance. The authors note these assessments were curriculum-based, classroom assessments intended to provide information for monitoring student progress and to shape individual and classroom instructional decisions. "Instead of external accountability, these classroom level data provided a form of internal accountability to one's colleagues" (Taylor, et al., p. 26).

Flexible Grouping

In the CIERA study of effective schools, the primary strategy for delivering instruction was use of small groups based on students' abilities. Both schoolwide common assessment and classroom assessments supported the effective practice of small group instruction in which students move in and out of various groups. This kind of assessment prevented ability grouping for reading instruction from becoming rigid and inflexible. It also strengthened a collaborative model of teaching and supported the flexible deployment of teaching personnel.

The practice: Students can attain high levels of literacy when teachers are well qualified to teach, especially through excellent pre-service preparation and through ongoing and substantive professional development in literacy.

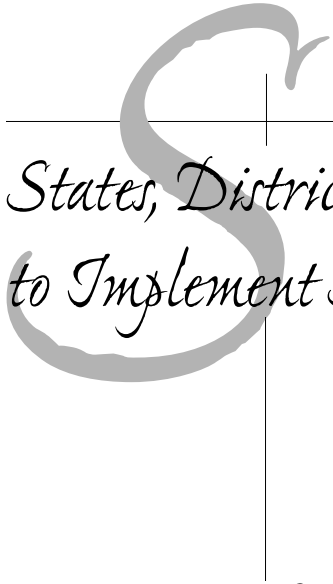
At Mary Lyon School

- ▶ All of the teachers hold Master's degrees, and all of the classroom teachers are dually certified in both regular and special education.
- ▶ A professional development school is designated. (Wheelock College and Boston College send graduate students to learn how to work on a multidisciplinary team.)
- ▶ Teachers work together in cross-grade level teams and in study groups.

"We look at teacher assignments and student work together. We are part of the 21st century Annenberg Challenge cohort, and across the cohort we look at the assignments teachers give alongside student work," explains Principal Mary Nash.

"The school utilizes city and state frameworks as well as national standards to develop practices that assist teachers in designing lesson plans. We have study groups, too. We find common questions and problems that the whole faculty works on together."

Educators and policymakers have increasingly come to understand that all education depends on achieving the national goal that all children read independently and well by the end of grade three.



States, Districts, and Schools Working Together to Implement Standards

Setting Standards

The Connecticut Board of Education, in its position statement on measuring success, states:

The most critical set of responsibilities for a local board of education is to articulate clearly what success means in its district; establish standards of performance; measure performance against those standards; regularly make this information available to the public; and ensure that this information is used to make good decisions that support student success.

(See Appendix: Position Statement on Measuring Success.)

Defining standards, measuring success and reporting the results are important steps in the process of improving education. However, the most important step is using this information to make good decisions about adjusting curriculum, improving teaching, designing new programs, and providing more specific and more effective instruction for each student (2000, para. 3).

Supporting Standards through Alignment

The term alignment is used to indicate that program elements—the standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessments—match and support each other. If teachers' curriculum and instructional methods support the standards, they will, in turn, influence students' performance on the assessments. In an aligned system, if the assessments are valid measures of the standards, they will accurately reflect students' progress toward meeting the standards. The need for alignment extends to other aspects of the school, such as instructional materials, school climate, professional development, and the way the school day is structured.

The Vermont Developmental Reading Assessment can serve as a classroom assessment tool to inform teachers of a student's instructional level and for accountability. One of the primary reasons for selecting and developing this performance assessment for second grade reading and comprehension was that "it assesses reading more authentically than most tests. The textual materials of the VT-DRA are like those used to teach reading in most primary classrooms" (Lipson, Mosenthal, & Mekkelsen, 1999, p. 2). Vermont and the numerous other states using the DRA in this way attain a precise alignment of standards, assessment, and classroom instruction.

To further assist schools, Vermont's Department of Education produces an action-planning guide. It is designed to help schools improve their capacity to examine data on student achievement from multiple sources, including performance and test results. See <http://www.state.vt.us/educ/actplan/apcover.htm>.

Effective schools establish measurable reading and writing goals and benchmarks by grade level, which reflect the standards of the state language arts curriculum and framework. Providing the supports for students to reach these standards is essential. Clear expectations (standards) for each grade level include a sample reading passage (most likely taken from the local reading program materials), writing exemplars, and writing rubrics. Connecting

assessments to everyday reading and writing—not just end-of-year tests—develops clarity about the kind of work expected of students who are striving to meet the highest standards. The Massachusetts Standards for Early Literacy illustrate these principles (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/frameworks/archive/eng97/englishEL.html>).

When checking for alignment of a school's assessment program, MacMullen and Warner (forthcoming) suggest asking the following questions:

- ▶ Do the skills and content called for by the school's curriculum at each grade level in each subject match the skills and content being assessed by the school's testing program?
- ▶ Do teachers' classroom instructional methods help students learn the appropriate skills and content?
- ▶ Do the tests and other assessments you are using actually measure your standards?
- ▶ Do the standards that teachers use for grading students reflect those on which assessments are based?

Using and Understanding Test Results

The same year that high-performing schools were identified for the Massachusetts report that is based on their ITBS scores, Massachusetts began implementing the first round of standardized tests based on the Massachusetts curriculum frameworks and learning goals. These assessments are standards-based, and aligned to new performance goals for Massachusetts school reform. The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) began testing 4th graders in English language arts (ELA) in 1997. Three years of MCAS data are now available (although FY 2000 data have just become available to the public as of this writing) to offer additional information on those schools that are performing better than the state's, or their district's, average.

For further ways to evaluate alignment between standards and tests, see Education Week's "Primer on Alignment," at <http://www.edweek.org/sreports/qc01/articles/qc01story.cfm?slug=17achieve-s1.h20>. (This document is provided in an appendix.)

When we look at the twelve schools on the MCAS, all but one performed higher than their district (in the ELA scaled score), but only a few performed significantly higher (more than one scaled point) than their district and the state average in 1999 and 2000. The schools are having some of the same problems as many other schools in Massachusetts. Approximately 80% of students in Massachusetts performed at the "failing" or "needs improvement" levels on the 4th grade English Language Arts tests in 1999. Some of the same students who receive a rating of "proficient" on the ITBS in reading fell into "needs improvement" on the MCAS ELA. A factor contributing to the discrepancy is that the ITBS is not standards-based, which highlights one difficulty of public reporting of school performance during the transition from using norm-referenced tests to using standards-based performance measures.

The Vermont study used the New Standards Reference Exams (NRSE), administered in 4th grade as a second measure of high performance in literacy. The second measure helped protect against selecting schools with strong primary grade practices or programs that are not maintained after 2nd grade. Like the Vermont DRA, the NSRE is a standards-based performance assessment that can inform classroom instruction as well as assess student learning.

The Maine report promotes a collaborative approach to looking at data, and proposes a data-driven inquiry cycle for making decisions and taking action. The report invites public discussion of what schools should do—making public the setting of standards and tracking of student performance. The most effective schools discuss data, look at student work across the curriculum, and create assessments based on a common scoring guide. A number of schools use portfolio approaches to save student work and track progress over time.

More Authentic Assessment

Vermont has shifted statewide assessment toward more authentic procedures. Accountability portfolios usually contain items of student work mandated by the state, such as student samples of best work as well as samples of required work. The purpose of the portfolios is to evaluate the school. Vermont has found that establishing the portfolio evaluation had a substantial impact on instruction, and was an effective method for stimulating professional conversation about a school's goals and needed curriculum shifts (Koretz et al., 1994, in Allington, 1996, p. 139).

Looking at Data by Groups

A close look at achievement data can help a school understand which groups of students are making progress, and which are in most need of support:

- ▶ What range and differences in performance exist at the school? Average or mean standardized test scores mask differences in achievement.
- ▶ What is the trend of achievement for students in the bilingual program?
- ▶ What are the scores and the rate of improvement for students who have stayed at the school for several years (compared with those who are new)?
- ▶ What are the achievement trends for non-Spanish-speaking minority children at the school? Looking at both cross-sectional and longitudinal data could help the school make decisions about its programs and supports to children. A school may need technical support from the district and state to analyze data in these ways.

The Connecticut study looked at the achievement of white, black, and Hispanic students and found significant differences on the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT). But rather than reporting average scores and percentages of students at or above the goal level, Connecticut uses an index score that is less affected by extreme scores and more sensitive to progress for those students who move from below remedial standard to above it (Baron). Connecticut data show a strong relationship between socioeconomic status and scores on the CMT. Nevertheless, when Connecticut disaggregated data by educational reference group (by socioeconomic indicators), every group showed some progress.

Measuring Success and Reporting Results

The same test for literacy may be used throughout a school or district to enhance program coherence, and that assessment does not have to be a multiple choice test. Stakes need not be high. Instead, schools and districts may use multiple data sources for assessing early reading rather than using a single measure of success or failure.

Schools can make more responsible use of statewide test data when their states make test data available to them and to their districts in a timely fashion. Results that are six months to a year old no longer report accurate assessments and can be of little value in guiding instruction. Schools can make use of test data, especially to close achievement gaps, when states select a useful format that is both disaggregated and aggregated.

Connecticut disaggregates data by race and ethnicity, and by socio-economic factors. In Connecticut, districts use state tests to realign the district curriculum and instructional practices. Tests used the agreed-upon skills students need to know. The state provided districts with disaggregated test results, item analysis, and estimated national norms. The most improved districts in the state noted these specific state accountability measures in Connecticut:

- ▶ The use of Connecticut Mastery Test scores to inform curriculum and instructional practices
- ▶ The formal reporting of the CMT scores
- ▶ The explicitness and practicality of CMT-related materials, including sample objectives, instructional strategies, and exemplars provided by the state in conjunction with test scores

Furthermore, the state initiative to develop and report state and national education reference group data provides districts with a context for a more accurate comparison of their students' reading performance with that of other students from similar economic, racial/ethnic, and parental education backgrounds (Grissmer in Baron).

Attracting and Supporting Quality Teachers

Teacher salaries in Connecticut are the highest in the country (and possibly the world). Connecticut recruits and retains teachers with advanced degrees and experience. Connecticut's Beginning Educator Support and Training (BEST) Program promotes systematic training opportunities for beginning teachers, and offers important mentoring opportunities for veteran teachers. Both groups benefit by having an explicit understanding of the state standards and expectations (Grissmer in Baron). Darling-Hammond (1997) discovered that every additional dollar spent on more highly qualified teachers netted greater increases in student achievement than did other uses of school resources.

Attention to Low-Performing Schools

Although states vary in their ways of giving attention to low-performing schools, it is now the rare exception that does not. By law, Connecticut requires its commissioner of education to pay additional attention to the poorest and worst performing districts and to raise achievement with careful state-level accounting. The array and consistency of these resources available to districts in Connecticut has clearly contributed to increased achievement. Additional resources make the most difference for poor and minority students (Grissmer in Baron). In a more proactive manner, Connecticut also directs resources to its early childhood programs in its poor and low-performing districts.

The practice: Students can demonstrate high levels of literacy when attention is given to tests and test taking.

At Baxter School

- ▶ Five years ago the school had the highest per student expenditure and the lowest performance on tests.
- ▶ Everyone paid attention to overall alignment and to student assessment results.
- ▶ At least 80% of 2nd-graders now perform at the state reading standard.

Baxter School's success with student achievement in reading and writing has come recently. Former principal Janet Showers says that, although the school and its faculty had enjoyed an "image as an incredible school, its test scores were not good."

A new superintendent and school principal asked questions about the alignment of tests and curriculum and about how to help students achieve. According to Showers, this administrative-level attention to the "glaringly" weak reading scores signaled a shift in attention. When the district superintendent was asked why Baxter School was so successful in 1997-1998, he named the use of student assessment results as one of the main factors.

¹ "Baxter" is a pseudonym for this Vermont School.

*What teachers expect of students
has more effect on what they
achieve than any other factor.*



Fostering Coherence and Learning Community

Collective Vision and Ownership

In CIERA's study of reading achievement, *Beating the Odds in Teaching All Children to Read*, researchers found that across effective schools, principals and teachers considered reading instruction their job and they worked at it. "They set personal preferences aside in order to reach consensus on schoolwide monitoring systems, curriculum, and professional development, with the constant goal of improving an already effective reading program" (Taylor, et al., pp. 29–30).

Similarly, Baron found that what characterizes the majority of the districts in Connecticut with the greatest improvement in reading scores was the collective ownership of reading instruction as a district priority. Similarly, in the Vermont study,

schools described gradual shifts from a climate of individual classrooms to a situation where the whole school is moving in the direction of showing students what good work looks like. (Mosenthal & Lipson, 1999, p. 21)

When the CIERA researchers found that the most effective schools averaged 60 minutes a day of small, ability-grouped instruction, they found that the greater time for small group instruction was made possible by the collaborative models used in the schools. With these models, the classroom teacher, a resource teacher, an ESL teacher, and a special education teacher came together to simultaneously enable every child to have two blocks of small-group instruction (Taylor, et al.). Speech and language teachers, bilingual teachers, and teachers of English as a second language all support classroom teachers. Assessment at one grade level is a responsibility shared by all.

In fact, Allington recommends defining all staff roles in terms of supporting classroom instruction, and asking how each staff person improves the instruction for children. For example, locating resource materials is not as important a role for a school librarian as it is to teach research skills to children, to provide books that they can take home, and to make the library a welcome space to spend time with books.

Teachers as Learners

Teachers are the single most important investment in education (Darling-Hammond, 1997). The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), created in 1987 to strengthen teaching, identifies five recommendations for improving student learning:

- ▶ Teachers are committed to students and their learning.
- ▶ Teachers know the subjects they teach.
- ▶ Teachers are responsible for managing and mentoring student learning.
- ▶ Teachers think systematically about their practice and learn from experience.
- ▶ Teachers are members of learning communities.

That is, the NBPTS defines accomplished teachers as those who work collaboratively with other education professionals and parents.

In its study of professional development for teachers, the National Reading Panel Report (2000) found that teacher learning clearly results in student learning. In all but a few cases, the report found that intervention in professional development produced significantly higher student achievement. The NRP concludes that appropriate teacher education does produce higher achievement in students.

Support for teacher education must be continued over an extended period. Teachers can improve their teaching in both pre-service and in-service contexts. While the need for better education for teachers is clear, the NRP asks how student achievement should be tied to teacher performance.

For the effectiveness of teacher education, future studies need to look at teacher and student outcomes. How can teachers be optimally supported over the long term to ensure both sustained implementation of new methods and student achievement? In addition, the study calls for more research on the relationship between the development of standards and teacher education.

Benefits to Student Achievement

Research suggests a direct connection between the quality of professional community in a school and the level of achievement of students. Schools with high levels of professional community have stronger academic climates and more organized and coherent instructional programs; they are also more likely to teach students grade-level material (Smith, 1998). When students are given assignments that require higher order thinking skills, they are more likely to demonstrate better cognitive skills. Teachers must offer this kind of instruction, and furthermore, they must be allowed time for professional development and discussion of their work with others (Newmann, Lopez, and Bryk, 1998).

The practice: Students can attain high levels of literacy when teachers believe that all students can succeed and when instruction is guided by student needs for literacy instruction.

At Smith School

- ▶ 58% of students have non-English home languages.
- ▶ 100% of staff planning teams include a bilingual teacher.
- ▶ There was a 24% increase of students reaching the reading state goal in 5 years.
- ▶ There was a 45% increase of students reaching the writing state goal in 5 years.
- ▶ Bilingual students attend full-day kindergarten.
- ▶ Reading Recovery provides early intervention for struggling readers.
- ▶ SAIL/SOAR tutoring programs are used in 2nd grade.

Five years ago, under the leadership of its principal, staff members began to “enrich” instruction—personalizing instruction and engaging students through their interests. Additionally, the state mandated standards.

In August 2000 before the official start of the school year, while a group of staff members and the school principal are having an animated discussion about the key to their school’s strong progress in literacy, one staff member says that the key to their success has been their unified belief that all children can succeed. Bilingual students and teachers are always included in literacy efforts, especially in planning instruction.

Teacher expectations often derive from or are closely related to beliefs about intelligence. What teachers expect of different students affects what they teach and how they teach those students. Students in turn learn to read teachers' expectations. When students perceive that expectations are low, they develop defenses and survival strategies that can further reduce learning. Research demonstrates that high expectations are critical for the success of all students. What teachers expect of students has more effect on what they achieve than any other factor (Cushman, 1998). Students achieve more when teachers share the belief that students have the ability to become proficient in reading and writing.

Coaching and Networking

Coaching and networking for teachers offer new models of professional community that are linked to professional development. Coaches are often reading specialists who work on a school level to create coherence and build capacity of staff. Coaches usually model effective teaching. Coaching can create an environment of teamwork—of teachers helping teachers. In one effective school, teachers took two or three year-long courses on the philosophy of early reading intervention and on how to implement intervention strategies in the classroom. Every class participant also met with a peer coach for 45 minutes once every two weeks (Taylor, et al.).

New Strategies for Teacher Development

Connecticut has an intensive apprenticeship for new teachers that includes mentoring by veteran teachers, seminars, and a requirement that a teaching portfolio for a two-week instructional unit be scored statewide. To be effective, teachers need a broad knowledge base in literacy as well as an understanding of how to make effective instructional and pedagogical decisions.

The studies under discussion in this report support several alternatives to traditional in-service professional development, such as coaching, utilizing time before and after school, common planning time with colleagues, and intensive summer learning. Effective schools work collaboratively in literacy. Schools and districts talk of how teamwork and professional development will enable the whole school to reach its goals. Allington and Cunningham (1996) advocate teacher participation in a broad array of decisions at all levels, in data gathering on their teaching and on their students' learning, and in the framing of questions about their instruction.

Collaborative Models

Across the most effective schools in Maine, teachers look at their students' work collaboratively to see what needs to be done in order for all students to do grade-level work. Teachers together develop clear criteria for student work that meets standards, and identify school exemplars that meet literacy standards.

In Vermont, teachers identify, for example, anchor papers in writing for all grades. They look at student reading and writing samples to identify exemplars and refine rubrics for evaluating student work. One approach to setting literacy standards is to work backwards from the state assessments at given grades to establish school exemplars at each grade level or to use New Standards assessment criteria to do so.

Time and Context for Collaboration

School collaborations among colleagues may become long term. They may take the form of a literacy leadership team with a trained literacy coordinator and ongoing training and support in literacy for the majority of primary teachers. Alternatively, a school may employ an early intervention program such as Reading Recovery and also collect data that is shared and analyzed on a regular basis.

Schools need to find ways beyond common planning time to bring teachers together for purposeful discussion about raising achievement across the school. Clair, Adger, Short, and Millen (1998) researched the issues that arise in implementing standards in schools with large numbers of limited English-proficient students and the professional development strategies that helped teachers prepare for these challenges.

They found that teachers need

- ▶ Long term professional development to understand standards and their implications for teaching English language learners
 - ▶ Time to explore their own attitudes about language, culture and race
 - ▶ Time to connect standards with classroom instruction
- (1998, pp. 13–14, 17)

The also found that teaching with standards requires professional collegiality that enables teachers to talk to each other about what students should know and be able to do, and consequently what teachers should be doing to support students' learning. These issues are not different from the issues all schools face in raising standards for teacher performance so that more students are able to achieve high standards.

The Vermont study finds that

successful schools are ones with a continuity and coherence in their literacy program K–4 that has developed over time. The continuity and coherence was a result of [among other things] a vision and commitment over an 8–10 year period, with stable leadership a key component. A school's coherence was created either through common assessments, common methodological approaches, or a shared philosophical vision that emerged from the long-term effort to account for all children's learning.
(Mosenthal & Lipson, p. 1)

The studies also note the importance of effective literacy leadership by a principal, librarian, teacher, or district-level administrator.

An inclusive approach—not layers of added programs, but one common core where teachers employ common strategies and adapt them to teach the individual students in their classes—is most effective. The CIERA study found that the most effective schools delivered reading instruction through small, flexible ability groups, where student progress is monitored regularly, and where students have ample reading time to learn skills and strategies. The most effective teachers and schools worked collaboratively and reached out to parents.

In an effective school, an observer can identify commonalities across a school's activities. Differences among grades represent maturational differences rather than different teaching or learning philosophies. Special, bilingual, and regular education share a variety of instructional approaches that work and that teachers hold in common. For example, all teachers and students can benefit from learning strategies that are used to improve English literacy in second language learners. School staff share explicit strategies for working with tutors, parents, and mentors across school programs.

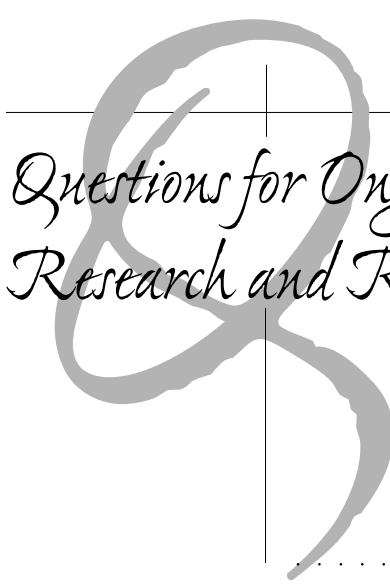
The practice: Students can attain high levels of literacy when school staff and parents are partners.

At Lawrence School

- ▶ 64% met state writing goals in 1998, compared to 19% in 1993.
- ▶ Writing scores were 6% higher than the average state scores.
- ▶ 59% met state reading goals in 1998, compared to 44% in 1993.
- ▶ Reading scores were 5% higher than the average state scores.
- ▶ Parents and staff develop the school improvement plan together.
- ▶ The principal writes a bi-weekly newsletter with literacy tips for parents.
- ▶ Kindergarten and 1st grade students take home books nightly to read with a parent.
- ▶ An active Home-School Association/PTA provides financial and volunteer support.
- ▶ A family outreach worker is employed to sustain family involvement.

Lawrence School is a learning community. One of the principal's roles as its literacy leader is to build serious partnerships with parents. Families assist in the development of the school improvement plan. Lawrence parents volunteer time to help increase the quality of instruction. An active Home-school Association/PTA provides volunteer and financial support. The principal writes a bi-weekly newsletter with tips for developing literacy skills and parents attend workshops in early literacy development. In the Bag-a-Book program, K-1 readers take home books to read with a parent. The school employs a family outreach worker and a school family literacy coordinator, and the district employs a parent resource coordinator.

*What are the affective aspects of learning that teachers must address in reading instruction?
We still ask the age-old question—how much of teaching is an art?*



Questions for Ongoing Inquiry through Research and Reflection

Can standards change the unequal distribution of opportunity to learn in U.S. schools? Can a more effective accountability system deliver a more equitable distribution of student achievement?

Poverty is still a key predictor of literacy performance. Can standards change that? Do students with limited English proficiency have distinct instructional needs in developing reading fluency and comprehension?

When are the policies that work in one context transferable to other different contexts?

Connecticut spends more per student than any other state in the nation and employs the highest paid teachers. In another state, higher levels of spending may not be as effective (Grissmer in Baron).

.....
Do we have a clear understanding of who is benefiting from reforms in literacy, new standards, assessments and instruction?

In 1993 Smith and O'Day warned, "Because of difficulties implementing reforms, it is possible that substantial new differentiation of curriculum will occur, with a continued skills approach for the majority of low-income children and an increasing emphasis on problem solving and complex content for the more advantaged students." This possibility raises particular problems of equity for urban schools whose lack of resources (such as discretionary money or well-trained teachers) and other problems drain attention and energy from the reforms (Furhman, ed., p. 259).

.....
What oral language development is prerequisite to reading?

How do the skills a reader draws upon when reading relate to one another?

What strategies do effective teachers employ to foster independent reading?

What kind of education helps teachers learn to teach children to read?

These four questions respond to the findings of the National Reading Panel Report (2000), which synthesized the research on literacy instruction concerning phonemic awareness, phonics instruction, oral reading, vocabulary instruction, and comprehension. Seeking answers to these questions would extend our knowledge both in areas where research has covered considerable ground and in those where the field continues to seek more knowledge.

.....
How can we clarify which particular factors contribute to high achievement in literacy?

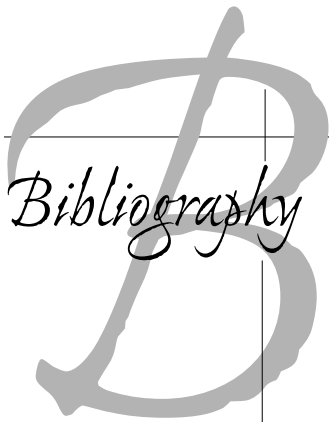
The National Reading Panel (2000) notes some of the technical challenges of figuring out which parts of the school program contribute the most. Mosenthal & Lipson note that much educational research “does not allow us to clarify the particular factor or factors that may be contributing in any causal way to the results.... Taken together, these studies lead to the daunting conclusion that everything matters” (p. 1).

.....
What are the limits of scientifically based reading instruction?

What is the convergence of research and practice? Do we already know enough about how the mind works to teach all students well? Is motivation lacking nationally to teach all students to high standards? What are the affective aspects of learning that teachers must address in reading instruction? We still ask the age-old question—how much of teaching is an art?

.....
How are “best practices” in literacy shaped by effective teachers?

Should we invest more in teacher expertise and not necessarily in curriculum frameworks or materials? Would it be beneficial for studies to focus on describing how effective teachers teach, or how standards and curriculum frameworks influence the way teachers teach?



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Appendix

Position Statement On Measuring Success

Adopted by the **Connecticut State Board of Education**
on September 13, 2000

The State Board of Education defines successful students as those who can read, write, compute, think creatively, solve problems and use technology. All students should also enjoy and perform in the arts and athletics and understand history, science and other cultures and languages. Each student must be responsible for his or her learning and behavior, work well with and be helpful to others, and contribute to the community. Every student must graduate from high school and be prepared to move on to productive work and further study and to function in the global economy. Ultimately, students must become active citizens and lifelong learners who lead healthy lives.

We can meet our responsibility of providing an educational experience that achieves these goals only if we regularly and consistently assess how well our students are doing and make the changes that are necessary in order to improve all facets of our schools.

Setting Standards

The most critical set of responsibilities for a local board of education is to articulate clearly what success means in its district; establish standards of performance; measure performance against those standards; regularly make this information available to the public; and ensure that this information is used to make good decisions which support student success. Defining standards for success and continually monitoring progress enable schools and school districts to make informed decisions about allocation of resources, curricular priorities and new initiatives that will directly enhance the success of all their students. Schools must constantly build on their accomplishments, while also addressing areas in need of improvement.

Measuring Success

Because success is multifaceted, it must be assessed using multiple measures: academic achievement over an extended period of time; student achievements that are other than academic; unique local indicators that represent community values; and the extent to which the performance gaps between various groups of students (by gender, race, economic status, etc.) are being reduced. The responsibility of measuring success is one shared by local boards of education and the State Board of Education.

There are several sources of data that a local board of education may use to measure the success of its students. The Connecticut State Department of Education (SDE) provides statewide, district and regional data on the critical aspects of education that contribute to and measure student performance. These include student test scores; dropout rates; graduate follow-up data; student participation in various courses and programs; expenditures; class size; and number of academic computers per student.

This information is published on the SDE web page and in publications such as the Strategic School Profiles (SSP), Condition of Education, Special Education in Connecticut, and CMT and CAPT Interpretive Guides. Each district should also use local data such as local assessments and teacher observations; measures of opportunities for students to learn with students from diverse backgrounds; community service work; participation in extracurricular activities; professional development acquired by teachers; parent involvement; and other indicators unique to the environment of the school and community.

Cautions

Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) and Connecticut Academic Performance Test (CAPT) results provide important information about student performance on a selected set of skills and competencies in mathematics, reading and writing in Grades 4, 6 and 8, and also science in Grade 10. However, these results do not provide a comprehensive picture of student accomplishments. There is a danger that overemphasizing state test scores to evaluate a student's, a school's or a district's performance can result in an inappropriate narrowing of the curriculum and inappropriate classroom instructional practices. Focused preparation for state tests should be a small fraction of a year-long comprehensive curriculum that balances the competencies assessed on the state tests with other critical skills and objectives. Teaching isolated skills for test preparation or using repetitive tasks that go far beyond reasonable practice do not represent good instruction. In addition, no one assessment—state or local—should be the sole basis for promotion, graduation or other important decisions in the education of a student.

Reporting Results

Each local board of education is required by law to annually hold a public discussion with the community on relevant student-related information from its Strategic School Profile. There should also be ongoing communication with the community on the successes and needs of its schools. This can include additional information about students, curriculum, staff, new initiatives and programs, and evaluations of programs' effectiveness. When and where appropriate, the use of technology (e.g., e-mail, school and district web pages, closed-circuit broadcasting) should be used to provide the community with greater access to critical information on and understanding of the district's performance. We encourage local boards of education to communicate frequently and openly with the communities they serve, using every effective means available.

Improving Instruction

Defining standards, measuring success and reporting the results are important steps in the process of improving education. However, the most important step is using this information to make good decisions about adjusting curriculums, improving teaching, designing new programs and providing more specific and more effective instruction for each student.

SBE-Measuring Success 9/13/00

Appendix

A Primer on Alignment

Alignment between academic standards and student tests is critical to the success of standards-based school improvement. Traditionally, “alignment” meant going through a checklist to see if a test question measured a standard.

The nonprofit group Achieve, which works to promote state standards and assessment initiatives, based its alignment work on the idea that the traditional method was not good enough to tell students, parents, teachers, and the public whether test results reflect the attainment of standards.

What is good enough? While no mathematical formula exists for matching a test to a state’s standards, Achieve has devised some guiding criteria:

Content. Does the test evaluate what the state standards indicate all students should know and be able to do at a particular grade level? If not, is it because the standards are too vague to make a determination, or is it because test items measure only part of what the standards ask for?

Performance. Are students asked to demonstrate the skills the standards expect? For example, if the standards say that students will analyze the characteristics of various literary forms, does the test ask them to evaluate different literary forms, or does it merely ask students to identify one type of literature?

Level of difficulty. Are test items easy, medium, or hard, and is the range of difficulty appropriately distributed across all the items? What makes them difficult—the content they are assessing, or another factor, such as the language of the question? Overall, is each assessment appropriately rigorous?

Balance and range. Does the test as a whole gauge the depth and breadth of the standards and objectives outlined in state standards documents? If not, are the standards that are assessed the most important ones for the grade level? Overall, do the assessments for elementary, middle, and high school focus on the most important content that all students should know?

Once the tests are analyzed against those criteria, Achieve uses the data to help states answer fundamental questions about their standards and assessments.

First, does each test measure only the content and skills reflected in the standards? In other words, can everything on the test be found in the state standards? That question gets at the heart of the fairness issue: If schools and students have used the standards to guide curriculum and instruction, they should not be surprised by material on the tests.

Other important issues center on the emphasis the tests place on certain content and skills. Does each assessment effectively sample the important knowledge and skills in the standards? To what extent does each assessment measure the core content and skills for that grade, and, taken together, do the tests for elementary, middle, and high school stress the most important concepts?

Finally, do the assessments for elementary, middle, and high school grow in sophistication and rigor from grade level to grade level?

Answers to those questions are intended to help states understand if their assessments are truly aligned to their standards, and whether the standards and tests taken together are a solid foundation for school improvement.

—The Editors

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Page 36

[http://www.edweek.org/sreports/qc01/articles/
qc01story.cfm?slug=17achieve-s1.h20](http://www.edweek.org/sreports/qc01/articles/qc01story.cfm?slug=17achieve-s1.h20)

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