

Meeting Literacy Goals Set by No Child Left Behind

Despite recent progress in reading achievement among children in primary grades, many children are not moving beyond basic “decoding” skills to develop the critical reading comprehension skills they need as they advance to the fourth grade and classes in history, mathematics, and science. Continual literacy instruction beyond the third grade is needed. Middle and high schools students need to build on the literacy strategies they learned in the early grades to make sense of abstract, complex subjects removed from their personal experiences. The need to guide adolescents to advanced stages of literacy is not necessarily the result of any teaching or learning failure in the preschool or primary years; rather, it is a result of the necessary next step in normal reading development. However, teaching reading and writing to adolescents is an “orphaned responsibility” in secondary schools, where reading and writing are not explicitly taught.¹ This is especially troubling since adolescents increasingly face a job market that demands high levels of literacy skills.

In an effort to focus national attention on the problem of adolescent literacy, Carnegie Corporation of New York launched a new initiative, *Advancing Literacy*, which aims to advance adolescent literacy by improving policy, research, and practice. As part of this initiative, Carnegie asked the RAND Corporation to undertake a study examining the state of adolescent literacy achievement in the nation, the results of which are documented in a new RAND report by McCombs and Kirby et al. The report provides a comprehensive portrait of where the nation's adolescents stand relative to state and national literacy goals and underscores how far we are from the goal of 100 percent proficiency set under No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The research examined data from the 2003 National Assessments of Educational Progress (NAEP) and 2003 state assessments (except in a few states where 2003 data were not available) to provide multiple indicators of student performance in the states. However, the authors caution that given differences in the tests and definitions of proficiency, data from these two sources are not directly comparable.

Findings

The research findings suggest some major concerns about the ability of states to meet the ambitious goal set by NCLB of 100 percent proficiency for all students, and highlight the need for multiple sources of data.

First, while states are operating under a common mandate for proficiency there are large differences in pass rates. For example, on state assessments, pass rates for elementary students (generally fourth graders) ranged from a low of 28 percent to a high of 90 percent. Similarly, pass rates for middle school students ranged from 21 percent to 94 percent.

Second, in general, proficiency measured by the NAEP against national literacy goals is significantly lower than proficiency measured by individual state tests against state goals. There is no state where even half the students met the NAEP national literacy standard of proficiency.

A few states have state assessments that track well with the national test. For example, in South Carolina, 21 percent of eighth grade students passed the state assessment while 24 percent scored as proficient on the NAEP. However, most states show the opposite pattern. In 23 states, the difference in proficiency rates on the two assessments was 30 percentage points or larger. Clearly, even if each state were to meet its 100 percent proficiency goal for reading, students across states would likely have quite disparate abilities, knowledge, and skills.

Third, the wide disparity in the achievement of subgroups of students makes reaching the 100 percent proficiency goal for all students a Herculean task. Both the state and national assessments show large achievement gaps (of well over 20 percentage points on average) by race and poverty level.

Overall, these are sobering statistics. The researchers advise that policymakers, schools, and teachers need to step up and accept the “orphaned responsibility” of teaching these students to read to learn. Carnegie's newly-established Advisory Council on Advancing Literacy will be examining literacy policy and research and making recommendations to improve the literacy achievement of our nation's adolescents. The work of this council is especially timely, given the President's proposal to extend No Child Left Behind into high schools.

¹ deLeon, Anne Grosso. Moving Beyond Storybooks: Teaching Our Children to Read to Learn. *Carnegie Reporter*. Fall 2002, Vol. 2 No.1, p. 3.

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