

# INSIDE EDUCATION

## *The Reading Rat Race Series*

### Part 2: The Reading Champion: 11 Lessons for Madison's Literacy Task Force

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As the newly appointed Literacy Task Force begins its quest to unravel why 20 years of efforts to improve reading were mired in a whirlpool of disastrous reading results to determine what went wrong (so that past mistakes are not repeated) there are critical lessons for learning from the ***Reading Champion***. This is critical because Part 1 of this reading series provided the information that was available to a previous task force to improve reading outcomes that were piled sky high and available at no cost; but, obviously, they were not viewed as lessons to be learned to promote success. Worse yet, there were a number of districts with successful reading turnarounds to copy from (available at no cost); but no lessons were learned.

#### **Lesson #1:**

**Learn from successful reading outcomes of other schools, districts and states; past failure to do so is probably the biggest mistake that has to be learned.**

One such example of success involved not just a district but the entire state. However, improvement may be applauded, but only because the rest of the nation did not do as well in comparison. Although Madison has been crowned as having the largest achievement gap in the U.S., CT had that distinction (and still is at the top) as a State because of the significant disparities in scores of minorities as will be seen in the results to follow. It's also an example of how the use of average or total scores hide lots of shameful disparities until disaggregated.

Since 1992, Connecticut has had the highest reading achievement scores on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) reading exam and it is the most improved state in reading scores. As a result of being "*crowned the reading champion*," the **National Education Goals Panel** commissioned a study to determine what Connecticut was doing right that could account for its success. The report, ***Exploring High and Improving Reading Achievement in Connecticut***, looked at a variety of statewide factors.

Before getting to the findings of the study, just how well did Connecticut perform on the 1998 assessment? In grade 4, it had the highest average score for public school students with 46% scoring at or above proficiency. However, in spite of the constant improvement, only 55% of Whites, 17% of Hispanics, and 13% of Blacks achieved at or above proficiency. In Connecticut's major cities, only 21% achieved at the proficiency level or above (compared with 25% nationally) which means that 79% scored at the basic level or below. Rural towns did much better with students scoring 57% at or above proficiency. What is also significant is that grade 4 scores improved while national scores stayed rather stable.

In grade 8, 42% scored at or above proficiency with 50% of Whites, 16% of Hispanics, and 10% of Blacks scoring at that level; the scores were lower than those in 4<sup>th</sup> grade. In the major cities, only 20% scored at proficiency or above (compared with 29% nationally), and in the rural towns 50% scored at that level.

#### **Lesson #2**

**Any results either from data or statement outcomes must be analyzed in terms of gender (females continued to outperform males), and ethnic factors--using total scores only masks the problems that persist.**

The test disparities help to explain what has been termed the "*two Connecticut's—urban and suburban*." More importantly, it demonstrates that

Certainly, Connecticut can take pride in being "*crowned*" for its improved reading growth; however, it cannot take much pride in the fact that urban students remain stagnated. Clearly, the crown

has some gold glitter on it, but it's also covered with too many "chads." So what were some of the findings of the study—the lessons for other districts to learn from?

### **Lesson #3**

**The popular perception that parental income and education, low class size, and teacher pay are responsible for higher performance are not the factors that prevent minorities from learning.**

Connecticut is one of the highest ranked states in these categories. However, although these factors are "associated" with higher achievement, *they did not account for the improved results*. This finding is given credence because, as an example, Maine matched Connecticut in the percentage of students in grade 8 at or above proficiency; yet, both states are dramatically different in parental income and education, class size, and teacher pay.

What is shocking is that these factors are used as the constant drumbeat why students, particularly minority students, can't learn because the schools have no control over these societal elements. It then puts the blame squarely on the schooling that was involved, not socio-economic conditions.

### **Lesson #4**

The *"total amount of instructional time—not just reading time--was not a factor"*

In fact, the study found that thirty-two states had more hours of instruction than CT. This is not surprising because allocating more time does not mean the instruction was effective.

Also, between 1992-1998 the median income in the state decreased in both absolute terms and relative to other states with more persons above the poverty level, and there was a higher percentage of Black and Hispanic students.

### **BIG LESSON #5**

**The conclusion of the study was that improvement could only be related to what the schools did in terms of policies and practices.**

This is really a very significant finding because both of these factors are in control of the school; yet, popular belief and even research findings have found that schools are hampered in their ability to improve achievement because of outside and uncontrollable factors such as parent wealth and education.

### **BIG LESSON #6**

**Among the key practices considered critical were a balanced reading program (providing that phonics was stressed in the early grades), on-going assessments, early identification, and the use of a variety of intervention strategies; all are in school control.**

Previously, schools and districts could use the excuse that societal conditions were beyond their control to change or influence; further, these factors inhibit schools from being more successful with students. This study proves that this is fake news.

### **Lesson #7**

**Districts with improved reading scores credit the State's accountability initiatives such as the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT); references with state and national educational groups; allocation of extra resources to the neediest schools; and on-going teacher support.**

In fact, CT had one of the highest percentages of teachers participating in professional development. The issue is what does that mean? Nowhere is it mentioned in what schools (suburban/city) it occurred or who the teachers were (academic specialty) and what was the subject matter of these activities e.g. for example, were they concentrated in improving instruction, or social emotional learning? Yes, it is important to know the subject matter involved in; it could be that it had nothing to do with improved instruction. Again, general statements and statistics need to be disaggregated to show reality.

### **Lesson #8**

***“Collecting and using data on student achievement in a way that is informative and helpful to those who must implement the policies; and, the state is actually using the data to improve policy and ultimately, student outcomes.”***

Can the consistent growth in scores be sustained in the future? There is no way to know for certain; but since the study, Connecticut has put in place other practices and policies that should continue to enhance reading and achievement growth.

The neediest districts now have available a number of resources:

- School Readiness and Preschool grants
- Early Reading Success grants
- Educational Accountability and Summer School grants
- Family Resource Center grants
- Governor’s Summer Reading Challenge program.

### **Lesson #9**

**Develop and implement a three-year reading plan to improve the reading skills of students in the early grades and to provide in-service training for new and certified elementary school teachers in how to teach reading**

CT passed legislation in 1998 (PA 98-243) to address lesson #9. Unfortunately, plans do not mean successful implementation. The Madison school board also had an excellent initiative in place that apparently either no one followed (lack of monitoring), or no one knew how to implement it.

### **Lesson #10**

**It also required priority districts (those with failing schools) to test their first- through third-grade students' reading levels and to offer summer reading programs to students who do not read well.** However, it should not be limited to summer school because those students not at grade level should continue an intensive remedial program during the year.

It allowed such districts to promote students who do not read at grade level to a higher grade only with extra help and written justification. and required the education commissioner to do a long-range study of the effects of the early reading programs on participating children.

What is really puzzling about the gender/race issue is that sometimes it is recognized because the failing schools that exist are labeled Priority School Districts (nice name), and the K-3 initiative is described below in more detail:

*Administration of a reading assessment is mandated for all Connecticut Priority School Districts (PSDs). There are seven assessments that have been approved for use: DIBELS 6th, DIBELS NEXT, NWEA MAP, STAR, AIMSweb, STEEP, EdChekup and iReady. Each is an individual reading assessment designed to assess students’ reading performance in kindergarten through Grade 3. Each assessment provides teachers with information that helps them determine students’ independent reading level and identify what the student needs to learn next. **As of September 2009**, all Priority School Districts are required to use one of the approved assessments district-wide in Grades 1 – 3 for the state-required assessment and for purposes of ongoing assessment to inform instruction.*

A letter addressing the legislation was sent to all school districts; but, interestingly, no mention was made about gender or ethnic issues; the absence of this information, in the light of reality, is rather strange.

It also required children to start school at age five instead of age seven unless their parents appear in person at the school district office when the child is five and again when he is six to sign an option form not to send the child to school until age six or seven.

Like all such plans or programs that start off with the best of intentions, they falter badly when it comes to implementation and monitoring to see that they are done successfully. The results are always measurable when tests are administered; and, if this initiative was working, it does not show up in test score results. Furthermore, it's not that there is any lack of reporting mechanisms needed for monitoring because as indicated below, CT provides a very detailed list; (don't try to decipher the abbreviations since it's to show the detail provided to back up plans) as indicated below; but unless the information is not only analyzed and acted upon, it becomes just paper shuffling. Can you imagine anyone in charge of going through these reports, analyzing them, determining shortcomings, etc.?

- User Guide to AIMSweb Reporting
- AIMSweb Template
- User Guide to DIBELS 6th Reporting
- DIBELS 6th Reporting Template
- User Guide to DIBELS Next Reporting
- DIBELS Next Template
- User Guide to EdCheckup Reporting
- EdCheckup Template
- User Guide to iReady Reporting
- iReady Template
- [iReady Template](#)
- [User Guide to NWEA MAP Reporting](#)
- [NWEA MAP Template](#)
- [User Guide to STAR Reporting](#)
- [STAR Template](#)
- [User Guide to STEEP Reporting](#)
- [STEEP Template](#)
- [Substantially Deficient Promotion Template](#)

Also, an **Early Reading Success Panel** was created (PA 99-227) “to identify the knowledge and skills important for teachers in the primary grades to teach reading.” (it seems similar to the Madison Literacy Task Force). Again, there was no mention of gender or ethnic issues. A comprehensive document, ***Improving Reading Competency for Students in the Primary Grades*** was also prepared and distributed to all schools; however, again, there was no mention of gender or ethnic issues. The only mention of racial issues is found in discussions and reports of discipline.

### **Lesson #11**

***“The challenge is to do what is right even better, and to be open to new approaches as they are tried and researched.”***

With continued emphasis on improving reading policies and practices, the reading crown should shed more “chads” and take on more “glitter.” However, if all the chads are to be shed, gender and ethnic issues must be openly recognized and addressed with vigor and determination. So far, it doesn't seem to be happening! Why not?

CT has lessons to learn in spite of their crown, but more importantly, other states and districts must learn from these findings as they develop understanding of past mistakes and to develop practical and intelligent recommendations with details to forge ahead with success.