

Connecticut Association for Reading Research

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Chairman Taylor and members of the State Board of Education, Good Morning!

My name is Agnes Burns; I am the president of the Connecticut Association for Reading Research- CARR. This organization is composed of dedicated and passionate literacy educators who consider it their mission to make sure children in Connecticut schools receive the best education based on proven instructional practices identified through research, both national and local. CARR offers grants and scholarships to literacy educators who share their findings each year. We also bring in prominent practitioners from across the United States to conduct professional development centered on commonly agreed best literacy practices. Our membership represents all grade levels from kindergarten through college and includes novice and veteran educators.

I am here this morning to provide information that CARR hopes you will consider as you decide on the reading assessments for our kindergarten through third-grade students. First, I would like to acknowledge the work that the State Board of Education, the State Department of Education, our governor, Dannel Malloy, and our legislators have accomplished. Continuing to make universal pre-K a priority will help all students to enter kindergarten ready to learn. The recent release of *Connecticut Early Learning and Development Standards: What Children, Birth to Five, Should Know and Be Able to Do* provides much-needed guidance to caregivers and families.

Call for a Definition of Reading

“What exactly is *reading*?” The first and foremost consideration is to arrive at a consensus of what reading really involves. Any decision regarding reading assessments should evolve from a common understanding of what *reading* is. As readers, we all know that reading is a highly complex process, the goal of which is to **comprehend** text. A definition of reading must reflect this. Catherine Snow, Harvard University professor and author of *Reading for Understanding: Toward an R and D Program in Reading Comprehension*, describes reading comprehension “... as the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language... Comprehension entails three elements:

- The *reader* who is doing the comprehending
- The *text* that is to be comprehended
- The *activity* in which comprehension is a part.” (RAND, 2002)

Snow makes it clear that comprehension is the goal of reading. It cannot be ignored. There is an interaction between the reader and the text.

Understand the Challenges of Assessing Young Readers

Assuming that reading is the complex process described by Snow, what special considerations need to be addressed in young learners? There are unique developmental challenges that include their age and the lack of reliability from one day to the next, understanding that young

children are very verbal and that they best express themselves interacting with their peers or an adult, the fact that young children are not aware of formal testing and its significance for instructional planning, the quick rate at which young learners develop new knowledge, and the difficulty of trying to predict a child's ability to learn based on his or her demonstration of what they already know. A professional educator who knows the child can observe him/her informally everyday and make decisions quickly. These formative assessments can even be used later in the same literacy block. A one-to-one evaluation is optimal and can provide evidence for many aspects of the reading process. Some screening and progress monitoring assessments are taken on a computer. Some students have access to computers from a very early age and may have an advantage if this is the only way they are evaluated. The diversity of our young learners should be reflected in their assessments. If the purpose is to obtain an accurate picture of young readers, then culture, language, and life experiences have to be considered.

Establish a Clearly Defined Purpose for Reading Assessments

It is not enough to assess our students periodically. We can identify and use any number of assessments. Unless they are purposeful and used to make educationally sound decisions, they are robbing children of precious instructional time.

"The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has identified three legitimate purposes for assessment of young children:

- 1) To plan instruction and communicate with parents;
- 2) To identify children with special needs; and
- 3) To evaluate programs.

Guiding principles for assessment of young children, consistent with NAEYC's perspective on testing are: *the content of assessments should reflect and model progress towards learning goals*, taking into account physical and social/emotional development; *methods of assessment must be appropriate to the development and experiences of young children*, meaning that in addition to written products observation, oral reading, and *interviews* should be used for assessment, recognizing the diversity of learners; and *assessments should be tailored for a specific purpose*, assuring the validity of the assessment." (Shephard, 1994)

Assessment Results that Reflect All Aspects of Reading

The optimal situation for assessing young readers is to have a qualified adult listen to a student's pronunciations and conduct an interview for insight into comprehension.

"In addition to outcomes assessments, assessments designed to reflect readers' cognitive, motivational, and linguistic resources as they approach a reading activity are necessary, because they can reflect the dynamic nature of comprehension (e.g. assessing increments of knowledge about vocabulary and particular target domains that result from interaction with particular texts). When the outcomes assessment identifies children who are performing below par, process assessments could help indicate why their reading comprehension is poor."

(RAND, 2002) "Individually administered tests of reading tend to provide more dependable results than group assessments, because the teacher can command the mental engagement of the student, to some extent, during the testing process." (Hess, 2007)

All too often students who are identified as developing readers receive instruction on discrete skills that hamper their progress and abort their chances to listen to engaging stories or wonderful nonfiction read by a classroom teacher. Children pulled from the classroom miss looking at the pictures in a book or talking with classmates about the characters that come to life as friends through an animated reading. The last thing we want for early strugglers is to equate the experience of reading with sounds and memorizing letters.

A Proven Recommendation

Based on input from our members and consulting the experts, we endorse the use of the Observation Survey created by Marie Clay. This tried and true assessment provides systematic observation under controlled conditions. Individual conversations with students produce more dependable information that can be measured against standards. They offer young readers the opportunity to demonstrate what they know about sounds, pronouncing words, holding a book, primary sight words, and vocabulary. Observers can measure a reader's understandings and strategies. We further recommend that it be conducted by a literacy professional.

Computer assessments that claim to measure fluency or sound-letter correspondence offer limited information on discrete skills. Although they can provide one piece of the reading puzzle, they should be done in conjunction with the Observation Survey. Otherwise, there is a chance that what is tested will become the sole focus of instruction. We do not want our assessments to mirror our socio-economic breakdown, but rather to reflect the progress that results from effective analysis of assessments and informed instruction.

Administration of the Assessments and the Role of Literacy Professionals

The need for a knowledgeable educator to administer these assessments, analyze the results, and develop an instructional plan cannot be underestimated. Without the expertise of literacy professionals who can guide the K-3 classroom teachers and offer specialized instruction to small groups of children in need of additional support, the achievement gap will persist. There is no "easy fix." No one strategy, program, or skill will work for all students. Parents are also part of the educational team. Many parents need to be welcomed back into school to learn how to help their children. Certified literacy professionals can educate parents, model strategies for classroom teachers, and meet with small groups to provide instruction based on necessary skills and strategies. High-quality instruction, based on accurate analysis, will help to create successful readers in every school no matter what its zip code. Overreliance on computers to assess or instruct will not provide a solid foundation for creating lifelong readers, nor will it address the root causes of our achievement gap. There is no substitute for reading to a child or providing the skills and confidence to an independent reader who can bring home a book that he or she can read.

Implications for Implementation

In summary, CARR's Board of Directors is urging you to carefully consider your decision regarding K-3 literacy assessments. Define reading and establish a clear purpose for the assessments. Create a list of choices that reflects the complexities of reading and the diversity of our children. Consider ranking them in terms of most reliable and valid for young learners. Know the challenges that five, six, and seven year olds pose to teachers as well as the expectations held for them. A highly qualified literacy educator is the best choice to administer the assessments, interpret them and plan instruction.

The Future of Education In Connecticut

The future of education can be a bright one. We are fortunate to have many educators who are hard working, knowledgeable and caring. At The Governor's Pre-K to 3rd Grade Policy Symposium, Dr. Kagan started her talk by stating "Do what is right for children." I ask that you think of your own children or grandchildren and do what is right for the children of Connecticut.

Thank-you!

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