

WHITE PAPER

Frameworks for Literacy Education Reform

As the United States moves into a new era of federal education policy with the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, talk of education reform continues, with much of it uninformed even if well intentioned. The presidential election campaign, already well underway, is certain to keep education issues in the forefront given the stakes for the future of the economy. At the turning center of this unceasing maelstrom lies the ultimate educational challenge: how to effectively impart, nourish, deepen, and strengthen to full potential the literacy skills of the nation's students.

Literacy is the essential education, the learning through which all other learning takes place. Crimp, deny, reduce, or thwart robust literacy acquisition and the prospects for achieving all other educational attainments are correspondingly diminished, resulting in serious social consequences that are known all too well.

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In some quarters, a growing impatience commonly fosters a predilection for “quick fixes.” In others, the assumption that “plain sense” and past approaches will do just fine drives comfortable nostrums but little progress, for the hard facts established by rigorous literacy research often lead to conclusions that are startling and counterintuitive. Policymakers need to keep this stark reality firmly in mind.

The challenges of contemporary literacy education are complicated, unprecedented, and pervasive, a far cry from the imagined simplicity of the little red school house of yore. The numbers of English learners are increasing, curriculum must align with new standards, interventions for struggling readers are on the rise, digital technologies are driving new modes of teaching and learning, and high-stakes assessments are exerting an enormous strain on classroom instructional time.

Teachers and teacher preparation programs are subject to almost constant polemical attack, and resources for the professional development of literacy instructors are often scarce. No wonder so many fingers get pointed, no wonder so many claims are bandied about, especially when contentious measures of student literacy achievement dominate the headlines.

Where is the path forward? What is the hallmark of literacy leadership in a context as difficult as the present one? What are the building blocks of a sound literacy education policy? To those of us at the International Literacy Association (ILA), the

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answer is simple: Effective approaches to classroom literacy instruction are always grounded in rigorous, peer-reviewed research. Not politics, not ideology, not speculation.

Research is the differentiator between the reliable and the uncertain, the element that provides an unimpeachable credential of practical validation. When advocating for literacy education reforms, stakeholders should settle for nothing less, avoiding the temptations of political expediency that too often limit the prospects for sustained student achievement.

What's needed to move the needle on literacy learning is not so much a specific proposal but a reliable approach to reform generally, a way of grounding reform efforts within a research-validated perspective. To this end, ILA offers four frameworks for developing and evaluating literacy education reforms, each focused on a specific component of the education sector: literacy teaching and teachers, schools and schooling, student support, families and community.

Each framework sets out a list of research-validated approaches to literacy advancement that is designed to function as a blueprint or rubric to inform, refine, and assess proposals for reform. The more such proposals are aligned with these approaches, the stronger their potential will be to produce meaningful and sustained improvements in literacy education. Moreover, each framework includes a detailed list of supporting sources to facilitate exploration into the underlying research base.

There is much that can be done to raise students' literacy achievement, and many individuals and organizations must accomplish the work. We must pool resources both within and outside of schools, including those of teachers, school administrators and supervisors, universities, parents, the business community, policymakers, and foundations. Collectively, these stakeholders can have a positive impact on the literacy learning of children and adolescents and, in turn, create a pathway for success for the next generation.

These frameworks are meant to provoke conversation and inspire action to use multiple pathways to support the literacy achievement of all children. There is much to be done and there are many to draw from in order to ensure equitable, accessible, and excellent educational opportunities that will result in high literacy achievement for all. This is every child's right and everyone's responsibility. The time to take action is now.

FRAMEWORK 1: Literacy Teaching and Teachers

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A highly qualified literacy educator is every student's right. Teachers must be well prepared, professionally developed throughout their careers, and evaluated in accordance with professional ethics. We also need to ensure that every teacher can address the diverse needs present in today's classrooms. Reform proposals pertaining to literacy teaching and teachers must pay careful attention to teacher preparation programs, the recruitment and retention of effective literacy educators, and teacher evaluation systems.

Teacher Preparation Programs

- Address literacy at every level of study during coursework and clinical practice
- Provide preservice teachers with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to teach the 21st-century literacy strategies needed in order for all students to become effective readers and writers

Recruitment and Retention of Literacy Educators

- Represent effective literacy teachers of color equitably
- Cultivate caring environments that facilitate teacher collaboration and empowerment around literacy instruction
- Create ongoing, intensive, and job-embedded professional development networks directly connected to effective, evidence-based literacy practices

Teacher Evaluation Systems

- Implement ethical and effective teacher evaluation systems that identify professional development needs and assess teacher effectiveness in the area of literacy
- Devise teacher evaluation measures that are grounded in systematic, well-developed, research-based criteria drawn from multiple literacy data points
- Use structured performance assessments designed to support literacy professional growth and development

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FRAMEWORK 2: Schools and Schooling

Schools provide the physical and conceptual structure for K–12 literacy learning and are woven into the communities in which they are found. To adequately support literacy learning in schools, we must resist a one-size-fits-all approach. To meet this goal, attention must be paid to access to high-quality literacy curriculum and instructional materials, accountability measures, technology integration, and building literacy leadership capacity.

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Access to High-Quality Literacy Curriculums and Instructional Materials

- Align literacy curriculum and instructional materials with evidence of student learning
- Require local literacy curriculum decisions to be driven by the identified needs of students
- Provide high-quality professional development for teachers on how to select literacy instructional materials that will help students achieve grade-level proficiencies in literacy outcomes
- Develop literacy curriculums specific to the needs of the individual schools that are aligned with research on best practices

Accountability Measures

- Describe literacy accountability systems transparently for all stakeholders (parents, children, educators, policymakers) using jargon-free language
- Enable standard-based reform efforts to align literacy curriculum and assessments and provide vertical articulation across grades
- Include measures of adult and student motivation; documentation of effective literacy curriculum, instruction, and classroom-based assessment choices; description of professional development in the area of literacy instruction for teachers; and student literacy achievement as evaluation variables
- Take proactive measures to avoid unethical literacy test preparation of students and the unethical use of literacy test scores by administrators and policymakers

Technology Incorporation

- Teach children how to comprehend and compose using available digital technologies
- Teach children how to evaluate information on the Internet to build knowledge in all disciplines
- Require the strategic and judicious use of technology use to support literacy instruction
- Use technology to organize and analyze assessment data to support data-based decisions about literacy instruction

Building Literacy Leadership Capacity

- Support school administrators as interpreters of federal, state, and local literacy accountability efforts
- Enable principals, teacher leaders, literacy coaches, literacy specialists, and teachers to design coherent, focused, and additive efforts that contribute to high literacy achievement
- Prepare principals to provide consistent, high-level professional development in literacy instruction for teachers, know the district’s literacy goals and see that they are implemented, and adequately report to district superiors and community stakeholders what is happening with literacy instruction in the building
- Encourage principals and teachers to share decision-making authority on literacy instruction, using teachers’ literacy instruction expertise
- Promote literacy teacher leadership
- Support school-level decision-making systems to “craft coherence” between stakeholder aspirations and school-level literacy standards, goals, and strategies

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FRAMEWORK 3: Student Support

Poverty is a global issue with far-reaching implications for children, families, schools, communities, businesses, and nations. In the most affluent nation in the world, approximately 20% of children in the United States live in poverty, attend schools without adequate resources, and are taught by teachers ill-prepared to address the educational inequalities they face—including the early emergence of and persistent gaps in literacy achievement. Reform proposals designed to alter the predictable trajectory of underachievement in literacy facing children are among the most important of all educational policy initiatives.

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Student Engagement

Provide access to the following:

- Culturally relevant instruction that builds upon students' funds of knowledge and enacts culturally competent teaching
- Instruction that uses a broad range of literacy materials geared towards student interests and needs
- A global learning network that connects students to diverse people and cultures and prepares them to collaborate with Web 2.0 technologies in a global society

Access to Information Capital in Homes, Neighborhoods, and Schools

Provide access to the following:

- Digital and multimodal texts
- Computers, tablets, and other digital literacy learning technologies
- Up-to-date and affordable technological infrastructure in homes, neighborhoods, and schools
- Technologies and adequate bandwidth for all students, especially disadvantaged students

Access to Effective Schools

Provide access to the following:

- The most effective literacy teachers, those teachers who produce annual growth in children who are performing at or above grade-level literacy standards and who produce

accelerated growth in children who are performing below grade-level literacy standards

- A literacy curriculum that fosters citizenship skills for participation in a democratic society

Closing the Achievement Gap

Provide access to the following:

- Discipline-specific literacy instruction
- Effective literacy intervention programs
- Effective extended day, week, and year programs for students who are struggling
- Standards-based literacy instruction
- High-quality literacy education, highly effective literacy teachers, and culturally relevant curriculum and literacy instruction
- Data drawn from administrations of multiple measures that describe children's social and emotional growth in addition to their literacy academic performance

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FRAMEWORK 4: Families and Community

It is well established that families are a major force in literacy development. Over 50 years of research has shown that language skills, a product of the home environment, are a leading indicator of future literacy performance. Notably, low language development has a negative impact on literacy and school achievement. Children from families of lower socioeconomic status show a six-month gap in language development by the age of 2 as compared with children of higher socioeconomic families. Factors such as family instability, trauma, and violence as well as community unrest compound the challenges faced by children of lower socioeconomic status in regard to literacy achievement.

It is well established that families are a major force in literacy development.

Collaboration

The literacy needs of children are best addressed by an approach that ensures that each child is healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged in and out of school. To accomplish this, we must coordinate resources, form partnerships, and systematize services. In particular, literacy educators need to do the following:

- Ensure that high-quality early childhood education programs are available and accessible to communities with patterns of low literacy achievement
- Centralize educational, medical, and mental health services and economic resources for families
- Endorse partnerships with universities and colleges as well as with national and international education organizations that promote high levels of literacy achievement
- Challenge community organizations to provide intellectual, monetary, or human resources to further the mission of literacy for all citizens

Family Involvement

Communication difficulties relate to parents' receiving and understanding school information or having structures for reciprocal sharing of information pertinent to the literacy development of the child. It is vital to develop sustained family

involvement and communication programs with the following activities in mind:

- Vary methods for communicating literacy information to families that include workshops, video files, home visits, and computerized phone and text messages
- Provide literacy education and training for parents to encourage a supportive literacy learning environment in the home
- Interact with individual families on literacy needs as students make the transition from one educational setting to the next: preschool; elementary, middle, and high school; graduation

Diversity

Educational inequities undermine literacy development. Equity and excellence in the classroom can be encouraged when policymakers and legislators work with literacy experts to do the following:

- Endorse policies that allow for children of diverse languages, ethnicities, and cultures to use their existing experiences and learning strategies to develop literacy, acquire content, and thrive in school and beyond
- Broaden policies related to diversity beyond traditional classifications such as race, ethnicity, and gender to include socioeconomic status, neighborhood, language, and special education needs
- Fund school liaisons to work with a citizens' advisory committee that includes members of families who live in high-stress neighborhoods

Business/Corporate Involvement: Collaboration With Schools and Communities

Business and corporate involvement is critical to successful literacy initiatives and programs. Partnerships and alliances aimed at high levels of literacy development bring essential resources to schools and communities through the allocation of funds and resources that do the following:

- Enable schools to be centers for the literacy development in their neighborhoods
- Provide affordable or free early-childhood education programs for employees in low-paying jobs

***Educational inequities
undermine literacy
development.***

- Increase opportunities for charitable and nonprofit organizations to join with publicly funded agencies to invest in the literacy success of children and their families

Governmental Relations

A literate populace is an essential asset of a democratic society. Families and communities need their governments to do the following:

- Invest in high-quality, affordable early childhood education programs that are safe and nurturing, provide literacy rich environments, and are accessible to all families
- Allocate funding for evidenced-based literacy education programs
- Provide tax incentives to businesses and foundations to invest in the improvement of student literacy achievement in urban areas

RESOURCES FOR FAMILIES AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Professional Development

- Annenberg Learner (Teacher Professional Development and Classroom Resources): www.learner.org
- Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development: www.ascd.org
- International Literacy Association: www.literacyworldwide.org
- National Council of Teachers of English: www.ncte.org

Teacher Education Programs

- National Academy of Education: www.naeducation.org

Teacher Evaluation

- National Association of Elementary School Principals: www.naesp.org
- National Association of Secondary School Principals: www.nassp.org

Early Education

- Association for Childhood Education International: <http://acei.org>
- California Department of Education (CDE on iTunes University): www.cde.ca.gov
- California Subject Matter Project: <http://csmp.ucop.edu>
- California Writing Project: www.californiawritingproject.org
- Edutopia (George Lucas Educational Foundation): www.edutopia.org
- LearningForward (formerly the National Staff Development Council): <http://learningforward.org>
- National Association for the Education of Young Children: www.naeyc.org
- National Writing Project: www.nwp.org
- WestEd: www.wested.org

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About the International Literacy Association

The International Literacy Association (ILA) is a global advocacy and membership organization dedicated to advancing literacy for all through its network of more than 300,000 literacy educators, researchers, and experts across 75 countries. With 60 years of experience in the field, ILA believes in the transformative power of literacy to create more successful societies, healthy communities, and prosperous economies. ILA collaborates with partners across the world to develop, gather, and disseminate high-quality resources, best practices, and cutting-edge research to empower educators, inspire students, and inform policymakers. For more information, visit literacyworldwide.org.

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