

Idaho Literacy Task Force Report

November 19, 2014

Introduction

The Governor's Task Force on Education identified literacy as a key foundational skill and recommended the state revisit state policy related to early reading. In June 2014, the Idaho Literacy Task Force gathered to review existing early literacy legislation, the Idaho Comprehensive Literacy Act, and create recommendations for revisions to submit to the State Board of Education. The Task Force's approximately 20 members from across the state included K-3 teachers, school administrators, professors of education, state legislators, a state board member, business representatives, librarians, and other advocates of early literacy.

Over the course of six months, the Task Force developed a common understanding of the Idaho Comprehensive Literacy Act (ICLA) of 1997, including its requirements at the school, preservice, and inservice levels. At the school level, requirements include using the Idaho Reading Indicator to screen every K-3 student, providing at least 40 hours of intervention to students identified as most in need, and public reporting of school-level results (Barr and Flachbart, 2003). Preservice requirements include aligning college coursework with the ICLA, stipulating that K-8 teacher candidates pass an assessment demonstrating their knowledge and skills, and reporting yearly on the number of preservice teachers who took and passed the assessment. For inservice requirements, K-8 teachers need to pass a three-credit reading instruction course in order to maintain certification.

Within six years of the legislation passing, the state experienced successes and challenges related to the ICLA (Underwood, 2013). While reading achievement improved statewide, concerns were raised in regards to aspects of the educational system that were not addressed, such as the importance of teacher collaboration, the role of instructional leadership, the need for high quality instructional materials, the practice of tracking students rather than having flexible intervention systems, and the need for more resources in professional development and intervention beyond third grade. The early 2000s brought changes to early reading in Idaho, including implementation of the federal Reading First Initiative and shifts in the assessment measures of the Idaho Reading Indicator. Further changes occurred in 2009 and after as the state budget became tighter and when the resources and professional development offered by Reading First expired with no further federal funding.

Considering the substantial history of early literacy efforts in Idaho, and in order to make well informed decisions, the Task Force engaged in collective learning about the components of a comprehensive assessment system, the early literacy policies of other states, understanding dyslexia (including instructional and policy implications), and the research on proven ways to bring effective practices to scale across a state. Schools representing Idaho's diverse students

and a broad range of learning challenges presented the strategies they have employed which have been effective in raising early literacy achievement. Based on the strategies presented, Idaho's most effective schools share the following characteristics:

- Every teacher is expected to be a reading expert
- The principal and/or reading specialist provides strong schoolwide literacy leadership
- Teachers exhibit strong collaboration
- Early intervention is targeted
- Interventions are research-based, explicit, and systematic
- Schools engage families by teaching them strategies to support their students
- Schools have processes to consistently use specific schoolwide data and evidence

Given that successful schools exhibit these characteristics, the Task Force sought to establish sound methods for creating a policy environment that cultivates such practices. After careful consideration, discussion, and debate, the Task Force agreed upon the following recommendations to the State Board of Education.

Recommendations and Rationale

A. ASSESSMENT

A1. Recommendation: The Idaho Reading Indicator should be used to screen K-3 students.

Rationale: Screening is a cost- and time-efficient method of predicting reading success and identifying struggling readers (Gersten, Compton, Connor, Dimino, Santoro, Linan-Thompson, & Tilly, 2009). Screening all students fosters early reading intervention because it enables educators to catch struggling students early and to begin making crucial decisions about instructional interventions.

A2. Recommendation: The Idaho Reading Indicator as a screener should not be used for accountability at the student, teacher, or school level. Progress monitoring may be used for this purpose, as it measures student growth over time.

Rationale: While the Task Force understands the importance of accountability and educator evaluation, the Idaho Reading Indicator was designed to inform decision making before instruction, not to examine the effectiveness of an instructional program after its conclusion. Using a screening tool for accountability has the potential to compromise test administration and encourage teaching to the assessment, which in turn invalidates the results and undermines the purpose of the assessment (Santi & Francis, 2012). To maintain a proper focus on early identification, prevention, and remediation of student learning challenges, it is important that state policy foster an appropriate culture of assessment among educators.

A3. Recommendation: The Idaho Reading Indicator should be reviewed to address concerns about its technical adequacy and to explore alternative measures.

Rationale: The Idaho Reading Indicator has been provided by different vendors and has changed over the years. A study conducted by Drs. Kristi Santi and David Francis (2012) raised several concerns about the current version of the Idaho Reading Indicator, including its technical adequacy, the lack of reading comprehension questions, and questions about the purposes of the assessment. The current version was created for sole use by the state and may not provide the predictive validity necessary to screen students accurately. The Task Force believes it would be prudent to examine what changes may be necessary to ensure the best screening practices possible.

A4. Recommendation: The Idaho Department of Education should provide screening and progress monitoring tools to LEAs.

Rationale: The Department of Education plays a key role in supporting LEAs and ensuring consistent statewide practice by vetting, purchasing, and distributing assessments. Under a previous vendor for the Idaho Reading Indicator, progress monitoring assessments were provided at no cost to schools. This encouraged widespread use and met the intent of the ICLA. The Task Force agreed that with the known availability of low- and no-cost progress monitoring tools (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2001), the state should provide specific tools that schools can access and use freely.

A5. Recommendation: LEAs should continue to screen and monitor progress of students beyond third grade until students who are not meeting grade-level proficiency have mastered grade-level expectations.

Rationale: The state has a vested interest in the success of students' literacy skills beyond third grade. Screening and progress-monitoring data are key tools to guide instructional decisions for students who need continued instructional support and intervention (Stecker, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2008). If LEAs are expected to continue progress monitoring in literacy, it increases the focus on continued intervention for struggling students in later grades.

A6. Recommendation: The Idaho Department of Education should provide K-3 diagnostic assessments in early reading to LEAs.

Rationale: Current state policy is ambiguous regarding how to target literacy interventions to students' specific learning needs. While screening assessments are brief and give general outcomes, diagnostic assessments are more in-depth and are used to pinpoint areas of student need and efficiently determine appropriate curriculum, instruction, and intervention needs. The state would benefit from providing diagnostic assessments at no cost to schools that can be used efficiently to narrow instructional focus for students who are identified as being at risk on the screening assessment.

B. CURRICULUM & INSTRUCTION

B1. Recommendation: The state should remove the requirement to provide 40 hours of intervention to any student receiving a score of 1 (the most intensive level) on the IRI.

Rationale: This requirement was a well intended effort in 1997 to ensure students receive intervention. However, this requirement is too rigid for the current state of Idaho schools and does not account for students who reach grade-level expectations before receiving 40 hours of intervention, nor does it consider students who make very slow growth and need much more time.

B2. Recommendation: IRI intervention funds should be allocated to provide evidence-based literacy interventions to students identified as at risk. The selection of interventions should be at the discretion of the school and district. At-risk status should be defined in relation to end-of-year expectations.

Rationale: Existing intervention funds target students who get the lowest score (1) on the Idaho Reading Indicator. Schools must intervene with all students who are not on track to meet end-of-year expectations, which includes other students, such as those who score a 2. The Task Force agreed that the state should fund intervention efforts for all students who are at risk, not just the lowest. Professional judgment and local context should be considered when determining the most appropriate intervention approach for students with an at-risk status.

C. PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

C1. Recommendation: The Idaho Department of Education should provide professional development in the administration and analysis of assessment data, to include the Smarter Balanced Assessment.

Rationale: Existing requirements under the ICLA do not require educators to be trained in data utilization. Proper training in test administration is essential to test validity and reliability. Professional development in analysis ensures that test results are correctly interpreted and used to make accurate decisions about instruction and resource allocation (Killion, 2013).

C2. Recommendation: The Idaho Department of Education should evaluate the expectations and implementation of the Idaho Comprehensive Literacy Course every two years.

Rationale: As policy, research, and practice evolve, the Idaho Comprehensive Literacy Course must change to reflect emerging best practices. Regular, formal review and

evaluation of this course will ensure that it is current and consistent (McColskey & Lewis, 2007).

- C3. Recommendation:** The Idaho Department of Education should provide professional development in the delivery of effective, evidence-based literacy instruction and intervention for all certified and classified educators.

Rationale: Existing requirements of the ICLA include one foundational course in literacy. However, this is insufficient to make every teacher an expert in teaching reading (Killion, 2013). In order to maintain and apply best practices in literacy instruction and intervention, educators require ongoing, high-quality professional development. Evidence-based literacy instruction and intervention includes phonemic awareness, decoding, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

D. POLICY, EVALUATION AND FUNDING

- D1. Recommendation:** The Idaho State Board of Education should reauthorize the Idaho Comprehensive Literacy Act every five years.

Rationale: Currently, there is no mechanism to cause the state to stop and reflect on needed changes to the ICLA. As research and practice evolve, the Idaho Comprehensive Literacy Act must change to reflect emerging best practices. A five-year reauthorization cycle, required by statute, must be implemented to guarantee that policy is not a hindrance to progress. The policy should be subject to best practice research and should be modified based on evaluation findings (McColskey & Lewis, 2007).

- D2. Recommendation:** The Idaho Department of Education should conduct ongoing reading initiative program evaluations with formal reports due every two years.

Rationale: The state intends to impact educator practices and student learning through its literacy policy. Significant time, effort, and financial resources are dedicated to this goal. As such, it is essential to understand if and how the goals are being met. Ongoing program evaluation by an external party with no vested interest in the policy enables Idaho policymakers to analyze trends, make program decisions, and deploy resources based on current data. Program evaluation is essential to fostering public trust and ensuring appropriate use of tax dollars (McColskey & Lewis, 2007; Fixsen, Blasé, Metz, & Van Dyke, 2013).

- D3. Recommendation:** The state legislature should revise the support-unit divisor for Kindergarten from 1:40 to 1:30.

Rationale: Under current statute, Idaho does not require students to attend kindergarten, and the legislature funds half-day kindergarten at a ratio of 1 support unit for 40 students.

This is compared to the ratio of approximately 1 to 20 for first grade and higher. Districts that are effectively intervening early in Idaho provide extended learning opportunities to kindergarten students who are at risk of academic challenges (Raney, 2014). To do this, they must find creative funding to make their efforts work. The Task Force recognizes that the state does not require, but funds, half-day kindergarten. The Task Force agrees that it would be in the state's long term interest both programmatically and financially to fund kindergarten at a higher level to incentivize early intervention for all students. The Task Force's recommendation would channel funding for districts to be funded at a 1 support unit to 30 student ratio, thereby increasing their ability to systematically create kindergarten intervention processes through extending kindergarten offerings to the students who need more instruction and support to be ready for first grade. Districts should use these funds to target extended reading interventions for students identified at risk. The funds should not be used for class-size reduction in other grade levels. Recognizing the fiscal impact, the Task Force understands that a multi-year phase in may be necessary and recommends such a phase in be no longer than five years (e.g., 1:38, 1:36, 1:34, etc.).

D4. Recommendation: The Idaho Department of Education should explore the creation of a literacy intervention speciality at the primary level.

Rationale: Given the critical necessity of early mastery of literacy in the primary grades, teachers need deep understanding of the acquisition of language and literacy. The practitioners on the Task Force all indicated that they had teachers with reading expertise on their staff as well as a literacy leader on their campus. In some instances, the literacy leader was the administrator, others had a reading specialist, and still others had a teacher with deep content knowledge who served as a mentor to colleagues.

D5. Recommendation: Given the critical relationship between literacy and academic success, the Task Force recommends funding for the Idaho Reading Initiative be restored and increased to the following levels.

- a) FY 2015 budget – restore funding for intervention from \$2.1 million currently allocated by the State Department of Education to \$4 million (the original funding in 2000). The funding should be structured by the legislature to be distributed in the following manner:
- 65% - intervention funds for grades K-3
 - 25% - committee work to develop the plans to scale up the Task Force recommendations (directed by the State Board of Education)
 - 9% - statewide administration and cost of administering the current assessment (directed by the Department of Education)
 - 1% - external evaluation costs (directed by the Department of Education)

b) FY 2016 budget – increase the funding for intervention from \$4 million to \$5.8 million annually for the FY 2016 budget and beyond. The funding should be structured by the legislature to be distributed in the following manner:

- 65% - intervention funds for grades K-3
- 25% - statewide assessment and professional development costs (directed by the Department of Education)
- 5% - statewide administration (directed by the Department of Education)
- 5% - external evaluation costs (directed by the Department of Education)

Rationale: In reviewing the history of the ICLA, the Task Force found that the funding for the Idaho Reading Initiative has been cut from approximately \$4 million per year to less than \$2 million per year, while costs associated with assessment and intervention have increased. The Task Force’s intent in this recommendation is to ensure the state provides dedicated funding to early literacy interventions in grades K-3 in order to meet the state’s goals of proficiency by the end of third grade. The funding allocation should be examined with each reauthorization period.

Conclusion

A strong early literacy system is one of the best investments a state can make in its future. According to research from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, “Reading proficiently by the end of third grade is a crucial marker in a child’s educational development. Failure to read proficiently is linked to higher rates of school dropout, which suppresses individual earning potential as well as the nation’s competitiveness and general productivity.” Knowing how to read proficiently enables a student to read and learn content in other subject areas.

In enacting the Idaho Comprehensive Literacy Act of 1997, Idaho was and is a leader in early literacy policy. However, given what has been learned in the research literature in the years since and given both the successes and challenges of existing policy, it is critical that the state make key adjustments. The Task Force agrees that the recommendations included in this report are the most prudent actions the state can make at this time to improve student outcomes through statewide early literacy policy.

The Idaho State Board of Education has a timely opportunity to rejuvenate the focus on early literacy through updated policy and strategic investment in proven practices in assessment, instruction, and professional development. The early literacy stakeholders represented on the Idaho Literacy Task Force call on the State Board of Education to act upon the recommendations above on behalf of the students of Idaho.

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