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# Becoming a Nation of Readers:

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The Report of the  
Commission on Reading

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with contributions from members  
of the Commission on Reading

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# Commission on Reading

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# Foreword

Continuing discussion across the country of policies for improving schools is sharpening recognition of the contributions of research to educational practice. As educational decision makers consider alternative approaches to school improvement, examine current practices and revise instructional programs, research on crucial elements of the educational process is invaluable. The accumulation of findings on certain essential aspects of schooling has reached a critical mass and deserves close attention. Reading and the use and comprehension of language — the most pervasive and fundamental activity in schooling — is one such area. This report fulfills a need for careful and thorough synthesis of an extensive body of findings on reading. In its pages, the leading experts present their interpretations of our current knowledge of reading and the state of the art and practice in teaching reading.

## **The Research Base For *Becoming A Nation Of Readers***

Three broad areas of inquiry have made *Becoming a Nation of Readers* possible. Studies of human cognition in the psychology of language, linguistics, child development, and behavioral science give us a clearer picture of reading as an integration of numerous learned processes. Research on environmental influences has described the impact of various settings on reading experiences. Investigations of classroom practices, especially those stemming from studies of teaching and of test use, have been interpreted in the light of the efforts to understand the reading process and to explicate factors that shape children's experience with written language. Given the scope of these inquiries, the Commission on Reading that guided the preparation of this document, and the scholars who wrote it, have been able to synthesize a diverse, rich body of scientific information into a systematic account of beginning reading and the comprehension of language.

## ***The Reading Process***

Research on the reading process has provided fuller understanding of how children can learn the letter patterns and associated sounds in an alphabetic language such as English, the importance of fluent word recognition, and how a text's structure influences the meaning drawn from it. It has uncovered the roots of proficient reading, and described how the development of well-practiced skills in beginning reading foster comprehension of complex texts. This research often supports accepted effective practices and removes them from unnecessary debate; the findings explain and confirm the experience and intuitions of outstanding practitioners and make their methods more widely accessible. At the same time, research findings identify practices that are less useful, outmoded, or that persist in the face of evidence to the contrary.

Knowledge about the intricacies of the reading process lay to rest once and for all some of the old debates about the roles of phonics and comprehension. We now know that learning efficient word recognition and grasping meaning are companion skills from the time a child first reads. These findings also have yielded evidence that extends early research on reading and on child development. We have learned that children bring more prior knowledge and complex mental processes to reading than was thought earlier. Reading instruction should meet the challenge of building from the knowledge that children bring to the school experience, by offering the richest texts that they are able to understand. Teaching techniques and text design can be informed by new conceptions of the potential of children's minds, and at the same time recognize individual differences in language experience and in the acquisition of reading proficiency.

### ***Environmental Influences on Reading***

Reading, comprehending, and thinking with language and the printed word are cultural phenomena. The extent of their development is affected by home and family circumstances, the encouragement of basic habits and attitudes in kindergarten and the early grades, and opportunities and social support for the development of effective skills and strategies in later life. This report addresses this complexity, understanding that too often one phase or factor of the acquisition of reading ability captures popular attention and blocks appreciation of the larger sweep of reading development.

Text comprehension depends upon a reader's prior knowledge, experience and attitudes; meaning is constructed as a reader links what he reads to what he knows. We can think of literacy as an acquired proficiency. Like achieving high levels of competence in swimming or in playing a musical instrument, competence in reading requires appropriate conditions and long periods of training and practice. This report discusses the roles of early habits and motivation; the systematic teaching of foundation skills for decoding words, developing vocabulary, inferring meaning from sentences and enjoying stories; and the further development of strategies for comprehending and interpreting textbooks in various subject matters.

The parent and the home environment teach the child his or her first lessons and they are the first teacher for reading too. Acquiring sensitivity to the sounds and rhythm of words and their meanings, a love of books and an ease of oral communication does not happen spontaneously; we can shape our homes to enable our children to become lovers of words and books. Formal school instruction takes on added value when programs in institutions out of school, like libraries, television, and museums, display attention to high standards of literacy.

### ***Teaching Techniques, Tools, and Testing***

In teaching, as in other professions, well-researched methods and tools are essential. This report makes clear the key role of teachers' professional knowledge. Research on instructional pacing and

grouping and on adaptation to children's accomplishments has contributed to new ideas that can help all children master the basics and then attain levels of literacy far beyond the basic competencies. The reading teacher's repertoire must draw upon the deepening knowledge of child development, of the nature of language and linguistics, of the structure of stories that give rise to comprehension, of the art and elegance of children's literature, and of the psychology of learning. With such knowledge assisting their practices, they can best foster the acquisition of foundation skills and higher processes of comprehension. The report indicates why changes in teacher training, internship experiences, continuing education, and sabbatical periods are necessary if teachers are to learn and refine their skills for their complex task.

*Becoming a Nation of Readers* also draws on knowledge that has been obtained about the design of primers, workbooks and self-study lessons, the structure of stories and texts that encourage effective habits of comprehension and thinking with language, and tests that significantly drive what is taught and learned. Fruitful directions are indicated for the designers and publishers of these materials. The report goes further and points out that our understanding of reading in the context of the subject matters of schooling, science, mathematics, social studies, and literature must be carefully researched so that texts and teaching materials can be designed for effective levels of comprehension and problem solving.

The ways in which reading achievement is tested and evaluated greatly influence what is taught and the reading skills that are valued and learned. Testing is a very useful aspect of teaching and learning, but should not emphasize only the competencies that are easy to measure and thus fix our sights below essential processes. Mastery tests must not treat reading as a set of discrete skills, when research has indicated that a closely integrated set of processes supports fluent reading. The nationally normed tests used by school systems may not accommodate the expanding view of literacy this society requires. Because of our greater understanding of reading and social influences upon it, improved forms of assessment are now feasible and can supplement strengthened instructional practices and tools in raising the national levels of literacy.

With growing recognition of the contributions of research to educational practice, educational policymaking can proceed with new vigor. Issues of educational practice, like those of health care, are of pervasive concern in this society. Where sound information on topics of national concern exist, informed policymakers, professionals, and an informed citizenry can work together to assure that high standards are observed.

## **The Sponsorship of the Report**

*Becoming a Nation of Readers* was produced under the auspices of the National Academy of Education's Commission on Education and Public Policy, with the sponsorship of the National Institute of Education. The Academy established this Commission in 1983 to bring its members' cross-disciplinary knowledge of research in education to bear in identifying bodies of research that might

inform educational policy. This report reflects the Academy's charge that the Commission "locate topics on which there has been appreciable research and scholarship . . . and gather panels of experts from within the Academy and elsewhere to survey, interpret and synthesize research findings." With this objective in mind, the Academy called upon experts on various aspects of reading to form the Commission on Reading, chaired by Richard C. Anderson, to prepare this report.

The last two decades of research and scholarship on reading, building on the past, have produced an array of information which is unparalleled in its understanding of the underlying processes in the comprehension of language. Although reading abilities and disabilities require further investigation, present knowledge, combined with the centrality of literacy in the educational process, make the report cause for optimism. Gains from reading research demonstrate the power of new spectra of research findings and methodologies to account for the cognitive activities entailed in school learning. And because, in the schools and classrooms across the country, reading is an essential tool for success, we can hope for significant advances in academic achievement as the policies and practices outlined in these pages become more widespread.

In this effort, the Academy's Commission on Education and Public Policy and the Commission on Reading, which guided the project, have had the good fortune to engage in work that can secure greater reliability in instruction and render educational outcomes more predictably beneficial.

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