

# CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS FOR EARLY READING PROFICIENCY

1. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, reading proficiency hasn't improved much nationwide over the past 20 years. But in South Carolina evidence of improvement has been somewhat more encouraging over the past decade:

Years	1992	1994	1998	2000	2002	2003	2005	2007	2009
<b>4<sup>th</sup> grade % Below Basic</b>									
SC	47	52	47	na	42	41	43	41	38
US	38	40	40	41	36	37	36	33	33
<b>4th Grade % Proficiency</b>									
SC	22	20	22	na	21	26	26	26	28
US	29	30	29	29	31	31	31	33	33
<b>4<sup>th</sup> Grade Scale Scores</b>									
SC	210	203	209	na	214	215	213	214	216
US	217	214	215	213	219	218	219	221	221

2. SC has ranked in the bottom 10 states on 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading: **On the NAEP reading test in 2009, SC was tied for 39<sup>th</sup> with Alabama and Arkansas in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade and was 42<sup>nd</sup> in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade.** The lowest scoring states are Louisiana, Mississippi, California, New Mexico, and Nevada. These states are similar to South Carolina in their high rates of poverty, low literacy, and minority populations.
3. Data from state tests for the percent deficient and for not proficient vary but generally show too many deficient readers and too few proficient: State test data over the past 30 years provide an ambiguous picture. Test scores in the first year of testing have always been discouraging but then become much better after several years of instructional alignment and practice in taking the test.
  - **First year state testing results have generally shown over 30% of students below standards:** in grade 3 for BSAP 33% and PACT 35%; for SCRA 30% in kindergarten and 33% in 1<sup>st</sup> grade; 22% on 3<sup>rd</sup> grade PASS were below standards (Not Met) in ELA and 31% in Writing. **Overall it seems reasonable to conclude: at least 25% of students and more likely over 30% are seriously deficient in reading by the end of grade 3. These state test results for early reading deficiency are significantly lower than the 38% Below Basic on 4<sup>th</sup> grade NAEP in 2009 and the 41-43% Below Basic in the 4 NAEP testing administrations from 2002 to 2008.**
  - **It appears that approximately 60-70% of students in SC are not proficient in reading by grade 4.** State tests have shown 72% not proficient in the 1<sup>st</sup> year of PACT testing and 43% in its last year. On PASS ELA in its first year, 54% were below Exemplary on ELA and 60% on Writing. NAEP data found 74% not proficient in 4 testing administrations for 2002-2008 and 72% in 2009.
  - **If state testing results are used to adjust the findings of NAEP (38% Below Basic, 34% Basic, and 28% Proficient), then a plausible though generous**

interpretation would be one-third of SC students at each level: Below Basic, Basic, and Proficient. Since the national goal is for all students to achieve proficiency, one-third of students in SC have attained this standard; one-third are close enough with significant support to reach the standard; and one-third have little prospect of ever becoming proficient, unless they are given substantial effective help starting no later than their initial enrolment in school and preferably earlier.

4. Five achievement gaps reveal troubling disparities in reading proficiency among students in SC: race (minority vs. white), income (poor vs. non-poor), gender (boys vs girls), English language proficiency (non-English vs. English speakers), and state reading competitiveness (SC vs US).

- **Achievement gaps for race and income are a persistent dilemma in SC. Twice as many African American and poor children score below basic than do whites and children who are not poor. Adding to the challenge is the fact that SC has a much higher proportion of African American and poor children than the national average.** The differences are large: for example, on NAEP 56% of African American children were Below Basic in 2009 as compared with 26% for whites; 51% of poor children were Below Basic as compared with 23% of children who were not poor. A smaller gender gap shows lower reading proficiency of boys than girls on all tests (e.g., 40% vs 36% Below Basic on NAEP Reading). Data is not available specifically for the previously small but rapidly growing number of immigrant English language learners in SC, but the gap for Hispanics on the 4<sup>th</sup> grade NAEP in 2009 was 47% Below Basic for Hispanic children as compared with 26% for non-Hispanic white children.

5. While some students come to school already reading or with knowledge and skills enabling them to become proficient readers quickly, many other children are quite unexposed to and unprepared in foundational literacy knowledge, skills, and interest. On the SC Readiness Assessment, teachers rated one-quarter of kindergarten and 1st grade students as not consistently ready in reading and writing and one-third in their communication skills. The Stanford Reading First test in the fall of 1st grade determined that in high-poverty schools only 20% of students have reading skills at grade level while 54% need substantial intervention.

SCRA 2008	Reading (% not consistently ready)	Writing (% not consistently ready)	Communication (% not consistently ready)
Kindergarten	24%	20%	32%
1 <sup>st</sup> grade	25%	28%	33%

Stanford Reading First 2004-2008	At Grade Level	Needs Substantial Intervention
1 <sup>st</sup> grade	20%	54%
2 <sup>nd</sup> grade	36%	31%
3 <sup>rd</sup> grade	26%	47%

6. Children who are slow in becoming capable readers either or both:

- reached school far behind in language and literacy skills (family literacy deficits). High-risk children constituting one-quarter of all 4-year-olds were found by the DIAL screening assessment to have low language skills as compared with national norms: 19% below 95% of all students nationally; 30% below 90% nationally; and 50% below 75% nationally.
- The Stanford Reading First test found that the Speaking Vocabulary of 41% of students entering 1st grade in high poverty schools needs substantial intervention, while only 37% have Speaking Vocabulary at grade level of national norms.

DIAL Language at entry to 4K preschool (SC children scored at national percentiles):	
At or below 5 <sup>th</sup> percentile	19%
At or below 10 <sup>th</sup> percentile	30%
At or below 25 <sup>th</sup> percentile	50%

Stanford Reading First Speaking Vocabulary in Fall of 1 <sup>st</sup> grade (at risk schools 2004-2008):	
At grade level	37%
Needs additional intervention	22%
Needs substantial intervention	41%

- exhibited serious phonological or other reading difficulties: **The Stanford Reading First test found that one-third of children entering 1<sup>st</sup> grade in high poverty schools need substantial intervention for phonemic awareness and phonics.**

Stanford Reading First Phonemic Awareness (at risk schools in Fall of 2004-2008):			
	1 <sup>st</sup> grade	2 <sup>nd</sup> grade	3 <sup>rd</sup> grade
At grade level	56%	65%	78%
Needs additional intervention	11%	21%	15%
Needs substantial intervention	33%	14%	6%

Stanford Reading First Phonics (at risk schools in Fall of 2004-2008):			
	1 <sup>st</sup> grade	2 <sup>nd</sup> grade	3 <sup>rd</sup> grade
At grade level	28%	9%	8%
Needs additional intervention	42%	35%	26%
Needs substantial intervention	30%	56%	66%

7. Effectiveness of reading and literacy instruction varies widely across school districts, schools, and classrooms but could be improved substantially. In an evaluation of high poverty schools participating in South Carolina Reading First (SCRF), schools with high levels of implementation of the effective reading practices promoted in SCRF had significantly higher standardized test scores on Stanford Reading First than schools with lower levels of implementation of these reading practices.
8. Progress has been constrained by lack of a formal plan and funding for a statewide reading initiative that reaches all schools. **Although South Carolina has never adopted a formal plan, the SC Reading Initiative has developed processes and practices for enhancing reading instruction in classrooms across the state, though far from universally. SCRI has worked with more than 5,200 teachers and many other educators to build their knowledge and skills for effective reading instruction. This ambitious initiative has been funded for a decade with approximately \$ 3 million per year of state funds and for 7 years with an average of \$14 million per year of federal Reading First funds. Since Reading First funds are no longer available, support for promoting early reading proficiency has now fallen to an amount sufficient for very limited efforts at the state and district levels (i.e., only enough for a reading coach in 10% of elementary schools with no state or regional support).**

## Solutions

- Formulation of state policy for early reading proficiency, including but not limited to the components listed below.
  - **Policy Prescribes, Practices Produce (If you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there):** Over three decades of activist state education policy, reading has never been a major and consistent focus. Despite the Basic Skills Act of 1979 and the SC Reading Initiative of 1999, reading has not been promoted through high profile policy and practice guidance from elected officials backed by evaluation and oversight. **Solution:** SC educators and elected officials must create a comprehensive plan for reading instruction. The plan should be enacted through legislation and supported by funding sufficient to promote universal early reading proficiency.
- Literacy development through Early Care and Education programs:
  - **Early Care and Too Little Education:** Many children attend child care while their parents are at work. Across South Carolina and the nation, most young children in child care attend programs with rather large group size and high child to teacher ratios. These programs are unable to do enough to stimulate oral language and print awareness skills. Many child care workers lack training in early literacy and too quickly take with them any training they received to better-paying jobs outside child care. **Solution:** Child care workers must receive high quality literacy training starting soon after being hired and continuing throughout their employment.
- Family literacy: both parenting education and literacy promotion (comparable to health promotion of exercise and nutrition).
  - **Families Grow Language (Literacy Begins at Home):** Children in literate families acquire from their parents strong oral language and motivation for

reading. Children growing up in homes not providing daily experiences of rich, interactive dialogue and exposure to print reach school considerably behind classmates entering with critical language skills and print awareness. **Solution:** Family literacy programs are needed to encourage and instruct low literacy families to adopt effective practices of interactive dialogue and shared reading, starting as soon after birth as possible. All of the families whose children are anticipated to perform below reading standards in grades K-3 (approximately 30%) need family literacy services, with half of them requiring intensive guidance and support.

- **Schools Grow Readers:** Building upon the oral language and print awareness which children bring from home, schools must provide learning experiences that produce proficient readers. Since too many young learners are not achieving proficiency in reading and writing, schools must transform their literacy instruction starting in preschool and kindergarten to increase early reading proficiency dramatically. **School solutions are presented below:**

- **Pre-school and kindergarten: building the foundation for reading through oral language and print-literacy skills.**

**Little Learners Love Literacy:** For many years, preschool and kindergarten too narrowly followed the mantra: *“play is a child’s work.”* Though this mantra is correct about process, it was sometimes interpreted to exclude pre-academic content critical to later success. Children ages 4 & 5 must build their oral language, awareness of print, love of literature, and facility with the sounds in words. **Solution:** Preschool and kindergarten must fill each day with rich experiences in language and literature. Teachers must be trained to infuse language and literature into developmentally appropriate individual and group activities throughout the school day.

- **Grades 1-3: quality reading instruction differentiated for each learner’s needs:**

**Struggling Readers Take It Personally.** Reading difficulties begin early, so children’s perceptions of themselves as readers and learners can be damaged if they fail to experience success in learning to read. Each child is different and requires personalized kinds and amounts of support at different points in the journey to reading proficiency.

**Solution:** In order for each child to attain reading proficiency, all of our schools must deliver consistently effective, customized instruction differentiated to meet the needs of individual children. Differentiated instruction should be organized through a tiered delivery model based on principles and practices of Response to Intervention (RTI). RTI is an instructional model with increasingly more intensive and more customized instruction in each successive tier. Tier 1 focuses on instructional improvement for all students; Tier 2 provides small group and individualized intervention services for struggling readers; and Tier 3 offers the most intensive services for severely struggling readers, often through individualized assistance. Students should be placed in Special Education services only when their needs are not resolved by these intensive interventions.

- **Quality classroom instruction** assures small group and individualized attention for readers who need additional help, delivered by teachers well-trained in reading and literacy. For reading instruction and for every content area, all students must be given books they can read. In quality classrooms, teachers employ effective instructional practices such as: (a) determining the

strengths and instructional needs of each child; (b) utilizing flexible grouping based on ongoing assessment of learning; (c) continually monitoring progress and adjusting instruction appropriately; (d) expecting large amounts of reading and writing, especially in the content areas; (e) ensuring that all children have ample time for independent reading of books they can easily manage; and (f) providing direct instruction in reading strategies emphasizing problem-solving in interpreting text, seeking meaning, and drawing upon all available information to comprehend what is being read.

- **Effective intervention programs for struggling readers delivered by highly qualified reading teachers** provide additional, more intensive help for children in small group and one-on-one settings. Intervention models such as Reading Recovery using effective practices validated by research should serve struggling readers in grade 1 with extended service in the summers before and after grade 1. All intervention services should be taught by the most knowledgeable reading professional available and should be customized to the needs of the reader.
- **Strengthened Special Education, Title I and Students at Risk-funded literacy interventions.** For decades Title I, Special Education (now IDEA), and the EIA Students at Risk program (previously Act 135 and originally the EIA Remedial and Compensatory Program) have provided the largest funding and instructional support for poor and disabled children, many of whom are struggling readers. The effectiveness of these efforts to promote reading proficiency is hindered by the limited reading expertise of many teachers employed with these funds as well as by a lack of cooperation and coordination with the classroom and with other interventions across the school. **Solution:** Title I, Students at Risk, and IDEA literacy efforts must become central partners in supporting evidence-based reading interventions delivered by highly-trained teachers. Priority in using the 15% of IDEA funding set aside for Early Intervention Services must be given for support provided by our most effective literacy teachers. When children require long-term assistance, special education services must assure high quality reading instruction for students with disabilities, especially speech and language impairment and learning disabilities.

■ **Teacher training and coaching through professional literacy learning communities:**

**Teaching Struggling Readers IS Brain Surgery (Teachers Must be Taught Too):**

Reading and writing instruction is very complicated work requiring extensive knowledge and skills. Most new teachers with a BA enter the classroom with only two courses in reading. Much more preparation is essential. **Solution:** Adequate preparation in reading and writing requires training equivalent to a MA in reading with at least half of the training received through practicum coaching while teaching. Substantial improvement is needed in:

- the quality and number of required university reading courses
- practicum experience in pre-service training
- coaching for teachers in the schools
- collaborative literacy learning among teachers of reading

- **Evaluation-driven accountability monitoring for early reading proficiency and for content-area reading proficiency:**  
**Fixing What's Broken (If you don't know what's broken, you can't fix it):** While the majority of children progress steadily to reading proficiency with little or no intervention assistance, roughly one-third test below basic in grade 3 and half of these students are severely below grade level. Because there is no statewide plan for monitoring the literacy progress of young children, too many struggling readers are not identified for early intervention in pre-school and kindergarten as intended by the General Assembly in funding pre-school and full-day kindergarten. **Solution:** The legislature should require universal screening and literacy progress monitoring for all students in grades Pre-K through three. These assessments should determine what children already know about written language and what they have not yet learned. The screening and progress monitoring will provide to the state, districts, and schools the information required to identify the students needing additional support and to improve and intensify literacy instruction to ensure reading proficiency by the end of third grade.

  - **Assess literacy skills at entry to 4K and 5K.** The SCDE should develop or adopt statewide a universal screening instrument and more specialized diagnostic instruments to identify children at risk of reading failure.
  - **Monitor children's progress and difficulties in reading through grade 3 or until attainment of proficiency.** The SCDE should adopt a battery of validated formative and diagnostic instruments assessing reading, writing, and oral language. These assessments should be used to diagnose individual child needs, prescribe services, and monitor the effectiveness of interventions in order to adjust instruction for individual children until attainment of proficiency.
  - **Utilize a collaborative, team problem-solving approach to accelerate literacy learning for students below grade level.** Individual reading proficiency plans designed to accelerate reading progress should be developed collaboratively by school teams together with students' families for each student below grade level. These plans should be actively implemented, reviewed, and revised until reading proficiency is attained.
  
- **Legislative oversight through its Education Committees and the EOC:**  
**Trust but Verify (Out of Sight is Out of Mind):** Oversight by elected officials for reading and literacy has been quite limited in the past. Because no major reading initiatives have been enacted, legislative oversight has been minimal. Other states such as Alabama have created high profile reading initiatives which are monitored for effectiveness by the Legislature, Governor, and Board of Education. **Solution:** The General Assembly through its Education Committees and the Education Oversight Committee should provide strong and persistent monitoring for early proficiency in reading and literacy. Annual reading proficiency reports from the State Department of Education should be published and then reviewed by the EOC to recommend improvements so that educators and elected officials can respond with needed remedies.

**Conclusion: there are at least 10 Solutions that should receive policy and practice attention for increasing early reading proficiency:**

1. Development of a state plan and an oversight process for assuring reading proficiency
2. Parenting education and family literacy services targeted to the lowest literacy families
3. Training for child care teachers in practical ways to promote literacy development
4. Substantially enhanced teacher training for effective reading instruction
5. Strengthened classroom reading instruction in 4K preschool through grade 3
6. Assessment of individual children's reading proficiency in 4K through grade 3
7. Individual reading proficiency plans for all struggling readers
8. Effective intervention provided to each seriously struggling reader
9. Improved reading instruction through Special Education, Title 1, and Students at Risk funding and programs
10. Funding sufficient to support a statewide system achieving universal reading proficiency

**For access to data and information on the reading tests cited in this report, see:**

- NAEP: <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard>
- Stanford Reading First: <http://www.ed.sc.edu/scepc/Projects.asp>
- PACT and PASS: <http://ed.sc.gov/topics/assessment/scores>

**Contact Us with Your Comments:**

This report on early reading proficiency has been prepared with funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. It is the first in a series of reports on the critical Challenges and Solutions for early reading proficiency. The report attempts to summarize data on reading proficiency in SC and to offer a framework of Challenges and Solutions for discussion by all persons sharing the conviction that early reading proficiency is essential for academic achievement. Reading is such a complex phenomenon that neither this present document nor the others that follow will ever capture all the perspectives needed for guiding reading proficiency policy and practice. We strongly urge you to send your comments, criticisms, and suggestions to us at: [baron.holmes@ors.sc.gov](mailto:baron.holmes@ors.sc.gov)

Your involvement will enable us to incorporate your knowledge and advice into the consensus-building that the Early Reading Proficiency Project is seeking to nurture. Please become an active partner in our efforts to make universal reading proficiency a reality in South Carolina.

