



Definitions and Approaches to Measuring Reading Proficiency

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INFORMATION REQUEST

A state contacted CEELO for guidance in developing a definition of “reading proficiency” and what it means to “read on grade level by third grade.” The state also requested information on how national sources or states define and measure proficiency. The state was particularly interested in national perspectives pertaining to the development of shared meaning for the terms, as well as any evidence of individual state-adopted definitions of reading proficiency.

State’s Goal

Establish a common definition of “reading on grade level by 3rd grade and processes to assess proficiency.”

Overview of Response

“Literacy” is most often described as the skills and knowledge that are necessary to learn to read, including phonological awareness/beginning reading, listening, speaking, and writing. “Reading” is described as a set of interrelated skills needed to learn from reading in order to comprehend meaning from varied texts. “English Language Arts” generally refers to the skills needed to comprehend and communicate effectively.

The following sections provide selected resources regarding national and state definitions to inform a definition of reading proficiency and approaches to measuring proficiency. Additionally, a good resource that summarizes state early literacy policy is [A Problem in Search of a Solution: A State Policy Roadmap for Improving Early](#)

Background/Context

This state has established working groups charged with developing resources and recommendations to support the implementation of a model to ensure that all children in the state are proficient in reading by the end of 3rd grade.

Methodology

Research national definitions of reading; literacy; and proficiency and identify common elements, skills, and language that could guide the workgroup in developing a definition.

Identify selected state definitions of reading and/or literacy proficiency in states’ literacy plans or “Third Grade Reading Proficiency” laws or initiatives.

Identify definitions and common measures of reading and/or literacy proficiency used by states and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

[Reading Proficiency](#). See in particular Appendix A- State Policy Excerpts and Appendix B- Sample Tools for Screening and Progress Monitoring.ⁱ

Is There a Common Definition of “Reading”?

Based on a review of the literature, reading is commonly defined as the ability to read and interpret meaning from varied texts. We reviewed three primary sources to identify national or commonly used definitions. These include:

(1) The [National Assessment of Educational Progress](#) (NAEP) is a nationally representative measure of trends in U.S. students’ academic achievement in grades 4, 8, and 12. NAEP defines reading as follows, but notes this definition is only for the purposes of the assessment:

*Reading is an active and complex process that involves: (a) understanding written text, (b) developing and interpreting meaning, and (c) using meaning as appropriate to type of text, purpose, and situation.*ⁱⁱ

(2) The **National Reading Panel (NRP)**, convened in 1997, synthesized current research on reading development of children in preschool through grade 12 (though very little research existed at the time on preschool children). The NRP produced two major reports in 2000.¹ No single definition of reading is identified in the report, however, the panel found the following skills critical to reading development: phonemic awareness, phonics, reading fluency, and reading comprehension.

(3) Selected reading researchers identify the following **definitions**:

- Reading is the process of constructing meaning from written texts. It is a complex skill requiring the coordination of a number of interrelated sources of information.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Reading is the process of constructing meaning through the dynamic interaction among: (1) the reader's existing knowledge; (2) the information suggested by the text being read; and (3) the context of the reading situation.^{iv}
- “...reading proficiency at the end of elementary school requires that students be able to identify the words on the page accurately and fluently; that they have enough knowledge and thinking ability to understand the words, sentences, and paragraphs; and that they be motivated and engaged enough to use their knowledge and thinking ability to understand and learn from the text. We want to emphasize that motivation to understand and learn from text is a critical component of reading comprehension...”^v
- Reading proficiency requires three sets of interrelated skills that develop over time: language and communication, mechanics of reading, and content knowledge.^{vi}

¹ Available at <http://www.nichd.nih.gov/about/org/der/branches/cdbb/Pages/nationalreadingpanelpubs.aspx>

Is There a Common Definition of Literacy?

Based on a review of the literature, literacy is generally defined to include knowledge and skills to read, write, listen and speak.^{vii}

The [National Early Literacy Panel](#) convened in 2002 to synthesize the research on the development of early literacy skills of children ages birth to five. The panel reports did not identify a single definition of “literacy,” however the intent of the review of the literature was to identify the skills and abilities of young children that predict later reading, writing and spelling outcomes. The panel concluded that “conventional” reading and writing skills, such as decoding, oral reading fluency, reading comprehension, writing and spelling in the early years (i.e. birth to five) are strongly predictive of later literacy outcomes.^{viii}

The [Common Core English Language Arts](#) address skills in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language. Reading standards focus on text complexity and growth of comprehension, and include foundational, skills, and reading literature and informational text.^{ix}

The U.S. Department of Education’s [Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy Program](#) provided funding to state literacy teams to develop a Comprehensive Literacy Plan. Many state plans do not explicitly include a definition of literacy, but they are implied or derived from either a description of reading difficulties, or instructional models, or descriptions of proficient readers. Below are selected definitions from state literacy plans to consider:

- [Massachusetts’s PreK- Grade 12 Literacy Plan](#) defines literacy in the United States as the ability to read, write, and speak English in order to comprehend and communicate meaning with clarity in school, the workplace, at home, and in society. Importantly, the plan also asserts that literacy in 21st century American society requires sufficient English language fluency to enable the integration of language and literacy skills and content knowledge. Proficiency in language and literacy contributes substantially to the likely success students will have in mastering all areas of the curriculum by enabling students to read and write complex texts, communicate thoughts, and participate actively in discussion. (1)
- [Hawaii’s Literacy Plan](#) defines literacy in the following way: Literacy is the ability to understand and use language and images to acquire knowledge, communicate, and think critically in all content and contexts. (4) (also see the profile of a literate learner)
- [New Hampshire’s PreK-Literacy Plan](#) defines literacy, reading, and proficiency as follows: Literacy is defined as the ability to read, write, speak, listen, and view in order to communicate with others effectively. Literacy is also the ability to think and respond critically in a wide variety of complex settings. Reading ...Students must be able to construct meaning from text through an active, cognitive process, and deal critically with a variety of complex material, including literary, narrative, informational, and practical works. Proficient readers enjoy multiple strategies and processes to understand text. Literacy includes the ability to think and respond critically...(10)

How do national organizations or states' define and measure reading proficiency?

Based on a review of the literature, reading proficiency is commonly measured by national or state standardized measures; and in some states, age/grade assessments of literacy. A rating of “proficient” generally means that a student has mastered age/grade level expectations. See below:

The NAEP defines [proficiency](#) as follows:

- **Basic**—Denotes partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills that are fundamental for proficient work at each grade.
- **Proficient**—Represents solid academic performance for each grade assessed. Students reaching this level have demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter.
- **Advanced**—Signifies superior performance.

The central language of proficient, "competency over challenging subject matter," was taken from the National Education Goals, announced by the president and the nation's governors in 1989.”^x

An analysis of 2007 NAEP ratings of proficiency and state standards found that “definitions” of proficiency between the NAEP ratings and state standards can differ widely. For example, the analysis found that some states’ “proficient” rating as measured by the standards was comparable to “below basic” according to the NAEP rating.^{xi} Presumably, then Next Generation Standards and Common Core implementation may address some of this discrepancy in rigor, but it will be important for a state to consider these issues of alignment in ratings and standards.

This state is one of a growing number of states with legislation or initiatives to improve third grade reading proficiency. We reviewed how states defined literacy or reading in the law or public materials. We also looked at the requirements or regulations to measuring proficiency, and what types of measures are used in states. Many states do not explicitly define reading, except in terms of specific skills to be accomplished by third grade.^{xii}

- Almost all states identify students who are proficient or not, based on state-wide standardized measures or standards at grade level, often specifically at 3rd grade.
- Some are implementing a comprehensive system of assessment including universal screening (e.g. kindergarten entry assessments or literacy screeners) and formative assessments (e.g. benchmark measures or response to intervention processes).
- States may require assessments in prekindergarten or kindergarten and often include Kindergarten through Grade 3.
- Many states are developing intensive professional development for teachers and administrators, with approaches that use coaching or video-based training most effective in changing practice.^{xiii}

See the following selected examples for further information on requirements of the law/initiative, assessments and professional development in these states: [Arizona](#), [Ohio](#), and [Wisconsin](#).

Considerations

When reviewing the information presented in this document and the resources identified, consider the following:

- What term-- literacy, reading, or English language arts-- would best convey the purpose and goals to parents, educators, policy makers and others?
- How can “proficiency” be clearly explained to all the key audiences? What terms would help parents, educators, policymakers and other key stakeholder’s best understand what it means to be a proficient reader?
- What measures for what purposes would support parents, educators, and others in having a deep understanding of children’s needs and skills in order to construct effective supports for learning at different age levels?
- How can related policy efforts, including the early learning standards framework and common core/next generation content standards and formative and summative assessment systems inform and align with the definition and measures of reading proficiency?

Endnotes

- ⁱ Christie K., & Rose, S. (2012). *A problem still in search of a solution: A state policy roadmap for improving early reading proficiency*. ECS. Retrieved from <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/04/41/10441.pdf>
- ⁱⁱ National Assessment Governing Board, US Department of Education. *Reading framework for the 2013 National Assessment of Educational Progress*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.nagb.org/content/nagb/assets/documents/publications/frameworks/reading-2013-framework.pdf> NOTE: See page 2-3 of this document for how NAEP defines specific terms within this definition.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Anderson, R.C., Hiebert, E.H., Scott, J.A., & Wilkinson, I.A.G. (1985). *Becoming a nation of readers: The report of the commission on reading*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Education. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED253865.pdf>
- ^{iv} Wixson, K., Peters, C., Weber, E., & Roeber, E. (1987). New directions in statewide reading assessment. *The Reading teachers*, 40, 749-754. [citing the new definition of reading for Michigan; Retrieved from <http://www.eduplace.com/rdg/res/teach/def.html>]
- ^v Torgesen, J., Houston, D., Rissman, L., & Kosanovich, M. (2007). *Teaching all student to read in elementary schools: A guide for principals*. Portsmouth, NH: RMC Research Corporation, Center on Instruction. [p 1]
- ^{vi} National Governors Association Center for Best Practices. (2013). *A governor's guide to early literacy: Getting all students reading by third grade*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.nga.org/files/live/sites/NGA/files/pdf/2013/1310NGAEarlyLiteracyReportWeb.pdf>
- ^{vii} <http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic1152889.files/4LiteracyUnpacked.pdf>
- ^{viii} The National Institute for Literacy. (2008). *Developing early literacy: Report of the National Early Literacy Panel*. Retrieved from <http://lincs.ed.gov/publications/pdf/NELPReport09.pdf>
- ^{ix} Common Core English Language Arts- <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy>
- ^x National Assessment Governing Board. (n.d.). *Frequently asked questions*. Retrieved from <http://www.nagb.org/toolbar/faqs.html#naep-covers>
- ^{xi} Paulson, A. (2009, October 29). Student 'proficiency': What is your state's definition? *The Christian Science Monitor*. Retrieved from <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/2009/1029/p02s19-usgn.html>;
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- ^{xii} Rose, S. (2012). *Third grade reading policies*. Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States. Retrieved from <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/03/47/10347.pdf>
- ^{xiii} Pianta, B.C. (2011). *Teaching children well: New evidence-based approaches to teacher professional development and training*. Washington, DC: Center on American Progress. Retrieved from http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2011/11/pdf/piana_report.pdf

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