

Texas Institute for Education Reform

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Texas Public Schools Today and Tomorrow: Call to Action and Agenda for Success

Teaching Children to Read: The Crisis in Texas Public Schools

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“Literacy skills are the foundation of academic success for all students, yet 29 percent of the nation’s 8th graders do not read even at the basic level according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The numbers for low-income students and students of color are even worse.” Education Trust, 2006¹

Like other states, Texas faces an enormous challenge in teaching children how to read. According to the most recent reading assessment administered by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in 2005, 71 percent of 4th graders and 74 percent of 8th graders in Texas public schools are unable to read proficiently.² NAEP scores were far worse for Texas Hispanic and African-American students. Eighty-one percent of Hispanic 4th graders and 85 percent of 8th graders cannot read proficiently, while 85 percent of African-American 4th graders and 86 percent of 8th graders cannot read proficiently.³

Inability to read proficiently creates an insurmountable barrier for many students in Texas public schools, barring their way to advanced high school studies, graduating with a diploma, completing postsecondary education or training, and competing successfully with their peers in the global workplace.

However, this barrier can be demolished. Reading instruction is one of the very few areas in education that has been thoroughly mapped by research. We know that most children can be taught to read and read well, and we know the most effective ways to help children acquire this fundamental skill. The challenge is putting this knowledge to use.

The need for expanding science-based reading instruction in Texas public schools is so great that this paper *begins* by identifying the reforms needed to teach children to read proficiently. In subsequent pages, this paper offers persuasive evidence that urgent action must be taken and describes the research that should guide reading instruction in Texas public schools. In departing from the custom of putting reforms at the end of a policy report, TIER hopes to emphasize the importance of efforts to ensure all children in Texas public schools have the opportunity to learn to read and to read to learn.

What Texans Must Do to Teach Children to Read and Read Well

Change how teachers are prepared, certified, trained, and appraised by:

- Requiring all educator preparation programs to train teachers how to use reading science in teaching children how to read, identify reading difficulties, and provide reading interventions—in concept and with classroom practice;
- Measuring teachers' knowledge of the reading science on state certification tests and requiring all teachers to pass tests pertaining to reading;
- Basing accreditation of all K-8 teacher preparation programs on the value that programs add to students' reading performance in schools;
- Establishing credentials for a K-8 Reading Specialist to instruct students who have not acquired grade-level reading proficiency;
- Recreating a new, improved Texas Reading Initiative: (1) Offering state-matching funds for K-8 teachers to complete Summer Reading Academies to hone their skills in the science of reading instruction, (2) Requiring districts to send K-8 teachers in low-performing schools to attend Summer Reading Academies, (3) Providing follow-up to Summer Reading Academies with supervised classroom practice in the teaching of reading which focuses on instructional practices that are based on scientific research, and (4) Strengthening early reading assessments and raise standards for proficiency;
- Incorporating reading into the teacher professional development and appraisal system—requiring districts to appraise proficiency in reading instruction and providing districts with matching funds to provide needed training in the science of reading;
- Using value-added measures in student assessments to evaluate teacher effectiveness in reading instruction, educator preparation programs, and professional development; and
- Replacing learner-centered instruction with direct, teacher-centered instruction in all state policy, including educator standards, teacher preparation, certification, appraisal, and professional development.

Strengthen state curriculum standards and assessments by:

- Incorporating components of effective reading instruction in English Language Arts TEKS;
- Enriching academically state curriculum standards in all foundation subjects and providing districts with an optional scope and sequence for K-8 that is similar to E.D. Hirsch's *Core Knowledge Series*;
- Creating explicit grade-level standards for reading proficiency, K-12 with vertical alignment;

- Raising the bar for performance and identifying levels of proficiency that are aligned with—or higher than—standards for proficiency set by NAEP for elementary and middle schools, and aligned with postsecondary readiness assessments for high schools (i.e. ACT and SAT);
- Connecting reading instruction and state assessments with specific academic knowledge across the core academic foundation subjects;
- Setting standards for variety, amount, and level of reading proficiency for all courses;
- Including vocabulary development in state curriculum standards and assessments;
- Having state assessments validated by independent, national experts;
- Establishing reading as a course of study required for K-8;
- Encouraging schools to provide extended time for reading and require schools to provide extended time for reading instruction to students at risk of, or diagnosed with, reading difficulties;
- Incorporating value-added measures in state assessments;
- Administering national norm-referenced tests as a supplement to, or replacement for, state criterion referenced tests to provide information about how reading performance in Texas public schools compare with other states; and
- Creating cross-jurisdictional task forces in urban areas to oversee reading reform.

Improving how we identify and help struggling readers and how we prevent reading difficulties by:

- Establishing higher standards for proficiency on early reading assessments, Pre-K-2nd grade;
- Incorporating early-reading assessments into the school accountability system;
- Requiring schools to provide scientifically-proven, effective reading programs for all students in every grade, K-12, who lack reading proficiency in any area assessed;
- Requiring schools in which less than 75 percent of students read proficiently to collaborate with early-literacy programs that have proven effective, such as TEEM; and
- Establishing public-private partnerships to encourage disadvantaged children to participate in effective early-literacy programs.

“In medicine, if research found new ways to save lives, health care professionals would adopt these methods as quickly as possible, and would change practices, procedures, and systems. Educational research has found new ways to save young minds by helping them become proficient readers; it is up to us to promote these new methods throughout the education system. Young lives depend on it. And so does the survival of public education.” American Federation of Teachers, 1999⁴

The Need for Reform

Over the past decade, students in Texas public schools have made significant progress in reading, which can be directly attributed to the Texas Reading Initiative, established in 1996 to introduce scientifically-validated reading instruction in K-3. As a result, the average reading proficiency of Texas students rose from the bottom of the nation to national average, and today, when performance is differentiated by racial/ethnic groups, Texas students perform near the top of the nation.⁵

This progress tends to obscure the fact that reading proficiency continues to be a critical problem for Texas public schools. In 2003, the Koret Task Force on K-12 Education drafted an education reform agenda for the Texas Legislature identifying reading as the state’s key education challenge. Acknowledging the enormous effort that Texas has invested in improving the ability to read, the Task Force warned:

“Nevertheless, in Texas, as elsewhere in the nation, reading scores are not improving at a satisfactory pace, and the reading ability of disadvantaged students remains unacceptably low. Failure to improve reading scores will hamper the success of other policy reforms.” Koret Task Force, 2004⁶

NAEP scores furnish a strong signal that Texas is in the midst of an unprecedented reading crisis:

- Overall improvement has ground to a halt. From 1998 through 2005, the overall state reading scores of 4th grade students failed to demonstrate any significant gains, while average state scores for 8th grade students slightly declined;
- No gains in proficiency have been achieved in almost a decade. The percent of students reading At or Above Proficient for both 4th and 8th grade is less than 30 percent; and
- The achievement gap between racial and ethnic groups is closing far too slowly. Although Hispanic and African-American students are achieving gains at a more rapid pace than their White peers, the gap is closing so slowly for 4th and 8th grade students that at the current rate of change, the gap will not be closed for approximately 63 years.

A recent report by the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation commends Texas for making “moderate” progress in NAEP assessments over the past decade, but confers a failing grade for educating low-income and minority students.⁷ Considering the demographics of

Texas schools, this is a broad and severe indictment of the state system of public education; economically disadvantaged students comprise 54.6 percent of the student population, and, combined, Hispanic and African-American students constitute a racial/ethnic majority of 58.9 percent.⁸

Reading: It Matters

“Reading is the fundamental skill upon which all formal education depends. Research now shows that a child who doesn’t learn the reading basics early is unlikely to learn them at all. Any child who doesn’t learn to read early and well will not easily master other skills and knowledge, and is unlikely to ever flourish in school or life.” American Federation of Teachers, 1999⁹

Research is unequivocal about the importance of early reading. Students must read fluently and proficiently early in elementary school or there is little likelihood for later success.¹⁰ By first grade, reading proficiency establishes a trajectory for academic performance from which students seldom deviate throughout their entire life.¹¹

For most children, reading is a skill that is not acquired easily. To read and read well, most children need to be taught to read in an organized, systematic, explicit, and carefully-designed approach that is based on scientific research.¹² Reading, like other skills such as mathematics and playing the piano, has to be developed to a level of full proficiency. In order for children to master increasingly complex texts, they must achieve a level of proficiency where reading skills are automatically employed and do not require effort.

Most children have difficulty learning to read. Intelligence, as measured by IQ tests, has little bearing on the ability to learn to read; in fact, children with early reading difficulties often have above-average IQs.¹³ These difficulties are easily identified and can be identified as early as kindergarten by a simple, highly-reliable test that takes only 15 minutes to administer.¹⁴

Sixty percent of all children face a formidable challenge in learning to read. As for the remainder, 20 percent experience severe reading difficulties while the other 20 percent learn to read quickly and easily.¹⁵ Difficulty in learning to read is a common experience among all children, not limited to only those served by special education programs.

Almost 90 percent of students who read with difficulty in the 1st grade remain poor readers throughout their entire school experience.¹⁶ For low-income, Hispanic, and African-American students, the rate of reading failure is very high, ranging from 60 to 70 percent.¹⁷

Reading difficulties in elementary school generally worsen with each successive grade. By the end of third grade, how well a student reads provides the basis for a reasonable prediction of whether the student will drop out or graduate, ready to succeed in college or skilled vocational training.¹⁸

By middle school, students with reading difficulties demonstrate academic deficits across all subject areas, and, by high school, their potential for postsecondary success is negligible.¹⁹ The likelihood for a poor reader to drop out before high school completion is quite strong,²⁰ as is the likelihood for poor readers to be placed in special education, particularly economically-disadvantaged students and racial/ethnic minorities.²¹

Through extensive research on how children read, research tells us that: (1) almost all children can learn to read well, although it is a challenge for many; (2) children must learn early and learn well to become proficient readers; and (3) the inability to read early and read well generally creates a life-long, immutable handicap.

Reading: Sounding the Alarm

“The most fundamental responsibility of schools is teaching students how to read.”

American Federation of Teachers, 1999²²

Texas public schools must make reading their top priority because weak reading skills, more than any other factor, represent the root cause of academic failure.²³ Lacking ability to read proficiently, to comprehend textbooks and benefit from classroom instruction, vast numbers of students leave Texas schools today woefully unprepared to succeed in most endeavors.

A reading crisis now threatens Texas public schools, although this crisis remains undetected by state assessments. Student performance on independent national assessments sounds the alarm. According to NAEP scores, the crisis begins in elementary schools and worsens in middle schools, particularly in large urban districts. The extent of this crisis is made clear by national standardized tests that many districts elect to administer. In Houston ISD, for example, Stanford Tests show the majority of students read on grade level only for 1st grade, and reading skills decline for each successive grade; by 6th grade and continuing throughout high school, over 60 percent of students are fully incapable of reading and comprehending assigned textbooks.²⁴

Between one-fourth and one-third of students leave Texas schools before graduation, discouraged by their inability to read and achieve academic success.²⁵ For students who do earn a diploma, failure to read proficiently handicaps their success in skilled vocational training and college. According to national measures, few Texas graduates have acquired the reading proficiency necessary to succeed in postsecondary endeavors.

On the College Board’s 2006 SAT, Texas public school students scored an average of 487 on the reading test, significantly below the national public school average of 500.²⁶ On the 2006 ACT, less than 20 percent of Texas public school students demonstrated the academic proficiency necessary for post-secondary success.²⁷ According to ACT, the ability to read is the clearest difference between Texas students who are ready for postsecondary education/training and those who are not.²⁸

Texas students graduate from high school with a weak foundation of reading and academic skills, and enter postsecondary education through a constricting pipeline that siphons off many. Only 63 percent of Texas graduates transition from high school to college; this is the ninth lowest transition rate in the nation and a rate that has remained unchanged since 2000.²⁹ Lacking college-ready skills, approximately 50 percent of the freshmen in state institutions of higher education require developmental (remedial) help.³⁰ Few students complete developmental education successfully, and only 52 percent of students enrolled in Texas colleges and universities graduate within six years, a rate that is the 5th lowest in the nation.³¹

The evidence is overwhelming: we face an insufficiently-addressed reading crisis in Texas public schools that severely damages the lifelong opportunities of our youth.

The Reading Crisis: Research Provides the Solutions

“Thanks to new scientific research—plus a long-awaited scientific and political consensus around this research—the knowledge exists to teach all but a handful of severely disabled children to read well.” American Federation of Teachers, 1999³²

Researchers have amassed a huge body of national and international scientific research demonstrating that fully 95 percent of children can be taught how to read.³³ Research also demonstrates that 90 to 95 percent of poor readers can be transformed to average or good readers by prevention and early-intervention programs,³⁴ but that remediation is more difficult after the end of second grade.³⁵

Scientifically-Based Elements of Reading Instruction

We have indisputable evidence that there is an effective approach to reading instruction. Research shows the necessary elements of effective instruction are: (1) phonemic awareness; (2) phonics and decoding; (3) vocabulary development; (4) reading fluency; and (5) reading comprehension strategies.³⁶ These elements must be taught explicitly, incrementally, and sequentially for most students to read proficiently.³⁷

Teacher-Centered Instruction and Direct Instruction

Further, we have scientific research that these elements must be taught directly. Studies produced by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development identify the necessity for explicit, systematic instruction in teaching the *majority* of children how to read.³⁸ Direct instruction and teacher-centered instruction are interchangeable terms, used generically to describe an approach that is highly structured and teacher-led,³⁹ in contrast to student-centered instruction where students construct their own learning.⁴⁰ Direct/teacher-centered instruction has proven the most effective way to introduce scientifically-based elements of reading to all children, but most particularly for children who are poor, Hispanic, or African-American.⁴¹ Direct/teacher-centered instruction has also been shown to be the most effective way to provide intervention or remedial assistance for struggling readers.⁴²

The quest to find the most effective way to teach children and solve the problem of low academic achievement was led by the late Jeanne S. Chall, one of America's most respected thinkers in education research. Her examination of a century of research and comparisons between American, European, and Asian schools, thoroughly demonstrates the importance of direct and formal, teacher-centered instruction in teaching reading and mathematics for *all* children, but especially for low-income and disabled children.⁴³

While direct instruction is a generic approach to teaching, *Direct Instruction* is a specific teaching model, devised by Siegfried Engelmann in the early 1960s.⁴⁴ Direct Instruction, originally known as DISTAR (Direct Instruction System of Teaching Arithmetic and Reading), is a highly scripted sequence of instruction that focuses heavily on reading, language, and mathematics. It carefully organizes time and technology for learning, and relies on small group, teacher-led, face-to-face instruction.⁴⁵

The effectiveness of Direct Instruction was proven by the world's largest educational experiment, *Project Follow Through*, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, conducted between 1967 and mid-2005, and designed to identify the most effective instructional model for breaking the link between student poverty and low educational performance in K-3.⁴⁶ Of the 22 models in the national study, only one—the Direct Instruction model—helped economically disadvantaged students to reach grade level performance in all subject areas.⁴⁷ With Direct Instruction, students performed better on measures of both basic and more advanced skills.⁴⁸

Time Counts

We are well-informed by scientific research about the importance of time in becoming a proficient reader.⁴⁹ Time for reading instruction, particularly for disadvantaged students, must be focused, extended, and daily at all grade levels.⁵⁰ Studies show disadvantaged students who spend 25 percent more time in courses with substantial reading and/or reading instruction throughout their high school years, outperform their peers in high schools with increased reading time.⁵¹ The technical ability to recognize words must be perfected so that students can concentrate on meaning rather than thinking about how to apply their reading skills.

Beyond Technical Skills

Scientific research tells us that reading instruction is effective when word recognition and understanding are automatic, rapid, and effortless.⁵² While technical skills are absolutely necessary for reading comprehension in the early elementary grades, technical skills alone are not sufficient for reading more advanced academic materials.⁵³ Approaching middle school, the majority of students, particularly economically disadvantaged students, demonstrate increasingly diminished reading comprehension because students lack the foundation of academic knowledge necessary to make connections between new and previous learning.⁵⁴ Researchers believe this is the chief cause of the academic achievement gap between socioeconomic groups: lack of word and world knowledge.⁵⁵ After acquiring the technical skills for early reading, children must develop a rich vocabulary and broad knowledge across the academic disciplines to be able to read with comprehension and benefit from instruction.

Learning Disabilities and Special Education

We know from the scientific research that early reading interventions, proven so effective with children enrolled in regular education programs, can dramatically help children with learning disabilities.⁵⁶ The growth of children enrolled in special education has skyrocketed over the past decade throughout the nation. The percentage of Texas public school students enrolled in special education surged from 7.6 percent in 1995 to 10.3 percent in 2005.⁵⁷

Research indicates that more than half of special education students are diagnosed as learning disabled, and reading deficits account for 80 percent of students identified as learning disabled.⁵⁸ Because reading is the most effectively corrected of all educational disabilities, early intervention can greatly reduce the need for special education and shrink the number of students who are diagnosed as learning disabled.⁵⁹

Prevention and Intervention

Lastly, we know that early prevention is essential for children with economic, social, and physical disadvantages to learn to read proficiently.⁶⁰ Scientific research indicates at-risk children who enroll in early childhood programs teaching language, literacy, and other cognitive skills are significantly more successful in reading than peers enrolled in programs focusing on social and emotional development.⁶¹ For all children, but particularly for disadvantaged children, prevention must be coupled with frequent, early assessments and intervention. Students must acquire the ability to read proficiently early in elementary school or the likelihood of success is significantly diminished.⁶²

Research provides the tools for combating and surmounting the Texas reading crisis: (1) scientific principles for reading instruction; (2) direct and organized delivery of reading instruction; (3) frequent assessment and early identification of reading difficulties; (4) immediate intervention with scientifically-based remedial methods; (5) a rich foundation of academic knowledge that includes vocabulary development; and (6) early childhood education programs for disadvantaged children that incorporate language and literacy development. These important tools can be incorporated in a variety of methods in teaching children to read—different methods can and should be employed—but all methods must include these components if we are to teach children to read and read well. We have the tools, now we must put them to use.

Improving Reading: Connecting Research to Reality

“Reading instruction is one of the very few areas where it is not the case that ‘more research is needed.’ Educational policy makers already have the theory and the evidence supporting it to guide the implementation of effective reading programs from K-12. In fact, they have had the theory and the evidence for decades. The central problem they face in providing effective reading instruction and a sound reading curriculum stems not from an absence of a research base but from willful indifference to what the research has consistently shown and to a theory that has been repeatedly confirmed.” Sandra Stotsky, Northeastern University⁶³

If the science of reading was fully used by Texas public schools, the vast majority of students would read proficiently on independent tests, as well as state assessments. Sadly, such is not the case. Because tests such as NAEP, national norm-referenced tests administered by districts, and post-secondary readiness tests—including the ACT and SAT—indicate that most students in Texas public schools never learn to read proficiently, we can safely conclude that instruction is not fully guided by scientific research.

While student performance in Texas public schools provides a sound basis for inferring reading instruction requires repair, we also have evidence that state education policy is not firmly anchored in scientifically-based research and does not furnish a strong framework for effective reading instruction.

Educator Preparation, Certification, and Professional Development

“There is a general disdain for any truths science has to offer, fed by running skepticism... much of current reading instruction is incompatible with science.” National Council on Teacher Quality, 2006⁶⁴

The fact is that we do not formally or fully incorporate scientifically-based principles of reading instruction in state policy related to educator preparation, certification, or professional development.

Neither state law nor the Administrative Code requires *all* teacher preparation programs to include reading instruction. While state law is silent on reading instruction, the Administrative Code explicitly requires only college-approved educator preparation programs to include reading instruction. Non-traditional educator preparation programs, now producing more than half of the new teachers hired by Texas public schools, are not required to train prospective teachers how to teach children to read.⁶⁵ Further, state requirements for college-approved educator preparation programs fail to identify the need for reading instruction to be based on scientific principles.⁶⁶

Nor does state certification ensure that prospective teachers are knowledgeable about scientifically-based reading methods. While it is certainly true that certification tests question preschool and elementary prospective teachers’ knowledge of “developmental and corrective and phonics-based, and meaning-based instruction,”⁶⁷ certification tests—as well as educator standards—fail to specifically identify scientific research as the basis for reading instruction.

Equally important, state certification does not ensure that prospective teachers can translate research-based reading instructional theory into real classroom practice. No demonstration of instructional skills is required for state certification.

However, the most grievous weakness of state certification lies in the gaping loophole that allows candidates to earn certification without having to pass all parts of the certification test, including the part pertaining to reading instruction.⁶⁸

Analyses of state certification tests offer little reason to be confident that certified teachers anywhere in the nation, including Texas, know how to teach children how to read. A recent study by Sandra Stotsky indicates that the Texas certification test for Reading Specialist covered only 29 percent of the research-based principles, and certification for early childhood teachers covered only 13 percent in the areas of phonemic awareness, phonics, and vocabulary.⁶⁹

Another recent study by the National Council on Teacher Quality, examining randomly selected educator preparation programs throughout the nation, found that most education schools are not teaching the science of reading. Only 11 of 72 programs teach all elements of the science of reading (notably, Texas A&M University was one of these).⁷⁰ Although phonics was addressed more frequently than any other component of reading, educator programs in the study generally dismissed the science of phonics or treated phonics with skepticism.⁷¹ This study warns, “The decision about how to teach reading is repeatedly cast [by educator preparation programs] as a personal one, to be decided by the aspiring teacher. All methods are presented as being equally valid, and how one teaches reading is merely a decision that works best for the individual teacher.”⁷²

One last national study merits note, although Texas certification tests were not examined. Of the 16 states participating in the Reading First Teacher Network, Diana Rigden found only three states had teacher certification tests that aligned with the statutory components of reading instruction defined in *No Child Left Behind*: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, reading fluency, and reading comprehension strategies.⁷³ After looking at state certification tests, this report cautions, “It is quite possible—maybe even probable—that candidates can be licensed to teach elementary students in 2006 without demonstrating their knowledge of essential components of effective reading instruction derived from research.”⁷⁴

State Curriculum Standards (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills)

“Incorporating these [elements of reading science] into the preparation of teachers will only occur when... state P-12 English language arts standards incorporate the five components of effective reading instruction ...” Reading First Teacher Education Network, 2006⁷⁵

Teachers look to state curriculum standards for guidance in how reading should be taught and how reading relates to the studies of math, science, social studies and English Language Arts. Consequently, state curriculum standards bear some responsibility when students do not read proficiently. There is strong evidence that the reading standards in English Language Arts TEKS do not fully incorporate scientifically-based principles of reading instruction.

In June 2006, national reading experts Barbara Foorman, G. Reid Lyon, and Sandra Stotsky reported to the State Board of Education the critical need to expand and strengthen science-based principles in the English Language Arts TEKS.⁷⁶ They recommended revisions to: (1) emphasize vocabulary development; (2) define clear and measurable standards for reading proficiency at each grade; and (3) differentiate

standards for reading to identify increasingly complex expectations for proficiency as grades progress.⁷⁷

These recommendations mirror findings of other evaluations of state standards for English Language Arts, particularly those pertaining to reading. Earlier in 2006, the American Federation of Teachers gave Texas a failing grade for reading standards established for grades three through eight, citing the failure to differentiate expectations for reading from grade to grade.⁷⁸ This repetition was also cited by ACT in a 2005 analysis of the reading sections of English TEKS. This analysis found a “high degree of overlap” in expectations from grade to grade, and a failure to differentiate a progression of reading skills.⁷⁹ Throughout the grades and across the subject area disciplines, TEKS fails to identify the variety, amount, and level of reading that teachers are expected to teach and students are expected to learn.

There is also evidence that state curriculum standards fail to build the strong academic scaffolding that is necessary for most students to acquire advanced reading skills. In various analyses of public education, E.D. Hirsch, Jr. refers to this academic scaffold as “cultural literacy,” “word and world knowledge,” and “core knowledge.”⁸⁰

Evidence is offered by several independent studies. In 2005, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation gave TEKS only mediocre grades for state curriculum standards—B for English Language Arts, C for mathematics, and F for science.⁸¹ In the 2005 TEKS analysis described above, ACT warns that lack of academic specificity and coverage across all subject areas is likely to produce a weak foundation of knowledge and skills.⁸² This same criticism of TEKS was expressed by members of a panel of experts assembled by Achieve, Inc. to evaluate the relationship between state curriculum standards and new assessment objectives in 2001.⁸³ Of course, the most persuasive evidence of weak state curriculum standards is furnished by student performance on independent, national assessments such as the NAEP, SAT, and ACT (detailed in TIER Policy Paper, Issue 2).

State Assessments

“How Will We Know If We Are Succeeding? Student Assessments.” Council of Chief School Officers and Texas Instruments, 2005⁸⁴

While it is true that assessments provide the best way to determine if schools are teaching students to read well, it is only true when assessments are designed to provide sufficiently accurate information about student performance.

We have evidence that state assessments do not fully identify reading difficulties and proficiency. Because the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) sets a relatively low standard for reading proficiency, the percentage of students identified with reading difficulties by TAKS is also relatively low. In 2005, on the most recent administration of NAEP in reading, 29 percent of 4th and 26 percent of 8th graders in Texas public schools scored as proficient, while the TAKS tests demonstrated proficiency rates of 80 and 84 percent, respectively.⁸⁵ National education experts Paul E. Peterson

and Frederick M. Hess awarded Texas a D+ for the strength of 4th and 8th grade reading proficiency standards in 2005.⁸⁶

The consequences of setting reading proficiency at a low, unrealistic level are dire. First, when weak readers are mistaken for proficient readers, opportunities for successful intervention are lost. Secondly, vast numbers of students are never able to read proficiently.

In 2003, the Koret Task Force on K-12 Education proposed solutions to key education issues facing Texas. The Task Force stated, “Texas’ reading tests can have a very beneficial effect on reading achievement, but they are currently not living up to their full potential.”⁸⁷ The Task Force urged Texas to set higher standards for student performance, particularly in reading.⁸⁸ Worth noting is that a panel of national experts convened to evaluate the Texas Reading Academies also recommended “increasing student reading expectations at every grade level.”⁸⁹ The Task Force additionally recommended that TAKS reading tests be connected with grade-level content in all academic disciplines—history, math, science, art, and literature, and include the vocabulary necessary to comprehend this body of knowledge. Basing reading assessments on word and world knowledge will, the task force predicted, encourage coherent teaching, cumulative learning, and faster-paced improvement in student performance.⁹⁰

Direct, Teacher-Centered Instruction

“Direct instruction by a teacher is portrayed as outmoded—or worse, harmful to students.” National Council on Teacher Quality, 2006⁹¹

Although direct, teacher-centered instruction finds purchase in both research and logic, the education community has long rejected explicit, organized, sequential teacher-led classroom instruction. Educators generally favor student or learner-centered instruction, a teaching method that encourages students to discover knowledge and construct their own learning. Despite scientific evidence demonstrating the educational damage wreaked by this approach, particularly for disadvantaged students, learner-centered instruction is institutionalized in Texas education policy.

Learner-Centered Schools for Texas: A Vision for Texas Educators, a guideline adopted by the State Board of Education in 1994, serves as the basis for reading instruction in state standards for educators, which in turn serve as the basis for educator preparation programs, state certification tests, professional development, and the state appraisal system for teachers in Texas public schools today.

This guideline defines the role of teachers as “facilitator,” “guide,” and “coach,” and describes the teacher’s responsibility to help students “construct knowledge” and “discover” the connections between prior and new knowledge.⁹² State Educator Standards for early childhood programs and elementary grades reflect the emphasis on learner-centered instruction by assigning teachers the responsibility to “assist,” “create an environment,” and “provide opportunities” for students.⁹³

The State Professional Development and Appraisal System (PDAS) also emphasizes learner-centered instruction. The Administrative Code requires teacher appraisals to be based on proficiencies described in *Learner-Centered Schools*.⁹⁴ A teacher who directs classroom learning more than half of the time is rated as “Unsatisfactory,” according to the State Professional Development and Appraisal System,⁹⁵ while a teacher who establishes a classroom environment where students direct their own learning almost all of the time is rated as “Exceeds Expectations.”⁹⁶ Based on these criteria, as the importance of performance appraisals increases as a consequence of incentive pay programs, the use of direct instruction may well be fully extinguished in Texas public schools.

Professional development, continuing education that teachers must complete for renewing certification, also reinforces the importance of learner-centered instruction. In a guide produced by the State Board for Educator Certification and endorsed by 25 state educational associations, learner-centered instruction is listed as one of six characteristics of quality professional development.⁹⁷

Improving Reading: Building on Texas Success Stories

There is overwhelming evidence that state policy is not currently providing public schools the framework for teaching students to read early and read well. However, a number of ground-breaking initiatives, both public and private, have demonstrated considerable success, and these initiatives provide a strong platform for strengthening state policy to improve reading instruction.

Texas Reading Initiative and the Student Success Initiative

The Texas Reading Initiative, created in 1996 by the concerted efforts of the Governor’s Business Council and former Governor George W. Bush, was designed to furnish early diagnostic testing and research-based interventions to all students in K-2. In 1998, the 76th Legislature folded the Texas Reading Initiative into a broader effort to strengthen foundational academic skills by establishing the Student Success Initiative which extended the target intervention population to 8th grade (phasing in over a 10 year period) and provides intervention for mathematics as well as reading.

The Texas Reading Initiative created reading academies for teachers between 1999 and 2002, developed research-based reading assessments (such as the Texas Primary Reading Inventory), and initiated district provision of accelerated reading instruction for students at risk of reading difficulties. Legislation requires districts to administer early reading assessments from a list of assessments approved by the Commissioner of Education in kindergarten, 1st, and 2nd grade.⁹⁸ Results of these assessments must be communicated to parents, school boards, and the commissioner, although state law disallows the results to be used for purposes of school accountability.⁹⁹ When reading deficits are identified, districts are required to provide accelerated reading instruction that contains components of effective intervention, as defined by the commissioner.¹⁰⁰

Successes and shortcomings of the Texas Reading Initiative offer invaluable information for mounting the next stage of reading reform and fulfilling our promise to teach all children to read and read well.

In the Texas Reading Initiative, Texans built a powerful vehicle for changing how reading was taught in Texas public schools, and crafted reading policies that deserve much credit for the significant gains in reading performance evident over the past decade. For this ground-breaking effort, the Texas model was widely replicated throughout the nation and elements of it are evident in federal reading initiatives.

Over time it has become clear that the initiative's success has also been coupled with shortcomings. Despite gains in K-3 reading performance, the initiative failed to resolve three fundamental problems: (1) teaching the majority of students to read at a level of proficiency set by the National Assessment of Educational Progress—a level establishing the capacity to master increasingly advanced reading challenges; (2) translating reading gains achieved by 3rd grade into later performance in elementary school and beyond; and (3) sustaining the pace of improvement in K-3 reading performance.

Why the Texas Reading Initiative failed at these key challenges, but demonstrated the power to change the delivery of early reading instruction and produce significant gains in K-3 reading performance can be largely explained by findings of an evaluation conducted by an independent research group commissioned by the Texas Education Agency. This 2004 evaluation found the Reading Academies resulted in higher overall student achievement, lower percentages of student retention, and lower teacher turnover.¹⁰¹ But it also identified weaknesses of the initiative and made the following recommendations: (1) schedule training close to in-school use of new teaching strategies; (2) follow up and support implementation of new teaching strategies; and (3) incorporate an evaluation component into training to monitor and modify its efficacy.¹⁰² National experts, convened to evaluate the Reading Academies by the researchers, made additional important recommendations for reading training and suggested: (1) improving the reading assessments; (2) increasing student reading expectations at each grade level; (3) training teachers throughout the school year instead of four days in the summer; and (4) providing activities that engaged teachers in the application, syntheses, and evaluation of new reading techniques.¹⁰³ These structural weaknesses certainly limited the initiative's impact on improving reading performance, but it must also be considered that many of the teachers who were trained by the Reading Academies are likely no longer in the classroom today, as a result of attrition or turnover, and were likely replaced by teachers who were not trained to provide science-based reading instruction.

RITE

The Rodeo Institute for Teacher Excellence (RITE) was created by the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo in 1997 to provide severely at-risk pre-kindergarten through 3rd grade students with explicit instruction in phonemic awareness and decoding through a consistent curricula, supportive materials, and skilled teachers.¹⁰⁴ Later, RITE was

extended to 5th and 6th grades in elementary and middle schools. When first introduced in 1997, RITE served six schools and 1,650 students in Houston ISD. Today, RITE has been extended to 38 schools and serves over 10,000 students.¹⁰⁵

RITE strengthens teachers' skills in reading instruction through intensive teacher training during summers and year-long support by trainers who work with teachers in the schools. It trains teachers to use reading mastery curriculum—which relies on direct instruction—and strong classroom management techniques.

Annual external evaluations of RITE by the Texas Institute for Measurement, Evaluation, and Statistics show that RITE is incredibly effective in teaching at-risk students to read. Children who entered the program early and spent more than two years in RITE significantly outperformed all students in comparison groups.¹⁰⁶

TEEM

In early 2003, the Texas Legislature created the Texas Early Education Model (TEEM)¹⁰⁷ to ensure subsidized preschool and childcare programs teach the pre-literacy skills that research finds necessary for school readiness. Senate Bill 76 encourages shared resources among government-funded public and private programs that serve poor and at-risk children (such as Head Start).¹⁰⁸ The law requires providers to coordinate services with the Texas Education Agency and the Texas Workforce Commission, and directs the commissioner of education to develop state standards and materials that focus on language acquisition, vocabulary development, and phonological awareness.¹⁰⁹

TEEM was expanded in 2005 by Senate Bill 23 with funds for additional sites and creation of a school readiness certification system that allows parents to find out how well pre-school or childcare programs are preparing children to enter kindergarten.¹¹⁰

TEEM is based on three components: (1) research-based curriculum; (2) ongoing professional development of teachers with in-classroom, side-by-side coaching; and (3) formal assessment of student progress.¹¹¹ Today, TEEM is established in 20 communities that include Austin, Corpus Christi, Dallas, Fort Worth, Houston, San Antonio, and San Angelo. Careful research documents that TEEM provides significant, rapid academic benefits for children, particularly for English language learners.¹¹²

With the Student Success Initiative, RITE, and TEEM, Texas has the foundation for reading reform, and the capacity to teach all children to read proficiently.

“Reducing the number of children who enter school with inadequate literacy-related knowledge and skill is an important primary step toward preventing reading difficulties. Although not a panacea, this would serve to reduce considerably the magnitude of the problem currently facing schools. Children from poor neighborhoods, children with limited proficiency in English, children with hearing impairments, children with preschool language impairments, and children whose parents had difficulty learning to read are particularly at risk of arriving at school with weaknesses in these areas and

hence of falling behind from the outset.” Catherine Snow, Harvard Graduate School of Education, 1998¹³

Reading: An Agenda for Reform

“Common sense should tell us that reading is the ultimate weapon—destroying ignorance, poverty and despair before they can destroy us. A nation that doesn’t read much doesn’t know much. And a nation that doesn’t know much is more likely to make poor choices in the home, the marketplace, the jury box and the voting booth... The challenge, therefore, is to convince future generations of children that carrying a book is more rewarding than carrying guns.” Jim Trelease, Journalist, 1995¹⁴

Before convincing children to carry a book, we must teach our children how to read, acquire knowledge, and benefit from classroom instruction. Despite earnest efforts, we are doing a very poor job at teaching children to read and educating children to be successful in the 21st century. Our failure cannot be attributed to ignorance about what it takes to teach a child to read or even insufficient resources. We fail because we have not recognized the reading difficulties our children suffer and we have not made reading the top priority for student learning in public schools.

However, we can solve the reading crisis today. We can commit ourselves to ensuring that children entering Texas public schools next year will become proficient readers and that children in today’s classrooms acquire sufficient skills to comprehend their textbooks. To succeed, all that is really required is will: the will to make reading job one for public schools and will to put knowledge to use. The agenda for reading reform, outlined at the beginning of this paper, has already been mapped by scientific research and the evidence of programs created by innovative Texans. With will and working together, we can open the book on reading and enrich the future of every child.

For more information, visit TIER at www.texaseducationreform.org.

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