

Reading and Literacy

EDUCATION POLICY BRIEFING SHEET

Literacy for Learning

The United States is facing a growing literacy crisis. The National Assessment of Educational Progress, which periodically assesses what America's students know in a variety of subject areas, shows that the nation's fourth and eighth graders have made only modest gains over the past 15 years in their ability to understand what they read, especially when confronted with texts in science, history, and other school subjects. Although closing achievement gaps was an explicit goal of the No Child Left Behind Act, poor and minority children remain far behind their more advantaged counterparts. Perhaps most alarming is the nation's persistent failure to help the rapidly growing number of English language learners gain the capacity to read well enough to learn complex subject matter. How can a nation that cannot find a way to teach all of its children to read and write well thrive economically or survive as a democracy?

The glimmer of good news is that U.S. schools have improved their capacity to teach children how to use letter and sound knowledge to decode words fluently. This can be attributed to insights gained from research, professional development for teachers, state and federal programs, and the press for accountability. But although reading words is a critical starting point on the road to literacy, it is not a destination.

America is on the brink of being able to defeat illiteracy; however, that is not the same as solving the crisis of literacy. Literacy is far more than just reading words. To be literate means to fully comprehend the meaning of the words and to be able to analyze, interpret, and critique the message. Literate readers are able to extract knowledge and concepts from a text and talk and write about what they have learned, providing explanations grounded in the text. Both reading and writing depend on students' developing their oral

language—the words they can use appropriately, the sentences they can construct, and their participation in the give and take of argumentation.

A large body of research in literacy development shows that, although explicit instruction in phonics and word identification is important, children also need to develop a rich vocabulary—which depends on opportunities to hear, read, and speak words, either at home or in school. Research confirms that effective literacy instruction involves discussion that engages students, asks them to reflect, gives them opportunities to express their ideas, and allows them to ask questions. Instruction in word recognition and comprehension should be woven together beginning in preschool, when children can respond orally to stories read to them.

Many American students—disproportionately poor or minority children, English language learners, and children with learning disabilities—never see teaching like this. We can do better. Providing access to stimulating, engaging literacy instruction for all our students from an early age is imperative for our nation's future. We need to experiment with effective ways to provide such programs. We highlight here two initiatives that should be part of such a national effort.

Recommendation: State and federal governments should increase investment in early education programs and make oral language development a primary focus of preschool.

Strong oral language skills provide children with the foundation for eventual success as readers. Young children need to hear and use words to connect with

others, to develop their understanding of the world, to increase their spoken vocabulary, and to establish a sense of themselves as intelligent language users. Teachers in early education settings should create as many opportunities as possible for children to have meaningful conversations with adults. The adults should use these conversations to model mature language usage and to give children chances to learn important concepts and the vocabulary that expresses them. The size of a child's vocabulary predicts his or her ability to recognize sounds within words as he or she learns to read, and for older children, the ability to comprehend textbook assignments. To be sure, efforts in preschool to teach children about letters and sounds help them learn to decode and recognize words. But explicit attention to oral language development is also critical to accelerating the process of learning to read.

States will spend approximately \$5.2 billion on pre-kindergarten this year, a figure that has been rising steadily. The federal government can help states ensure that the programs they offer focus on oral language development by creating curricula, training programs, and other resources. And, it can make a focus on oral language one of the criteria for making decisions about direct investments.

Recommendation: The United States should make it a national priority to provide English language learners with targeted, conceptually rich language instruction starting in preschool and continuing until students are fully proficient in English.

To be effective, reading instruction for English language learners must recognize the importance of both oral language competence and the acquisition of specialized academic language. More than one in five U.S. students speaks a language other than English in the home. About 3 million of those students, or 5 percent of all students in the U.S., speak English poorly.

Not surprisingly, these students score at the bottom in school performance, especially on tasks requiring reading in English. It is common sense that children will have difficulty reading a language they cannot speak or understand. So, it is essential that oral language development for English language learners begin in preschool and continue as long as necessary.

An emphasis on oral language accompanying the acquisition of written literacy will help non-native speakers develop the broad vocabulary and content knowledge required for learning from textbooks. Many students who learn English in school do not develop fluency with the special type of discourse used in academic texts and settings. So, as they progress through school and are asked to learn more and more sophisticated content, they fall further and further behind.

Where feasible, bilingual or dual language techniques should be used. Many research studies show that such methods significantly increase the capacity of English language learners to read in English. Whatever the setting, these students need systematic and deliberate instruction in which teachers focus the students' attention not just on the concepts, but on how features of the language relate to meaning, and how that affects interpretation. Mere exposure to academic text over time is not sufficient. Also needed are lessons that immerse students in rich conversations. There are several effective models for this kind of instruction. The federal government can make a valuable contribution in developing the language capacities of language minorities by investing in the development of curricula built around these methods and in providing professional development to teachers who will use them.

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