

Early Literacy: Leading the Way to Success

A Resource for Policymakers



Most Important Skills

- **Alphabet knowledge:** Knowing about the names and sounds associated with printed letters
- **Phonological awareness:** Being able to detect, manipulate or analyze the auditory aspects of spoken language
 - e.g., break words apart into smaller sound units (syllables or phonemes, adding or deleting sound units)
- **Rapid automatized naming:** Being able to quickly name a sequence of random letters, numbers, objects and colors
- **Writing letters:** Writing letters in isolation on request or write own name
- **Phonological memory:** Remembering content of spoken language for a short period of time

Other Important Skills

- **Concepts about print:** Knowing about print conventions (e.g., reading left-right, front-back) and concepts (e.g., book cover, author, text)
- **Print knowledge:** Knowing alphabet knowledge, concepts about print and early decoding
- **Oral language:** Being able to produce or comprehend spoken language, including vocabulary or grammar
- **Visual processing:** Being able to match or discriminate visually presented symbols
- **Reading readiness:** A combination of skills including alphabet knowledge, concepts of print, vocabulary, memory and phonological awareness

Reading is a gateway to future success... in school and in life

Results of the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress tell us that more than one-third of 4th graders (and an even higher number of our at-risk students) read so poorly they cannot complete their schoolwork successfully.

It is critical to start early if children are to develop the skills they need to be successful.

Research evidence confirms the strong connection between early skill development and later reading success. The challenge for state and local policymakers is to understand how to use these findings to promote an early literacy agenda that can help everyone learn to read proficiently.

Supporting an Early Literacy Initiative

Many states are working to improve teacher and program quality by establishing or revising state early learning standards, including credentialing qualifications and benchmarks or goals. Early literacy is an essential part of setting standards for any public or private preschool curriculum.

This resource can help you make informed decisions about early literacy policies and practices that will give young children a good start in reading.

Learn about:

- Research findings about early literacy and its connection to future academic success
- Legislative policies that can improve learning standards, curriculum and teacher quality
- Ways to support systemic change in state and local preschool education

What Research Says About Early Literacy

Although continuing research is needed to develop a deeper understanding of instructional approaches to prepare preschoolers for learning how to read, the current knowledge base does provide sufficient evidence to suggest important content knowledge and practices that show promise for building early literacy skills.

The years from birth through age 5 are a critical time for children's development and learning. Learning to read begins well before children enter school.

Children who develop more literacy skills in the preschool years perform better in the primary grades. Providing young children with the critical precursor skills to reading can offer a path to improving overall achievement.

Critical Early Literacy Skills for Learning How to Read

The National Early Literacy Panel reviewed the research and found that a young child's ability to talk, listen and understand spoken and written words is related to later literacy achievement in reading, writing and spelling.

Even before children start school, they can become aware of systematic patterns of sounds in spoken language, manipulate sounds in words, recognize words and break them apart into smaller units. They learn the relationship between sounds and letters and build their oral language and vocabulary skills.

Although there is evidence of a link between early literacy and later-developing literacy skills, some early literacy skills appear to be more important than others in getting children ready for learning how to read.

Policy Implications

A Literacy Challenge

Leadership and advocacy from informed policymakers can establish an early literacy initiative that is:

- founded on age-appropriate learning goals and standards aligned with those already in place for reading in the later grades
- focused on improving teacher quality through professional development and staff training
- committed to bringing about systemic change in preschool education and community support for early literacy

Set Early Literacy Goals and Standards

Advance an early literacy initiative based on the research findings and recommendations for implementing instruction.

Set early learning goals that align with other state policies and regulations to establish a continuum of literacy instruction across grade levels.

Provide state guidance to help preschool programs identify research-based early literacy models, practices, teaching strategies and instructional materials aligned with early learning standards.

Support legislative proposals that coordinate financial and other resources for research-based early literacy programs at the state and local levels.

Improve Teacher Quality

Establish policies that are proven to improve teacher quality, such as certification and licensure requirements.

Provide early childhood teachers and caregivers with ongoing professional development on early literacy skill development.

Build the capacity of preschools to provide staff training and technical assistance offered by state-level educators.

Work with teacher preparation institutions to align early childhood coursework and state standards.

Develop plans for phasing in new policies related to:

- monitoring and oversight
- staff training

Bundle services and create opportunities for collaboration among staff across preschool settings.

Support Systemic Change

Make early literacy a state priority and build support throughout local communities.

Engage key stakeholders and set up state and local partnerships.

Make outreach to business and community leaders, preschool leadership, school and parent boards, higher education faculty and family and child service agencies to raise awareness and generate support.

Educate constituents on the research evidence supporting early literacy skill development.

Support efforts to institute an early literacy research agenda and funding stream at the national and state levels.

The National Early Literacy Panel

The National Early Literacy Panel was convened in 2002 to conduct a synthesis of the most rigorous scientific research available on the development of early literacy skills in children from birth to age 5.

The primary purpose of the Panel was to identify research evidence that would contribute to decisions in early childhood educational policy and practice that could help early childhood providers better support young children's language and literacy development.

Early Literacy: Leading the Way to Success is based on the Panel's research findings.

The Institute, a federal agency, provides leadership on literacy issues, including the improvement of reading instruction for children, youth and adults.

Its mission is to make evidence-based reading research available to educators, parents, policymakers and others with an interest in helping all people learn to read well.

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Learn More

Visit the Institute's website to download copies of this product, learn more about early literacy research and download a copy of the Panel's report, *Developing Early Literacy: Report of the National Early Literacy Panel*.

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