



# reTHINKING Literacy for the 21st Century Learner:

**Solving the Language / Reading / Literacy Problem in South Carolina**

***Report from the August 7, 2018 Symposium***



# Background

On August 7, 2018, 97 individuals representing policymakers, local school board members, district leaders, principals, teachers, literacy coaches, and teacher preparation programs from across South Carolina met in Columbia at the invitation of the Education Oversight Committee (EOC). The objective of the symposium was to address the following questions:

- What does the research show are effective policies and strategies to improve the teaching and learning of language, reading and literacy?
- What can we as policymakers, district leaders, principals, teachers, and teacher preparation programs do to improve language, reading and literacy in our state?



## National Experts

### **Dr. Lorin Anderson**

Dr. Lorin Anderson, Professor Emeritus at the University of South Carolina, reviewed the past 20 years of educational achievement in South Carolina. Using the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores as the most consistent measure over time, he examined the patterns of scores on a variety of tests (PACT, PASS, SC READY, English I End-of-Course, and AP). Generally, the patterns were quite consistent. For example, approximately 70% of eighth grade students met the standards, regardless of the specific test that was administered or the year the test was administered. Relatively large racial and social class differences in the percent of students meeting standards (about 30%) were also consistent across tests, grade levels, and academic programs (e.g., AP courses). These consistencies are particularly disheartening given the large investment of time and resources in the areas of language, reading, and literacy in South Carolina over the past twenty years. His recommendations included:

- keeping the same tests from year to year so that changes in achievement can more easily be monitored and properly interpreted;
- avoiding over-reaction to year-to-year changes in test scores (which are likely to be quite unreliable);
- realizing that although being able to read with comprehension by grade 3 is important, we must continue to emphasize language, reading, and literacy throughout the curriculum; and
- reviewing the state tests administered in elementary schools in terms of both the difficulty of the items and the level of the cut-scores to ensure that success on those tests predicts success on tests administered in later grades.



[Link to Dr. Anderson's presentation](#)

## **Dr. Timothy Shanahan**

Dr. Timothy Shanahan, Professor at the University of Illinois, Chicago, gave a presentation entitled “How to Improve Reading Achievement.” He began with the statement that what matters most in learning is the child’s experience, specifically, the amount of experience, content of experience, and quality of experience. The amount of experience includes the number of words spoken to children in their early years as well as the time that children spend actively engaged in reading, both in and out of school. The content of experience is what teachers teach children in reading programs. The focus should be on those factors that research studies have shown produce improved reading achievement, factors such as phonological awareness, phonics, oral reading fluency, vocabulary, reading comprehension, and writing. Finally, the quality of experience refers to how well teachers are teaching what they should be teaching. For example, phonics instruction needs to be systematic, and oral reading fluency is best taught through guided oral reading practice with repetition. His recommendations included:

- nurturing strong and coordinated instructional leadership for the teaching of language, reading, and literacy at the state, district, and school levels;
- providing high-quality teacher education and professional development which focus on the amount, content, and quality of experience;
- providing high-quality reading materials, materials that are interesting, motivating, and challenging; and
- maximizing social interactions when reading is taught (that is, teachers with students, and students with students).

[Link to Dr. Shanahan's presentation](#)



## **Dr. Stacey Leftwich**

Dr. Stacey Leftwich, Executive Director of the Office of Educator Support and Partnerships, at Rowan University (NJ) began with an important question, namely, “how do we pre-dispose teachers to think about the roles that equity, diversity, and justice have to do with teaching?” She introduced the concept of “culturally sustaining pedagogy” and contrasted two views of cultural differences, the deficit approach (which emphasizes insufficiencies to overcome to learn) and the appreciative approach (which focuses on using cultural differences as resources for learning). Teachers tend to bring their own cultural experiences and backgrounds to their classrooms, experiences and backgrounds that often influence how they believe literacy should be taught, how students should respond to literacy instruction, and, perhaps most importantly, whether they believe that certain groups of students can learn to read well. Her recommendations included:

- using non-traditional texts (e.g., blog posts, song lyrics) to teach reading and literacy;
- finding ways to connect the way we teach and the materials we use to support teaching to culturally diverse students;
- helping students make successful transitions from their cultural experiences and backgrounds to the demands placed on them by the dominant culture of schools and classrooms; and
- ensuring that the primary goal of teacher preparation programs is to equip all candidates with the knowledge and skills they need to teach all children.



[Link to Dr. Leftwich's presentation](#)



### Dr. Marilyn Jager Adams

Dr. Marilyn Jager Adams, currently a Visiting Scholar in the Cognitive, Linguistic and Psychological Sciences Department at Brown University, divided her presentation into three segments. In the first segment, she presented a brief review of the importance of firmly establishing reading foundations – letter knowledge, phonemic awareness, and phonics. She underscored the critical role of reading, working knowledge of spelling-sound correspondences. In the second segment, she turned attention to the time-honored and widespread practice of assigning below grade-level texts to below grade-level readers – a practice that has been met with concern that teachers may be assigning texts that are easier than need be. In the third section, she shared current research indicating that the factor most strongly influencing the difficulty of text is the predictability of its words, not word frequency. This research explains the absence of text-level effects on children's fluency. Her recommendations include:

- recognizing that although “the basics” are important, they are not enough: Many children with serviceable phonics skills still struggle in reading comprehension;
- using topical reading units, rather than grade-level texts, as a means of managing the easy-to-hard dimension while developing the language, knowledge and modes of thought of which good reading depends;
- when teaching topic reading units, begin with simple, top-level overviews of the topic, then move to subtopics and details to help students understand the knowledge and semantic networks inherent in the units; and
- de-emphasizing sheer repetition of words and emphasizing the enrichment and refinement of their meanings and usages.

[Link to Dr. Adam's presentation](#)

Following lunch on August 7, small group discussions occurred. Attendees were assigned to one of the following four groups:

1. State-level policymakers (members of the Education Oversight Committee and State Board of Education and members of the General Assembly and their staffs);
2. Educator preparation programs, both traditional and alternative, along with staff from the Office of Educator Services at the South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE) and staff from the South Carolina Commission on Higher Education;
3. District leadership (superintendents, deputy superintendents for instruction, local school board members, and staff from the Office of Standards and Learning at SCDE); and
4. School leadership (principals, literacy coaches, teachers, and staff from the Office of Early Learning and Literacy at SCDE).

The following three questions guided the small group discussions:

1. What have I learned today about education in our State?
2. What have I learned today about language/reading/literacy teaching and learning?
3. What do I believe to be the most important thing that we, as members of this stakeholder group, should do to improve language/reading/literacy learning in our State?

# Observations from the Symposium

Among all groups there were the following common observations:

- South Carolina's tendency to change state assessments from year to year has complicated the task of monitoring and properly interpreting academic gains in reading.
- Looking at the one consistent assessment we have, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), reading achievement in our state is at best stagnant despite implementation of initiatives and additional investments of resources.
- Eighth grade reading scores on NAEP are consistently higher than 4th grade across time. What can we learn from the teaching of reading and language arts in the middle schools and apply to the teaching of reading in elementary schools? What can we learn from the test items themselves to understand the discrepancy?
- Reading/literacy should be emphasized across grades and across all content areas.

How does South Carolina improve the reading and literacy skills of all students? The stakeholders identified three needs:

1. The need for a consistent and explicit state plan that has clear, consistent, common language that defines what we want reading/literacy instruction to include at various levels and across content areas: the amount, content and quality of instruction.
2. The need for high quality professional development grounded in best practice and available to all teachers.
3. The need to improve pedagogy in the teaching of reading and literacy across content areas.

*Below are summaries of the stakeholder group discussions:*

## Policymakers

Policymakers focused on the need to improve the teaching of reading with the equitable execution of a consistent and explicit state plan grounded in evidenced-based practice. The plan would:

- Include clear, consistent, common language for classroom teachers, school and district leaders, and educator preparation programs;
- Focus on the amount, content, and quality of instruction;
- Establish, especially in early grades, reading foundations including letter knowledge and phonemic awareness;
- Prioritize for high-needs schools, those with a high percentage of struggling readers, explicit interventions and supports;
- Identify strategies to connect the ways we teach, and the materials used to support teaching to culturally diverse students.
- Exclude certain practices like assigning below grade-level texts to below grade-level readers that negatively impact literacy; and

- Focus on the application of reading/literacy skills across subjects to ensure that literacy is not taught in isolation.



## District Leaders

District leaders also addressed the issue of having a consistent state model and common language that supports enhanced teaching and learning. District leaders overwhelmingly focused on the following strategies to improve the teaching and learning of reading, language and literacy:

- Establish importance of systemic, purposeful immersion in phonics in the early grades and writing throughout the curriculum.
- Integrate additional, collaborative planning time for teachers as well as individualized professional development that again addresses the amount, content, and quality of instruction.
- Focus on choosing and offering relevant texts for students.
- Move away from a deficit model in instruction, focusing on what children know instead of what they don't know. Meet them where they are.
- As a State, increase access to high quality, full-day 4K opportunities.

## School Leaders

School Leaders focused on improving the quality and equity of professional development for teachers and principals to ensure high quality literacy instruction. The school leaders identified several state needs including:

- Expand access to high quality, full-day 4K, especially for most at-risk students.
- Include phonemic awareness in primary and elementary school to promote fluency.
- Continue professional development grounded in

research and on knowledge of how readers read while incorporating teaching strategies to meet the individual needs of students.

- Integrate a statewide formative assessment system to be used in K-12, especially for struggling readers.
- Explicitly address the balance of the quantity (no time killers) and quality (phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary comprehension and writing) of literacy instruction for ALL students especially in closing the gap with low achieving students.
- Expose students to a variety of text to develop readers. Students still need to be challenged and given access to complex text but not at the expense of their frustration levels.

## Educator Preparation Program Leaders

The stakeholder group of Educator Preparation Programs, both traditional and alternative, discussed specific strategies to improve pedagogy, especially pedagogy for struggling readers who represent diverse racial and social backgrounds. The stakeholders discussed the following needs:

- Prepare teachers for classroom experiences by adopting a more clinical, systemic approach that builds knowledge and dispositions to minimize gaps in reading achievement and to integrate reading/literacy across content areas.
- Incorporate research to use culturally sustaining pedagogy in teacher preparation programs.
- Expand the diversity of students pursuing education as a career is needed as well as more opportunities for pre-service teachers to teach in diverse school settings.
- Address best instructional practices for improving the teaching and learning of literacy in professional learning.

