

# Turning the Page: Refocusing Massachusetts for Reading Success

## Strategies for improving children's language and literacy development, birth to age 9

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### **Introduction**

43% of third-graders in MA are reading below grade level. There are high costs associated with reading failure, so efforts to promote reading should be redirected towards the quality of language and reading exposure in childrens' everyday environments. Much research has shown how high-quality early experiences and prevention are the necessary precursors to reading success.

Reading, and who can promote it, must be viewed on broader terms. We must be quicker to identify strugglers and support efforts to help them. Children's outcomes should be the indicator of success.

This study outlines recommendations drawn from current research. There are many programs available to children but they do not have the high-quality, intense services that are needed. Reallocating resources is the next step; obtaining new resources is not necessary. The foundation of this plan is increasing service providers' knowledge and competency. Five recommendations for improving childrens' reading outcomes and creating measurable success are explained.

### **What is reading?**

Reading requires the child to be engaged, have knowledge of the code, possess the ability to decode quickly, and successfully recognize concepts. The demands of reading are constantly changing as children age and grow. There are opportunities in all settings to promote children's reading skills. Reading is the foundation for academic success and overall health. Reading failure has high costs for both the child and society. High-quality interactions set children up for success in higher-level reading and to be competitive in this knowledge-based economy.

### **How are we doing in Massachusetts?**

Massachusetts appears successful on the surface due to high average test scores, but not all students are being adequately served. Students who perform below average include those who are from low-income households, have disabilities, are African-American and Latino, or speak English as a second language. Students who do reach proficiency should not then be abandoned; rather, the end goal should be success in life. Many college professors are reporting that their students who a decreased ability in reading, writing, and critical thinking. Furthermore, newly hired young adults are not able to meet the literacy demands associated with their new jobs.

## Five Recommendations for Improvement

The following recommendations were based on much high-quality, current research that supports the importance of quality interactions in everyday environments on children's reading development.

*1. "Reallocate funds and alter policy to ensure programs are delivered with sufficient intensity and effective implementation tactics—producing measurable success in children's language and reading."*

This can be achieved by determining what specifically is facilitating improvement. Ongoing evaluation is also essential. We must make sure we are delivering enough services to make an impact, delivering the proper aspects of the program, and focus on prevention.

*2. "Programs and providers, including medical professionals serving babies, preschoolers, and school-age children should assess language and reading development, and should regularly evaluate the quality and impact of their services."*

This can be achieved through screenings and ongoing assessment that includes language measures, evaluation of quality, and impact on children's development. A statewide database should be created in order to effectively track children's progress and participation.

*3. "Redefine professional education to increase adults' capacity to assess and support children's language and reading development."*

Caregivers and professionals who work with young children must be given appropriate training to support reading development. There should be support for administrators training in children's reading and language development. Training should take place on-site and be data-driven.

*4. "Bring language-rich, rigorous, and engaging reading curricula into early education and care settings, as well as PK-3 classrooms."*

Children spend a great deal of time in classrooms, where the focus is mainly on foundational, rather than meaning-based, reading skills. Curricula for early education and PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> should be provided by the state. This curricula must be designed to develop reading skills, provide a structured daily lesson plan, and contain consistent features. Quality should be monitored on-site and supplemental instruction provided to struggling students.

*5. "Expand and strengthen partnerships with families to focus on improving children's language and reading."*

Family efforts should be linked to program efforts to promote children's literacy. This includes planning home activities for families, encouraging the use of native language, and

encouraging book-reading rather than tv-watching. These family engagement efforts should be assessed for effectiveness through techniques such as keeping home reading logs and taking attendance at parent-teacher conferences. The community library and community leaders such as pastors should be utilized to promote family literacy.

## **Conclusion**

Despite high test score averages, efforts to help struggling students are desperately needed in MA. By re-working early childhood and PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> programs, professional development, and family and community collaboration, children's reading and life success can be dramatically improved.

Lesaux, N. (2010). *Turning the page: Refocusing Massachusetts for Reading Success. Strategies for improving children's language and literacy development, birth to age 9*. Springfield, MA: Strategies for Children, Inc.