

Learning to Read and Reading to Learn: Meeting the International Challenge

David Loertscher

Two major reports have emerged recently that take a look at the literacy challenges facing children of the United States and really, any of the world's children who do not read well.

The first report, *Early Warning!: Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters*, by Kids Count (2010), and the second, *Early Reading Proficiency*, by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, draw pretty much the same conclusions that youngsters in the United States are not doing well.

Two tables created from NAEP scores in the *Early Warning* report deserve a few moments of time to study. Both look at the percentage of kids scoring below proficiency and below basic at the fourth grade level; the first looking at rural vs. urban kids and the second by racial group.

Surprise! By the end of third grade when learning to read turns to reading to learn, few are doing well. Stephen Krashen, the notable advocate for free voluntary reading and school libraries, commented in a widely circulated email that neither report mentions the availability of books and school libraries as any factor figuring in a solution. This neglect or ignorance flies in the face of much research but continues to mystify the library community. We are amused that in spite of the report's lack of recognition of the library, the *Early Warning!* Report puts a picture of a child selecting a book from library shelves on the cover!

Both reports expose the problem and call for making reading assessments available to teachers almost instantaneously so diagnostics and strategies can be designed. There is little benefit

in getting reading test results long after the school year is over. Little help. It is like watching a train wreck through the rear view mirror.

What can teacher-librarians do to move to the center of literacy? Our research says we make a difference, but obviously not enough for anyone but us to notice. Readers of this column are urged to consult the major article of reading that appeared in *Teacher Librarian* in October 2009 entitled *The Role of a School Library in a School's Reading Program*. There are a plethora of recommendations mentioned. In addition, the article provides a checklist for all of us to repeatedly review and plan for the next school year. Now, here is a further checklist to consider as we meet the literacy challenge.

1. Is there a Literacy Leadership Team at your school and are there teacher-librarians on that team? In a recent survey of graduate students in the teacher-librarian credential program at San Jose State University, few schools had any kind of literacy leadership initiative, whether they were elementary or secondary. Are we surprised that students do not do well if literacy is not a major school focus? To just dump responsibility for reading on classroom teachers and hold them accountable is no realistic or sustainable plan for improvement. The obvious fix is to lobby for a team and get a seat at the table! Then make the library/learning commons a major force in whatever strategies are adopted.

2. Access, access, access, access. Let us get this one right. Check out half the collection the first day of school and keep it rotating through classrooms and the home on a regular basis. We recently heard of a teacher-librarian who encouraged every kid to bring a rolling suitcase to school and borrow his and her own personal rotating bedroom collection! If the student does not have a private bedroom or a bookshelf, get them to make cardboard library box bookshelves. Get rid of much of the book storage space in the library so there is more space for learning commons activities. As more and more print turns to digital, we will not need the shelving space we needed in the past even if the size of the physical book collection is increasing.

3. Push reading access in every imaginable format. Start with a collection of free ebooks that download to every device kids and teens have access to: cell phones, iPads, MP3 players, Kindles, iPads and make these available in both print and audio editions. iPad advertises that they have available more free books than a person could read in a lifetime. However, we need a great collection that kids and teens WANT to read available alongside their tunes and their texting icons. Start budgeting to pay for digital downloads of books on kid's own devices. Have a group of Kindles and iPads with books preloaded for check out; but not books only. Help kids download their favorite magazines and news feeds. Have a digital geek squad concentrate on digital collections for digital devices: the DDS, not the DDC (digital device club not the Dewey Decimal Collection). Partner with the public library in the digital download revolution. If "I" am going

to read, I want it where I want it, on the device I want it, and at any time I want it. You expect me to read then supply what I need. Do not make excuses!

4. If you want kids to make progress in reading to learn, then emphasize and promote more informational reading. Why do we as a profession make such a case for fiction? Of course reading narrative text will make a difference but expository text is at the center of reading to learn. Link the kids to the best; celebrate nonfiction authors as you would fiction writers. Maximize the amount of great reading connected to the topics they are studying; the world of insects; outer space; volcanoes; rain forest creatures—and not just in book-length treatises—and, of course, in all formats. The new Common Core Standards are pushing more and more access and mastery of complex texts. A steady diet of quick pick fiction will not suffice.

5. Get serious about book clubs/magazine clubs/Kindle clubs, iPad clubs, and OPAC commentary clubs. Write an article for *Teacher Librarian* about the first time you have a hundred virtual book clubs in simultaneous operation using the OPAC, wikis, blogs, texting clubs, or any other social networking you can think of in addition to the standard face-to-face experience. The sooner OPACs go conversational, the better.

6. Take a refresher course or PD opportunity in how to teach reading. There are few people in the school that expose students to a large variety of material, as does the teacher-librarian. It is not enough to help kids locate information in the various databases, web sites, and printed resources. They must translate what they find into understanding, ideas in support of arguments, implications of spin on issues, conflicts in factual data, and the building of sound arguments to name just a few. Teacher-librarians are teachers of reading as is every other teacher in the school.

7. Have the reading specialists office in the library/learning commons. Together, you can do much that you cannot do separately. Explore the possibilities.

EARLY WARNING! Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters



A KIDS COUNT Special Report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation

Figure 1

Early Reading Proficiency

Lindsey Musey

A Compilation Series by
Beyond Text Source: Teaching Techniques for Librarians



Figure 2

8. If electronic reading programs are in place, make them work for individuals who do not do well answering questions or cheating. Have many different reading strategies available to every student rather than force a one-size-fits-all policy that may work only on one segment of the student population. If lexile level is important in the reading program, check out the differences in the new Common Core Standards. Defend every child's right to read anything they want to read. Lexile levels and filters on the Internet are the new battlegrounds of intellectual freedom.

9. Promote every opportunity to write and create content in every single Web 2.0 platform you can. Remember that reading and writing are best friends in the fight for increased literacy. Wikis, blogs, chats, texting, and in particular, collaborative writing tools provide a whole new environment for writing, thinking, comparing, editing, and sharing across the classroom and across the world.

10. Create a digital library of books, stories, manuscripts, and writing projects accessible via your school library web site/virtual learning commons. Even if there is a "book" on the subject, have

TABLE 1

Percent of 4th graders scoring below proficient and below basic on NAEP reading test, by geography and family income: 2009

GEOGRAPHIC AREA	BELOW PROFICIENT			BELOW BASIC		
	ALL STUDENTS	LOW-INCOME STUDENTS ¹	MODERATE AND HIGH-INCOME STUDENTS	ALL STUDENTS	LOW-INCOME STUDENTS ¹	MODERATE AND HIGH-INCOME STUDENTS
Total	67	83	55	33	49	20
City	71	85	55	39	54	22
Suburb	62	81	52	28	47	19
Town	71	83	59	35	48	22
Rural	67	81	58	31	45	21

¹ Geographic areas are based on U.S. Census data describing proximity to an urbanized area (a densely settled core with densely settled surrounding areas), using four categories (City, Suburb, Town, Rural).

² Family income is measured using students' eligibility for the National School Lunch Program, a federally assisted meal program, sometimes referred to as the free/reduced-price lunch program. Free or reduced-price lunches are offered to students with incomes below 185% of the poverty level.

SOURCE Annie E. Casey Foundation analysis of data from the NAEP Data Explorer, available at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/naepdata/>

TABLE 2

Percent of 4th graders scoring below proficient and below basic on NAEP reading test, by family income and race/ethnicity: 2009

RACE/ETHNICITY ¹	BELOW PROFICIENT			BELOW BASIC		
	ALL STUDENTS	LOW-INCOME STUDENTS ²	MODERATE AND HIGH-INCOME STUDENTS	ALL STUDENTS	LOW-INCOME STUDENTS ²	MODERATE AND HIGH-INCOME STUDENTS
Total	67	83	55	33	49	20
White	58	76	52	22	38	17
Black	84	89	74	52	58	38
Hispanic	83	87	72	51	56	36
Asian/Pacific Islander	51	70	43	20	35	14
American Indian	80	85	69	50	59	34

¹ Categories exclude Hispanic origin. Results are not shown for students whose race/ethnicity was unclassified.

² Family income is measured using students' eligibility for the National School Lunch Program, a federally assisted meal program, sometimes referred to as the free/reduced-price lunch program. Free or reduced-price lunches are offered to students with incomes below 185% of the poverty level.

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groups of students create their own. There never has been a better time to write, read, and share works based on collaborative intelligence as well as individual writing and reading expertise.

I have been dreaming about this What Works article during the night and came up with an additional two points—11 and 12 to add to our list:

11. Explore even more collaborative programs and sharing of resources with the public library than you currently have. Joint literacy initiatives, particularly during school vacation periods have documented research support for maintaining reading skill achieved during the school year.¹² Read and discuss Rosemary Chance's article in this issue,

Family Literacy Programs—Opportunities and Possibilities (p. 7), with the literacy leadership team and then ask the question, "What can we do to have more of an effect on family literacy?"

REFERENCES

Early Warning! Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters: A KIDS COUNT Special Report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010. Retrieved May 15, 2010 from <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/reports/readingmatters.aspx>.

Musen, L. (2010). Early Reading Proficiency: A Companion Series to *Beyond Test Scores: Leading Indicators for Education*. Retrieved May 15, 2010 from <http://www.annenberginstitute.org/Products/LeadingIndicatorsSeries.php>.