



**IMPROVING LITERACY TEACHING AND LEARNING:  
A RESEARCH AGENDA FOR KENTUCKY**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Literacy remains a serious problem for many Kentuckians. Nearly one-third of adults in Kentucky possess low levels of literacy (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003) and the state's children are not faring much better. While data from the Kentucky Core Content Tests (KCCT) from 2000 to 2006 demonstrate that elementary students have improved in reading and writing, middle schools and high schools are not reaching proficiency rates in reading and writing as quickly as elementary schools. In addition, gaps in reading achievement are evident, with lower achievement levels among male students, minority students, students receiving free and reduced lunch, and students with disabilities. Ultimately, the lack of progress demonstrated in reading and writing proficiency impacts overall college readiness, as evidenced by the fact that about 50 percent of Kentucky's students who take the ACT do not reach benchmark levels for preparedness in reading.

These data reflect the need for urgency related to reading and literacy in Kentucky. The Collaborative Center for Literacy Development (CCLD) has worked with a team of state and national literacy experts to develop an extensive research agenda that will influence policy and practice in ways that improve the literacy of Kentuckians. A think tank of state and national literacy researchers and state department of education personnel was convened to set the agenda, and this group participated in three day-long meetings. In addition to the think tank, CCLD gathered input from teacher educators, state legislators, teachers, administrators, parents, and community members to establish the priority research topics.

Developing the research agenda involved a multi-layered approach that was grounded in exploration of two overarching questions:

- What do we know about Kentuckians' literacy achievement/attainment?
- What new knowledge is needed to improve Kentuckians' literacy achievement/attainment?

During the first think tank meeting, participants examined state assessment data on the literacy of Kentuckians, early childhood through adulthood. Based on those data, the think tank identified important topics of study that will advance the state in the area of literacy. Next, a survey was administered to teachers, administrators, parents, legislators and community members in which respondents prioritized research topics and identified new topics for study. Four hundred and eight stakeholders responded to the survey. Additional feedback on the identified topics was provided by teacher educators from Kentucky's colleges and universities. At a second meeting, the think tank used the stakeholder feedback to prioritize and narrow the research topics. The think tank identified four key research topics for the agenda, and those are listed here in order of priority:

1. Teacher Preparation
2. Family and Community Literacy
3. Student Achievement Data
4. School and Program Content

The group then used the state-level data and existing body of literacy research to draft a rationale for including the topic in the research agenda. Finally, at a third meeting, the think tank finalized the specific research questions for each topic.

## PRIORITY TOPICS

### 1. Teacher Preparation in Literacy

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Much of the emphasis on improving literacy focuses on how to create and sustain effective literacy teaching for all learners. This issue is especially important since the teacher is often identified as the single most important factor in determining student success (Darling-Hammond, 2000). While it is essential that Kentucky employ well-prepared teachers who can guide students toward literacy achievement, researchers have given relatively little attention to the question of how to best prepare teachers to teach reading (Anders, Hoffman, & Duffy, 2000). Teacher preparation in literacy involves preparation at multiple levels, including education for pre-service and in-service teachers, administrators, and reading professionals. Research must address all levels of teacher preparation, including early childhood through adulthood, to ensure that all Kentuckians have access to high quality literacy instruction. Furthermore, teacher preparation in literacy must involve teachers of all content areas since literacy is a gateway to learning across the entire curriculum.

In 2003, the National Commission on Excellence in Teacher Preparation for Reading Instruction found significant variation in initial literacy preparation requirements across U.S. colleges of education. National recommendations suggest that teacher candidates earn a minimum of twelve semester hours in literacy education (Hoffman & Roller, 2001; International Reading Association [IRA], 2003). However, initial preparation programs in Kentucky fall well short of this recommendation (Overturf & Parker, 2008). While Kentucky's level of course-work preparation for pre-service teachers is of concern, just mandating a certain number of credit hours will not ensure quality initial certification programs. Research has indicated that high quality programs are essential and that teacher candidates in high-quality initial certification programs are better prepared as classroom teachers of literacy during the first three years of teaching than comparison groups (Hoffman et al., 2005). Further evidence suggests that a "learning by doing" approach to initial preparation may impact student achievement in positive ways (Risko et al., 2008). Given the emphasis on pre-service education at state and national levels, it is essential to know how best to prepare pre-service teachers to address the varied literacy needs of the students they will encounter in the classroom.

In addition to pre-service teacher preparation, in-service teacher professional development is important to improving literacy instruction for Kentuckians at various age levels and from diverse populations. Although research shows that effective professional development can lead to improvements in both teacher practice and student learning, (Wayne & Youngs, 2003), the general professional development literature indicates that professional development for teachers is frequently fragmented, lacking in follow-up, and ineffective in changing teacher practices (Borko, 2004; Parsad, Lewis, & Farris, 2001). Given the limitations of traditional professional development, reform efforts have included alternative models of professional development, such as professional learning communities, embedded professional development, and the use of advanced reading professionals (e.g., literacy coaches, reading coaches, reading coordinators). The preparation and qualifications of these literacy specialists is of high interest in today's literacy landscape (Frost & Bean, 2006), and more research on the preparation and work of advanced reading professionals is needed to ensure that these specialists are highly trained and utilized to effectively improve teaching and learning.

While teacher development is central to literacy improvement, comprehensive school and community reform efforts also focus attention on school leadership as a vehicle for advancement of educational outcomes (Marsh et al., 2005; Supovitz, 2006). It is important to understand how school administrators can influence the quality of literacy instruction throughout a school or agency (Knapp, 2008). Because of this influence, administrators must possess the knowledge necessary to support

effective literacy instruction. Research is needed to discern effective practices for preparing school administrators in the area of literacy leadership.

Teaching learners to read, write, listen, and speak proficiently is a highly complex process. Therefore, research is needed to ensure implementation of the most effective practices for preparing teachers and leaders to address the varied literacy needs of the learners they will encounter in their classrooms, schools, and communities.

*Research Questions:*

1. How closely do initial teacher certification programs in Kentucky align with international, national, and state standards and recommendations for developing high quality classroom teachers in literacy?
2. What components should a quality initial certification program include to prepare educators to facilitate literacy learning in Kentucky classrooms and communities?
3. What are the effects on teachers' knowledge and students' literacy outcomes when teachers participate in alternative approaches to professional development (e.g., embedded professional development activities, learning communities, literacy coaching, advanced reading professionals)?
4. What are the effects on teacher practices and learners' literacy achievement when administrators are knowledgeable about effective literacy strategies?
5. What roles do literacy coaches and other advanced reading professionals assume in Kentucky, and how do different roles impact teacher practice and student outcomes in literacy?

## **2. Family and Community Literacy**

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Research indicates that foundational knowledge and skills related to learning to read and write are acquired within the family context (Purcell-Gates, 2000), and families reflect the values of multiple cultures, extended family networks, multi-generational units, and community connections (Perry, in press). Despite the fact that there is a strong national research base on the impacts on family and community literacy (Henderson & Mapp, 2002), there is currently not a base of data and research on the impact that family and community involvement has on literacy attainment in Kentucky. This is an important gap in research, as demographic information on Kentucky students and their families indicates economic and multi-ethnic/multi-lingual factors that may serve as barriers to literacy achievement. As teachers work with increasing numbers of children and families from different cultural groups, it is essential that they recognize and value the different ways that literacy is supported in homes and communities (Mui & Anderson, 2008).

Research suggests that both families and communities have an impact on student achievement in literacy (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). In considering the impact of families and communities on student achievement, the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory synthesized recent national research (Henderson & Mapp, 2002) and found the following: (a) family and community involvement that is linked to student learning has a greater effect on achievement than more general forms of involvement (Invernizzi, Rosemary, Richards & Richards, 1997; Dryfoos, 2000; Clark, 2002); (b) programs that successfully connect with families and community invite involvement, are welcoming, and address specific parental and community needs (Edwards, 2004; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997, Sanders & Harvey 2000; Peña, 2000); and (c) organized initiatives to build parent and community leadership aimed at improving low-performing schools are growing and leading to promising results in low-income urban areas and the rural South (Mediratta, Fruchter & Lewis, 2002; Jacobs & Hirota, 2002; Wilson & Corbett, 2000).

Research has also demonstrated the importance of community on adult literacy learners (Fingeret and Drennon, 1997). Purcell-Gates, Jacobsen, and Degener (2004) found that adult literacy learners relied heavily on support from both family and community members, such as friends, neighbors, caseworkers, and so forth, in their quest to achieve higher levels of literacy. In her work with Sudanese refugees in Michigan, Perry (2008) similarly found that adult refugees participated in adult literacy, ESL, and higher education opportunities for a variety of purposes which included helping their children achieve in school and also supporting and contributing to their communities. Since significant numbers of Kentucky adults do not have the literacy levels required to perform essential everyday literacy tasks (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003), and since the state ranks forty-ninth in the nation in adults without a high school diploma (Kentucky Adult Education, 2007), further research on better serving adults and families with regard to literacy is needed.

Although a strong body of national research exists with respect to the important contributions of community to all levels of literacy learners, the same sort of research is sorely lacking for Kentucky contexts, which have great regional variations. Urban contexts, such as those found in Louisville and Lexington, represent highly diverse communities that include families from a variety of ethnic and socio-cultural backgrounds. Both cities also have recently resettled large communities of refugees from various countries around the world. Rural parts of the state, in contrast, tend to represent communities that are more homogeneously White, but that may still represent a variety of socioeconomic levels. ACT data (Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education, 2006) suggest strong regional patterns in literacy achievement, and due to the regional differences in communities described above, learners with varying background experiences face unique literacy development needs. Because achievement data have not been disaggregated by region within the state, nor by community, it is important that a needs assessment be conducted across the state that explores (a) the communities that exist and the characteristics of those who comprise those communities, (b) the literacy needs of each community, (c) the resources for literacy participation that exist within each community, and (d) the issues that may limit access to or participation in those literacy resources.

Finally, educators should become familiar with the literacy practices of the families and communities with whom they work. Much research suggests that households have “funds of knowledge” (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) that educators can build on in schools. Research is needed which further explicates family and community literacy practices and illuminates the ways in which families’ cultures and capabilities can be supported and utilized by schools (Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988).

#### *Research Questions:*

1. What are the similarities and differences between communities in the different regions of the state concerning literacy, and what literacy needs and issues are specific to each region?
2. What are the services that must be provided to meet the literacy needs of a family in a given community? Based on the services communities provide in literacy, how does that impact the family? Where are the gaps in being able to support families in literacy? Are certain types of services more effective for certain types of communities? How can we identify which interventions would be most appropriate in different contexts?
3. What are some of the effective practices/models that teachers, schools, and community groups utilize to impact literacy achievement?

### 3. Student Achievement Data

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Many types of data are gathered on student literacy achievement in Kentucky (Kentucky Department of Education [KDE], 2008a, 2008b, 2008c; KDE, 2009c; National Center for Education Statistics, 2007a). Research is needed to analyze literacy achievement and trends (a) across levels of schooling, populations, and geographies and (b) in relation to national expectations. With each literacy assessment that is administered, it is essential to determine the aspects of literacy that are being measured and how those measures relate to teaching and learning. Although Kentucky has been a pioneer in developing statewide data systems, it is not always clear the extent to which there is articulation of data across these systems, nor are there clear ways in which researchers may access those statewide data sources. As emerging efforts to build a statewide database continue (KDE, 2009b), issues of access for teachers, students, and researchers must be addressed.

At the P-12 level, assessments such as National Assessment of Education Progress can be analyzed along reading and demographic variables to show the extent to which Kentucky's student achievement patterns differ from national trends (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007b). However, more finely-grained data are needed to explore achievement patterns within Kentucky by (a) region, district, and school; (b) demographic groups (socio-economic status, ethnicity and race, gender, special needs, English language learners, age); and (c) individual learners over time and place as students move through their education. In addition, more data are needed concerning student performance on specific components or processes associated with reading, so that districts and schools can best target the reading processes and strategies that students need to develop. While a range of assessments are administered in the state, such as Kentucky's tests of Kentucky core content and the ACT, critical analysis is needed to determine the literacy skills that are not yet assessed and to ascertain the student groups that might be missed by these assessments.

At other ages across learners' lifespans, there are serious gaps in data that are collected. At the early childhood level, virtually no statewide language and literacy data are available. Similar deficiencies exist in the adult education data. While tests such as the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE), GED, and Compass are administered in adult education programs, virtually no data exist regarding adults with learning disabilities or other important segments of the adult population (i.e. prisoners). To effectively advance literacy learning among the population of adults in Kentucky, research is needed to fill these gaps in data collection and analysis.

As noted, there are a myriad of important questions to be researched about patterns of student literacy achievement and the reasons for and consequences of those patterns. In order to answer these questions, better data sets are needed—sets that collect achievement data on multiple dimensions of literacy and across categories of learners, place, and time. However, perhaps an equally important issue relates to the extent that districts and schools are able to use these existing data sources to plan for program improvement and the extent to which teachers are able to use these sources in conjunction with ongoing formative assessments to inform their own instruction. Advancement of literacy teaching and learning occurs most profoundly at these ground levels, and research that investigates how assessments can be most effectively used to move students toward higher achievement is needed.

#### *Research Questions:*

1. What student achievement data does Kentucky collect that can help us understand how to teach students to read and write better? What additional achievement data need to be collected?

2. What populations are not currently represented (or are inadequately represented) in existing data sets (i.e. adult prisoners, home and private schools, English-language learners), and how can data on these populations be effectively collected and used?
3. What are the patterns of student literacy achievement in Kentucky? For example, what variations exist within geographic regions (e.g., by school, grade level, demographics, etc.)?
4. Historically, how has Kentucky's performance on nationally-normed assessments (e.g., NAEP) compared with performance on state-designed testing (e.g., KCCT)?
5. How does student achievement in Kentucky compare to national trends? For example, how does the achievement of Kentucky African-American children compare to the achievement of African-American children nationally?
6. How can student achievement data be used to analyze patterns in reading and writing scores in Kentucky, including longitudinally?
7. Which aspects of literacy are measured at different age levels on current assessments? Which components are not assessed?
8. How well do literacy achievement results align across multiple assessments?
9. Which data sets can be analyzed to inform achievement (what has been learned), prediction (likelihood of educational success at the next level), and diagnosis (points for learning intervention)?
10. What affects the literacy development of an individual from early childhood into adulthood (i.e. change of school, relocation, interrupted schooling, period of low skill development)?
11. What is the relationship of literacy achievement to achievement in content areas and to post-formal education outcomes?
12. How can large-scale achievement data be used with classroom-level, formative data to inform teaching and learning based on a complete picture of student literacy?

#### **4. School and Program Content**

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High levels of literacy achievement are rooted in a relevant curriculum and effective instruction for all students. In Kentucky, curriculum and instruction in schools and programs are grounded in statewide standards for early childhood through grade twelve and standards for college and career readiness. Therefore, discussions of improving literacy across age levels must be anchored in a firm examination of literacy standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices.

In 2009, the Kentucky Legislature passed Senate Bill 1, which requires redefinition and alignment of core content standards across all disciplines in Kentucky by December 15, 2010. Further, the Bill requires that Kentucky standards be aligned vertically from pre-kindergarten through post-secondary education. This alignment is critical for preparing graduates to meet postsecondary literacy needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In Kentucky, 22-32% of Kentucky high school graduates who attended Kentucky state colleges were underprepared for freshman-level classes in English and reading (Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education, 2006). A study by Regional Educational Laboratory-Central found that content standards in the majority of central region states included 82% of language arts topics considered important on national tests for postsecondary preparedness (Kendall, Pollack, Schwols, & Snyder, 2007). These studies emphasize a need for research examining the alignment between K-12 and post-secondary expectations.

In response to this need for a national focus on higher standards, the National Governors Association (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) began a state-led process to develop common core state standards in English language arts and mathematics. Forty-eight states, including Kentucky, and three territories signed onto the Common Core State Standards

Initiative<sup>1</sup>. As these standards are adopted in Kentucky, research is needed which examines the ways in which districts and schools are using the Common Core Standards to develop and align the curriculum. Further, studies are needed to investigate the ways in which teachers (a) are informed about and supported in using the standards to develop curriculum and instruction; (b) develop and use formative assessments to evaluate and support students' progress toward literacy standards; and (c) integrate instruction related to the standards across the curriculum in discipline-specific ways. In addition, it is important to consider the aspects of literacy that are not specifically addressed by the standards (i.e. critical thinking, digital literacy) and the extent to which teachers emphasize or de-emphasize these aspects in the curriculum and instruction.

Research on the implementation of Kentucky's literacy standards and the extent to which they influence curriculum, assessment, and instructional practices will inform policy makers, school administrators, and practitioners as they make decisions about literacy practices for all students.

#### *Research Questions:*

1. How are school districts and schools aligning content with state standards across the educational continuum from early childhood to adulthood?
2. How are literacy standards used in developing content curriculum and influencing instruction?
3. Which instructional strategies have a positive impact on students' abilities to achieve literacy standards?
4. How do formative assessment processes and results inform literacy curricular and instructional decisions?
5. How do districts and schools communicate to local and state communities the results, progress, and issues that affect implementation of aligned literacy standards?
6. How are 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills such as critical thinking, digital literacy, and problem solving implemented in literacy curriculum and instruction?

### **MOVING THE AGENDA FORWARD**

CCLD has developed the research agenda to promote a strong research base in literacy for improving policy and practice in Kentucky. The data, which reflect serious difficulties in literacy for so many Kentuckians, suggest a sense of urgency for such a research agenda. CCLD will lead the implementation of this research agenda by working closely with researchers across the state to support, facilitate, or conduct studies in each of the priority topics.

First, CCLD will initiate a research support program that provides funds for researchers and students at Kentucky's eight public universities to conduct research in the priority topic areas. CCLD will solicit proposals from researchers across the state for small research grants focused on the priority topics. These grants will support new and innovative research that begins to answer key research questions. In addition, CCLD will accept applications for student thesis or dissertation awards to help support students' work in the priority topic areas. This program will provide incentives for graduate students to focus their work on answering research questions that improve policy and practice.

Next, CCLD will bring together researchers from its partner institutions to develop studies focused on the priority topics. The center will facilitate the collaborative development of grant proposals to secure extramural funding for research in the priority topic areas. Further funding for studies in the

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<sup>1</sup> The Common Core is scheduled to be reviewed for adoption in Kentucky during January 2010.

priority topic areas might be sought from the state legislature, grant agencies, and education advocacy groups. CCLD will assume a range of roles in this process, from taking a leadership role in the research to providing needed assistance to principal investigators at its partner institutions. In addition, CCLD will share this research agenda with other agencies around Kentucky to help inform decisions about what should be studied in literacy. It is important to note that the research agenda priority topics align well with the priorities outlined in the federal “Race to the Top” initiative for education. This alignment should be leveraged to advance Kentucky’s literacy goals.

To ensure that the research emanating from the research agenda informs policy and practice, CCLD will implement strategies for disseminating findings to policy makers, teacher educators, district administrators, and teachers. Pertinent research from the research agenda studies will be translated into literacy policy briefs for decision makers. Findings and implications from studies on the research agenda priority topics will be disseminated in “research to practice” summaries geared toward school and program personnel for the purpose of influencing key decisions about literacy instruction. Research studies may be further disseminated in a face-to-face venue such as a conference focused on ways to translate the research ideas into practice. Practical implications from the research might also be shared with families and communities through collaborations with partner agencies that work directly with these constituent groups. Finally, CCLD will utilize the findings from the research agenda studies to inform its development of new professional development programs and initiatives to improve literacy instruction and achievement in Kentucky and beyond.

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