

A NEW FOCUS ON READING

There are students in B.C. schools who should be able to read this sentence but can't. Everyone involved in education in the province will agree this is a problem that must be solved.

This is neither a new problem nor a new concern. We know that reading success has one of the most profound impacts on an individual's future. Successful readers are more successful in virtually every other social and economic aspect of their lives, as children and as adults. Within the school environment, we know that learning to read deeply shapes a child's overall educational experience. Research tells us that those who read early and well are more likely to graduate. For example, almost all of the Grade 4 students who exceeded expectations in reading in 2001/02 earned their dogwood diploma by 2010/11. In contrast, approximately a quarter of the students in that cohort who did not meet expectations have yet to graduate.

Challenges with reading not only directly impede learning and academic achievement, they can also be the root of behavioural and other difficulties that only multiply the impact on a child's educational experience and other challenges that child may face. This is why government, school districts, individual schools, teachers and community partners have pursued an array of literacy initiatives with varying levels of success over the years.

BC's Education Plan sets out a vision for an education experience that helps students succeed through collaboration, creativity and critical thinking. As compelling and important as that vision is, we must not lose sight of the value of ensuring every student has the foundational skills they have always drawn from our schools, including reading. Indeed, the vision in BC's Education Plan cannot be achieved without maintaining that focus. We could never expect students to succeed in even the most flexible, personalized and engaging environment if they cannot read. Arguably a foundation of strong reading is even more important in a personalized learning environment and in preparing students for life in a knowledge-based world.

Recognizing the continued importance and challenge of reading, the Ministry of Education has made reading in kindergarten to Grade 3 a primary focus for the coming year. To support this, \$10.7 million in increased funding has been dedicated to support early reading in every district. Maureen Dockendorf, a highly respected B.C. educator, is taking on the role of Superintendent for Reading and working with districts to identify how best to use that funding. Her goal is to guide an approach that will draw on current research and an understanding of what builds reading success, and on examples of how that is being applied in a number of districts and schools that have proven the potential of that practice.

In many communities across the province we can see outstanding examples of early reading success. But, despite our best efforts to date, the 2012 Foundational Skills Assessment data tells us that provincially only 70 per cent of Grade 4 students and 64 per cent of Grade 7 students are meeting or exceeding expectations in reading. However, the range from the lowest-performing to the highest-performing schools and districts is wide.

The challenge is to emulate the successful results in every community, while recognizing that each community will require approaches that reflect its unique diversity and circumstances. Where this success has happened, has invariably been the result of a deliberate and relentless focus on reading success, which is precisely what we hope to instill across the province this year.

We know from these success stories and from the research that successful early reading is not just a matter of focusing on the technical aspects of reading but also of building an overall environment that fosters reading. This includes building a strong community of reading within and beyond the classroom that includes families, the wider school community and beyond. It includes understanding factors such as self-regulation and its impact on student focus and engagement. And, perhaps more than anything, it includes the commitment we know that all teachers share to engaging their young students in the magic of reading in ways that allow them to succeed.

Every student has the potential to be a successful reader given the right supports and opportunities to find a path to reading that reflects their individual learning needs. Teachers work to ensure every student has the opportunity to participate in literacy activities. They create an environment rich in language, oral expression, respect and understanding. They work on developing not only reading skills but also thinking skills, including self-awareness and self-regulation, as gateways to reading. They provide meaningful choices for each child in reading materials that appeal to different interests. And they provide choices about when and where to read and how to use and extend what they learn from reading.

Our goal is to support teachers by further building their capacity as the leaders at the heart of early reading success for every student. But, however pivotal their role, it is not only up to teachers. Helping every young B.C. child learn to read is in the interest of every British Columbian and is dependent on all the people who influence each child's early years.

There is no "typical" struggling reader. They come from every social, economic and cultural background. They may have additional behavioural, cognitive or physical challenges, or they may have none. They may come from families unable to provide the necessary support, or they may come from the most stable and supportive homes. They may have difficulty with social skills, or they may be the most friendly and outgoing children in the class. And their barriers to reading success can be just as varied.

But the one thing they have in common is that they all have the ability to learn to read and the potential to enjoy all its benefits if they have the environment that supports their needs. Every child can learn to read, and every child wants to read. In partnership with teachers, districts, communities and students themselves, our goal is to ensure they have the opportunity.

Further Background

The following resources provide additional insight into the current thinking on supporting early learning and reading success.

The Ontario Ministry of Education's Parents Guide to Helping Your Child Learn to Read
<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/brochure/earlyreading/index.html>

Early Learning, the Brain and Society (video) a lecture by Dr. Patricia Kuhl
<http://itunes.apple.com/ca/itunes-u/early-childhood-development/id431502420>

Ready, Set, Grow (video) a discussion with Dr. Andrew Meltzoff about learning through play
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n-r617BK9Pg>

The New Literacies (video) by Allan Luke
<http://resources.curriculum.org/secretariat/may31.shtml>

Comprehension and Content: Planning Literacy Curriculum in Low Socioeconomic and Culturally Diverse Schools by Allan Luke, Karen Dooley and Annette Woods
<http://lled.educ.ubc.ca/sites/lled.educ.ubc.ca/files/pdf/luke.pdf>