Improving the Quality of
Early Literacy Education in New Jersey

Report of the Governor's Task Force on Early Literacy Education

Executive Summary

As part of a comprehensive effort to improve the quality of education for New Jersey's children, Governor James E. McGreevey established a Task Force on Early Literacy Education. The Task Force was charged with the responsibility for identifying best practices and approaches in early literacy and making recommendations intended to move New Jersey forward in achieving the Governor's goal of "making sure that we are not leaving any children behind and that we are optimizing their precious early learning years." This document, as prepared by the Early Literacy Task Force, presents research to guide efforts to improve the quality of early literacy education in the State of New Jersey.

Research indicates that there are effective practices that support quality early literacy education. Specific qualities are inherent in effective programs and schools. For instance, research-based practices of effective schools from pre-kindergarten onward, support the role of strong educational leadership, include parents as part of the educational community, sustain professional development, enable collaboration among teachers, provide a manageable class size for optimal learning, and utilize assessment data to inform instruction as all stakeholders work toward what is best for the students. These components work in concert with what is known about effective teaching practices and the content of effective early literacy programs. In addition, these practices are reflective of the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards[20] and the Early Childhood Education Program Expectations.[21] Together, these components serve to highlight the importance of using high-quality literature, including multiple texts that link and expand concepts, providing time for independent reading, and expanding students' background knowledge. Reading should be taught through purposeful and authentic literacy tasks in combination with word study or phonics instruction. Teachers should include a balance of instruction that includes direct instruction, guided instruction, independent learning, small group work, and teacher- and student-led discussions. This instruction must be informed by a variety of assessment techniques and tied to the research that outlines effective literacy programs. The content of effective research-based literacy programs changes as students' progress in their learning and meets the students' needs in a developmentally appropriate manner from pre-kindergarten through the primary grades.

Student assessment data influences decisions made by educators and policymakers alike. Therefore, it must be administered in multiple ways and contexts to guide and enhance student learning, and serve as an accountability system to inform state and local school districts about how well their students are performing. Assessment must be supported by what scientific research says about early literacy development and reflect state and national perspectives on literacy achievement. In addition, a standard design to implement effective instructional practices and services to districts must be established. Districts need to know where to go to get reliable information on research-based early literacy programs and help with using data to make decisions about programs and distribution of resources. Critical to this initiative is the placement of a qualified teacher in every classroom. To prepare pre-service teachers, programs at schools of education must include more coursework around the delivery of initial reading instruction, intervention strategies for students who are having difficulty learning to read and write, and early childhood education. In addition, recommendation is given to an Intern-Teacher Program where pre-service teachers gain practical experience working beside an effective teacher for a sustained period of time. Practicing teachers must also receive high-quality professional development if they are going to help all students meet standards and achieve their academic potential. The use of reading consultants positioned in districts throughout the state who articulate research-based practices, and provide appropriate professional development is one such way to make certain that effective literacy instruction is delivered to all students.

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Introduction

All students must be afforded the opportunity for optimal language arts literacy learning through high-quality teaching. The importance of teacher expertise versus literacy material has been highlighted in numerous studies[12,26] and quality classroom instruction in preschool, kindergarten, and the primary grades has been cited as the "single best weapon against reading failure" in the national report, *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*.[27] With this in mind, the New Jersey Early Literacy Task Force presents this document of research-based features of effective schools and effective teaching practices to support administrators and teachers of children in preschool through grade three. These practices are not only supported by research, but are aligned with the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards[20] and the New Jersey Early Childhood Education Program Expectations[21].

New Jersey is a culturally and linguistically diverse community of families and municipalities. The Task Force views this diversity as positive and reflective of the world in which today's children will grow and learn. The Task Force is aware that the challenge of educating young children with varied backgrounds is an enormously complex task. It is our hope that all of New Jersey's children will have access to the best practices outlined in this document. Furthermore, in keeping with our Standards for World Languages and with current research, we believe that the opportunity to learn, or become acquainted with, two languages appears to have cognitive, cultural and economic advantages.[1] Because language flourishes in schools, English language learners should be offered many opportunities to learn English while maintaining their home language. The early literacy curriculum, with its emphasis on oral and written language, interaction with peers and adults, and exposure to a variety of texts, should enable children new to the United States to experiment with and learn English and English only children to become aware of world languages. In addition to linguistic differences, cultural differences are equally important within the early literacy curriculum. Effective teachers take time to learn about the cultural backgrounds of their students. These are respected and built upon as resources that complement a culturally rich variety of literary and first hand experiences.

The Task Force also places heavy emphasis on strengthening the connections between home and school.[13] It values the role of the entire school staff including the library media specialist as contributors to the literacy development of young children.[14]

The content in this document represents a balanced approach to language arts literacy. In a balanced literacy program, children have many opportunities to listen and respond to books read aloud to them and to observe and respond as writing is modeled for them. Children share interactively in the reading of

various print materials and collaborate in creating written texts. They engage in language study as they learn about the sounds and symbols of our language and their relationship to the alphabetic code. They learn about the conventions of written language. They discuss and respond to written materials and they read and write independently, applying what they have learned. The components of language arts and literacy carry through the years of early literacy learning; however, they look different at various stages of development. Effective teachers scaffold children's learning, providing support as needed and moving children to more challenging tasks and learning opportunities. Outlined below are key ideas from the research that summarize what effective schools and teachers do to support young children's language and literacy development. Based on this research, recommendations are given for the implementation of effective practices, professional development, pre-service and certification, and assessment. This information is presented to guide efforts to improve the quality of early literacy education in the State of New Jersey.

Research-Based Best Practices of Effective Schools
(Pre Kindergarten – Grade 3)[8,30]

1. *Effective schools put students first to improve learning.*[5,7,8,18,31]
The responsibility for school improvement is a collective effort. Teachers, parents, administrators, and other staff members work as a team to improve all students' learning. Overall, the staff focuses on what is best for the students.

2. *Effective schools have strong building leadership.*[8,11,18,32]
The administrative staff (principals, directors, and other educational leaders) play a vital role in a school's success. An effective leader values collaboration and professional development and works to provide time for this to take place while also striving to create additional time for instruction. An effective administrator develops a collective sense of responsibility for school improvement, secures resources to work toward this improvement, and assists staff in overcoming difficulties.

3. *Effective schools have strong collaboration across teachers.*[5,8,11,18,31,32]
Teachers are focused on how best to meet students' needs. They plan and instruct together to meet these needs. There is a strong sense of communication in the building both within and across grade levels. This leads to a better understanding of school wide curricula and expectations.

4. *Effective schools consistently use data on student performance to improve learning.*
[5,8,11,18,31,32]

Teachers consider student assessment data important. They share the data and make instructional decisions based on this data. Together they also align instruction to standards and state or district assessments.

5. *Effective schools have strong links to parents.* [5,8,11,18,31,32]
Parents are considered valued members of the school community. School staff members reach out to parents and build effective partnerships with them to support student achievement. This provides a positive school climate, good relations with the community and high levels of parent support.

6. Effect schools focus on professional development and innovation. [5,7,8,11,18,31,32]
Professional development is ongoing and sustained over a long period of time. Teachers try out new research-based practices and learn together within the building to improve instruction.

7. *Effective schools successfully maintain reasonable class size* [8,23,24]
Small class size provides longitudinal benefits for all students. Small class size enables the teacher to spend more time with individual students addressing their specific needs and may create a more comfortable environment for some children.

Research-Based Best Practices of Effective Teachers[9]

Note bold type in this section indicates content and strategies that link directly to New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards[20] *and the New Jersey Early Childhood Education Program Expectations.*[21]

1. *Teach reading for authentic meaning-making literacy experiences: for pleasure, to be informed, and to perform a task.*
Purposeful and authentic literacy tasks motivate students to learn and to consider reading an interactive and relevant process. These meaningful experiences allow for development of **comprehension** skills and support **vocabulary** expansion.

2. Use high-quality literature.
Students learn best when they are interested and involved. Quality literature engages students and helps to create a classroom culture that fosters reading motivation. This involvement in quality literature enables teachers to model **fluency** as they read aloud to students, to teach **comprehension** strategies, and to generate **responses to and discussions about text**.

3. Integrate a comprehensive word study/phonics program into reading/ writing instruction.
Best practices include explicitly and systematically teaching children to manipulate phonemes with letters. Instruction should be focused on 1-2 types of phoneme manipulation, instead of multiple types, and segmenting and blending seem to be the most important manipulations to teach. Phonemic awareness should be taught in small groups, but research shows no difference in the effectiveness of phonics instruction provided to individuals, small groups, or whole classes. Monitoring of students' **phonemic awareness** is critical, as those who do not respond to phonemic awareness instruction may have a reading disability. Teach a carefully selected and useful set of letter-sound relationships, organized into a logical instructional sequence. Effective teachers encourage readers to apply their **phonics** knowledge while reading connected text and while writing. Phonics instruction is most effective when it begins in kindergarten or first grade and continue for about two years.[19]

4. Use multiple texts that link and expand concepts.
Effective teachers use author studies, genre studies, and topical studies to **link a variety of texts** around a central theme. Author studies allow students to **read and discuss** a variety of works by a single author, study the author's craft, and consider applications to their own writing. Genre studies allow students to investigate the distinctive **structural features** of various types of **fiction** and **non-fiction** text. Familiarity with the structural features of various texts helps readers **comprehend** and **writers compose**. Topical studies allow students to read and discuss a **variety of texts** focused on specific areas of content under study. Students read, **compare, and contrast information** from a variety of print and electronically generated materials.

5. Balance teacher- and student-led discussions. Talk in the classroom serves to build community as students and teacher generate, share, and clarify ideas.

Students **respond to texts read, heard, and viewed**. They learn to use **talk as an instrument for learning** in conjunction with other modalities. The Report of the National Reading Panel indicates that there is scientifically based evidence for the effectiveness of cooperative learning strategies as a tool for **text comprehension**. These strategies make use of both teacher and student-led discussions and activities.

6. Build a whole class community that emphasizes important concepts and builds background knowledge.

Effective teachers provide experiences that equip children with the necessary background knowledge to succeed with literacy tasks.[2] This includes **before, during, and after reading** activities that generate discussions and consider new vocabulary. This activation of background knowledge facilitates children's **comprehension**, **vocabulary development**, **decoding and word recognition**, and **fluency** as they engage in the task.

7. Work with students in small groups while other students read and write about what they have read.

Effective teachers modify instruction, tasks, and materials to meet each child's literacy needs.[28] Small group instruction enables teachers to do this as they perform the task of systematic evaluation of student progress in context[31] and teach literacy skills in response to specific difficulties students encounter as they read authentic texts and write for authentic purposes.[34] This small group setting lends itself to instruction to students with similar needs in such areas as **decoding** and **comprehension** strategies.

8. Give students plenty of time to read in class.

Opportunities for readers to read passages orally multiple times with guidance and feedback from teachers, peers, or parents has been proven effective for the development of **fluency**. Practices such as paired reading, shared reading, collaborative oral reading, assisted oral reading (with tape recorder or computer) and echo reading are appropriate practices that offer repeated reading experiences.[19]

9. Give students direct instruction in decoding and comprehension strategies that promote independent reading. Balance direct instruction, guided instruction, and independent learning.

Literacy best practices are grounded in the principle of balanced instruction. This model stresses the importance of both form (phonics, mechanics, etc.) and function (comprehension, purpose, meaning) of the literacy process. A systematic program of **direct instruction** insures that students have opportunities for instruction in key areas of literacy at their developmental levels. **Guided instruction** allows for teacher led development and monitoring of students' application of skills and strategies. **Independent learning** activities allow students to apply skills and strategies on their own in a variety of situations that may be orchestrated and monitored by the teacher, but not directly supervised. It is noted that learning occurs most often and effectively in a whole-part-whole context.[9,29]

10. Use a variety of assessment techniques to inform instruction.

Best practices are a result of informed decision making. These decisions are based in data as it is collected through a variety of methods. Characteristics of best practices in literacy assessment include those that: focus on important goals and support meaningful student learning; are based on our most current and complete understanding of literacy and children's development; are based in the classroom rather than imposed from outside; involve students in their own learning and enhance their understanding of their own development; use criteria and standards that are public so that students, teachers, parents, and others know what is expected; start with what the students currently know; involve

teachers (and often students) in the design and use of the assessment; empower teachers to trust their own professional judgments about learners; nourish trust and cooperation between teachers and students; focus on students' strengths rather than just reveal their weaknesses; provide information that is used to advocate for students rather than to penalize them; support meaningful standards based on the understanding that growth and excellence can take many forms; are integral parts of instruction; gather multiple measures over time and in a variety of meaningful contexts; provide educators and others with richer and fairer information about all children, including those who come from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds; are part of a systemic approach to improving education that includes strengthening the curriculum, professional development for teachers and additional support for helping those children who need it; provide information that is clear and useful to students, teachers, parents, and other stakeholders; continually undergo review, revision, and improvement.[35]

Content of Effective Research-based Literacy Programs[15]

Prekindergarten and kindergarten programs

Teachers at this grade level should provide students with **language skills** through a broad array of language experiences that stress oral language, vocabulary, and other language concepts. These are critical foundations for success in reading, especially comprehension. Language experiences should include giving students many opportunities to discuss their experiences, make predications and discuss past events in small groups. It may also include instruction in key language concepts such as colors, shapes, prepositions, sequence, and classification. A key predictor of successful reading comprehension is **background knowledge**. Quality teachers provide children a wealth of background knowledge by exposing them to content in science, history, and geography from an early age to give children a context for understanding what they read. Effective teachers nurture children's **appreciation of stories and books** to provide a great deal of experience with literature. When teachers read to students, they should stop to engage discussions about the characters and make predictions. Active exploration of new words and concepts, retelling after the story is complete, and sequencing pictures of the story's events are appropriate activities with literature. It is important to include nonfiction and genres other than fiction in the students' reading repertoire. Teachers should include **concepts about print** in their teaching. Children must be aware that stories and text are written from left to right, that spaces between words matter, and that there is one-to-one correspondence between the words on the page and what the reader says. **Phonemic awareness** if one of the most important foundations of reading success and is a component of effective literacy instruction. This is the understanding that words are sequences of phonemes (the basic speech sounds that are represented by the letters of the alphabet). Children can learn to assemble phonemes into words as well as break words into their phonemes before they are writing letters or words. In preschool, teachers should provide ample experience with rhyming words as it is an effective first step in building phonemic awareness. Later, more direct instruction on the individual sounds that make up words is needed. Teachers should provide experiences with letters of the alphabet. This can include alphabet songs, matching pictures or objects with initial sounds, and playing games with letters and sounds. By the end of kindergarten, children should be able to recognize, name, and print letters, and know the sounds they represent.

Beginning Reading Programs

First grade instruction must be designed to ensure that all children have a firm grasp of reading basics such as **phonemic awareness**, and an understanding of how the letters of words, going from left to right, represent their sounds. Students who don't know **letters and sounds** will need special instruction. First grade instruction should include a **balanced approach** to early reading instruction with phonics and meaning. This includes explicit instruction and practice with sound structure that lead to familiarity with spelling-sound conventions and their use in identifying printed words.[27] Well-sequenced **phonics instruction** early in first grade has been shown to reduce the incidence of reading difficulty even as it

accelerates the growth of the class as a whole. Continual monitoring of the children's progress is necessary to allow those who are progressing quickly to move ahead and those who are struggling to receive the assistance they need. Reading material for first grade students must be as **interesting and meaningful** as possible. Reading pleasure should always be as much a focus as reading skills. However, a young readers' material should include a high proportion of new words that they can use the letter-sound relationships that they have been taught. The combination of these features of interesting, meaningful and decodable text, may be accomplished with pictures as representations of words students cannot yet identify or a combination of text the experienced reader reads and then text the student reads. **Comprehension strategies** are an essential component of reading instruction and can be taught using material that is read to children as well as material that children read themselves. Teachers should engage in before reading activities such as establishing a purpose for reading or reviewing vocabulary, during reading activities such as asking children to identify problems and directing students' attention to difficult or confusing parts of the text, and after reading activities such as retelling or sequencing. Direct instruction in **metacognitive strategies** such as checking for meaning or one-to-one correspondence should also occur in effective reading instruction. A literacy program would not be complete without the inclusion of **writing**, both expository and creative, and writing instruction from kindergarten on. Although invented spelling is supported as a means of leading students to internalize phonemic awareness and the alphabetic principle, conventionally correct **spelling** should be developed with focused instruction and practice.[19] **Curriculum-based assessment** should be included as a component to consider how the student is doing in the classroom, guide decisions about grouping and the pace of instruction, and addressing individual needs of students. Ideally, **class size** would be decreased for the literacy instruction so that students could receive the necessary services to meet these individual needs. Particularly, teachers should make use of **supplemental support** offered by qualified individuals to provide additional individualized and small-group remedial assistance for those students most in need. However, teachers must include effective grouping strategies that meet the needs of the students without hampering motivation or interest on the part of the students. It is of utmost importance that when teachers are working with a particular group, that the remainder of the class is involved in meaningful and productive tasks. Teachers must also reach out to the caregivers at the **home** to encourage spending more time reading at home. By the end of first grade students should be able to decode virtually any phonetically regular short word with short or long vowels, read a large number of high-frequency sight words, and have solid comprehension skills.

Second Grade and Beyond
Second grade students should continue to increase their **joy of reading**, develop the ability to **read a wide variety of materials**, and increase **fluency, vocabulary, background knowledge**, **comprehension strategies**, and **writing skills**. This can be accomplished with a concentration on **quality literature** appropriate to the students' current reading levels. The importance of content knowledge should be a focus as students read **expository texts**. Effective reading **comprehension** strategy teaching should be infused into content area periods such as social studies or science. To further address comprehension instruction, teachers should engage students in before reading activities such as scanning material and predicting, during reading activities such as looking for story elements and monitoring their own reading for understanding, and after reading activities such as representations of the content that highlight the main idea of the text including webs, charts, and outlines. Teachers should build students' **vocabulary** by teaching specific words in text, giving opportunities for students to use these words in a variety of contexts, and teaching students dictionary skills. Since vocabulary development is closely related to students' amount and variety of reading, teachers can support this through activities that encourage students to notice new vocabulary in what they are reading. Teachers may ask the students to choose three new words from their reading and then set aside time to further explore these words in a way that extends and clarifies their meanings and usage. Writing creative and expository texts should be included in a **writing process approach** that encourages collaborative planning, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing individual compositions in a variety of genres. Students need specific writing instruction in strategies that enrich and clarify language expression, and language mechanic skills can be directly taught as they are integrated into students' own writing during

the revising and editing process. Students also need opportunities and instruction in writing for a variety of purposes and different audiences. **Cooperative learning** should be a component of the teaching strategies that teachers employ. Students should work in groups of four or five over a period six to eight weeks where they can be recognized for achieving goals or meeting expectations in the group.

Summary Statements and Recommendations

An important national priority is improving the academic achievement of all American students.[22] For this to happen, fundamental changes must occur in the classroom where learning is determined by what teachers and students do. Thus, after identifying effective research-based instruction, the Governor's Early Literacy Task Force examined four key areas necessary to move the Early Literacy Initiative forward into local school districts and classrooms throughout the state of New Jersey. Following are summary statements and recommendations by the task force for four areas examined: Implementation of Effective Practices, Professional Development, Pre-service and Certification, and Assessment.

Implementing Effective Practices
Literacy programs throughout the United States and New Jersey have demonstrated success based on their desired outcomes. However, the conditions under which success occurs may be dependent upon the factors present in a particular environment. For example, a small school may find success with a before school program to support early literacy learning, however, a larger school with bussing issues may find this program difficult to implement and will need to search out a more appropriate program to meet its needs. Thus, the decision to implement particular literacy practices or programs must be based in data generated from the schools or school districts that would be impacted by the program.[27] Data analysis highlights the areas in need of strengthening and enables a program to be tailored to the needs of the students it will service while working through the restraints of implementation. [31]

Recommendations

1. **Establish a clearinghouse** of early literacy programs that are aligned with research-based practices, the NJCCCS, and the Early Childhood Education Program Expectations.[20,21] Include in this database program descriptions and the significant factors that impact the success of the each program.

2. **Host needs assessment workshops** to assist districts with the interpretation of data from language arts literacy assessments. Analysis of assessment data leads to further understanding of the needs of the students and the professionals working with these students. This data can then be used to drive instruction and guide professional development. Workshops shall also offer guidance regarding what districts should be looking for when selecting programs and materials. Regional workshops addressing these issues must be collaborative and non-directive.

3. **Establish regional centers** of reading consultants throughout the state to provide assistance to schools in the area of literacy. This will enable all schools to have access to literacy experts. The role of these experts would include articulating research-based practices, providing appropriate professional development to literacy educators, and supporting effective literacy instruction for all students.

Professional Development
American schools are faced with the increasingly complex task of educating the most diverse student population in its history, in a multifaceted, technology-driven society. At the same time, academic

standards for student achievement are higher than ever before. Clearly, these important changes in schools calls for teachers who are highly-qualified, flexible users of resources, and have a deep understanding of children and subject matter.[6]

Preparation to fulfill such an enormous responsibility must come in the form of continuous high-quality professional development. Such development would guide teachers as they reflect on their instructional practices, collaborate with peers who are working toward similar goals, and consult with content experts around best practices for early literacy learning.[16] This kind of professional development must be adequately funded at the appropriate state and local levels.[22]

Recommendations

1. **Provide Reading Coaches to build instructional support** in school districts and classrooms that demonstrate the need for additional help. The Reading Coaches will maintain sustained contact with teachers as they practice and refine their teaching practices around research-based best practices as defined by this task force.

2. **Provide common professional development experiences** for all literacy teachers. This on-going professional development will support the systemic use of best practices to meet the NJCCCS and the Early Childhood Education Program Expectations. The use of videotapes with hands-on activities should be considered as one of the formats for delivering consistent demonstrations of instructional methods.

3. **Establish a Principal's Literacy Academy** designed to offer building leaders the opportunity to meet on a regular basis in order to develop the knowledge and directed leadership skills that are essential to the success of the New Jersey Early Literacy Initiative.

4. **Offer school districts menu-driven professional development** opportunities for teachers to choose from based on their specific needs.

5. **Require pre-k-third grade teachers to use 50 of the 100 hours of professional development towards courses/workshops in reading/language arts.** Other professionals such as physical education teachers, and media specialists should allot 25 of the 100 hours for courses/workshops in reading/language arts. Selected courses/workshops must be registered and certified by the state.

6. **Prepare teachers in culturally responsive teaching strategies and critical teaching behaviors** to reduce the disproportionate representation of culturally diverse students in remedial classes and special education.

7. **Use mass media such as New Jersey Network (NJN), the Internet, and library media services to disseminate information** about the Early Literacy Initiative. Research-based programs and their characteristics, various resources, announcements, and contact persons shall be listed. Sites shall be in English and Spanish. In addition, all communications should extend to Spanish networks.

Pre-service and Certification
Research indicates that the quality of the teacher in a classroom is one of the most critical factors in how much a student learns in school.[4,16] In addition, further studies have shown that teachers with strong preparation in the subject matter they teach are better able to help their students meet the curriculum and academic standards successfully. [6,19,22] However, many new teachers do not feel prepared to implement curriculum, help students reach performance standards, or address the diverse student population they

face in their classrooms. As a result, about 30 percent of new teachers leave the profession in the first five years, and among those, the most talented are more likely to leave.[4,10]

In the state of New Jersey, pre-service teachers are not required to have hourly credits in the teaching of reading to obtain certification in elementary education. In the state of New Jersey, pre-service teachers are not required to have hourly credits in the teaching of reading to obtain certification in elementary education. Consequently, many new teachers may be placed in classrooms without having the repertoire of the skills and knowledge needed to help all students become successful readers.[22]

Pre-service teachers must be nurtured and supported. They must have a substantial amount of time throughout their preparation to work in classrooms alongside effective teachers to learn from observation and their own teaching. In addition, their coursework must include immersion in research-based literacy instruction to acquire the critical skills needed to teach students at each stage of reading development.

Recommendations

1. **Institute required programs/competency in schools of education for elementary teacher certification** with an emphasis on the delivery of initial reading instruction and early childhood education. Other components of teacher preparation should include a considerable number of practical classroom experiences before student-teaching.

2. **Provide programs/coursework that equips teachers with intervention methods and strategies** to instruct students who are having difficulty learning to read and write.

3. **Establish an Intern-Teacher program** to prepare pre-service teachers for their responsibilities in the classroom. This internship would be similar to that of the medical profession, where pre-service teachers gain supervised practical experience by working beside effective teachers. District administrators and curriculum supervisors shall be responsible for ensuring that pre-service teachers are placed with highly-qualified teachers only.

Assessment

Student assessment data informs decisions about resources, programs, and practices at local, state, and national levels. Assessments used to measure the progress of students' literacy performance throughout the grades should be continuous, administered in a variety of ways and contexts, and used to inform instruction that improves student learning.[22] Assessments used must be supported by what research has shown about children's literacy development [17] should focus on important goals that advance meaningful student learning, and reflect both a state and national perspective on literacy achievement.[19,20,21]

Recommendations

1. **Use summative assessment** that occurs at a predetermined time and under set conditions to report students' status of proficiency in grades 3-8 and demonstrate district/school performance and statewide progress.

2. **Use formative assessment** that directs instruction throughout the teaching and empowers teachers to trust their own professional judgment about learners. Also, the use of formative assessment involves students in understanding the particular qualities of their own work and how to improve.[3]

3. **Provide professional development opportunities** to strengthen teachers' understanding and

capabilities in the use of formative assessment tools.

4. **Align state assessments with the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards and Early Childhood Program Expectations** to match what students are expected to learn and how they are assessed.

5. **Identify developmentally appropriate assessments for pre-k through second grade** that provide continuity across all grade levels to indicate how students are progressing at successive stages. Assessments must support early literacy learning and be sensitive to the range of differences among learners. These assessments shall provide information that is comprehensive and efficient for instructional and administrative use.

6. **Obtain documentation from test publishers** in the Request for Proposals (RFPs) that clearly indicate an alignment between publishers' tests, and NJCCCS benchmarks. In addition, test preparation materials should include multiple sample items reflecting the same standards, format and level of difficulty.

7. **Include a writing assessment as part of the Grade 3 Assessment** because research indicates when reading and writing are taught together, student achievement improves in both areas.[31] This assessment must support the use of best practices in literacy education.

8. **Report assessment results promptly** to provide immediate feedback to aid teacher and student during the learning process. School districts and state policymakers also benefit from early reporting of assessments to ensure accountability and allocate resources to improve literacy learning (e.g., program innovation, professional development, and training for school personnel).

9. **Develop a statewide student database** to monitor individual student literacy progress and provide continued support/intervention for students who transfer between schools and districts.

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