

## Ensuring Literacy: Reducing Student Retention

### Introduction and Context

Reading is the fundamental skill on which all learning depends. Any child who doesn't learn to read well will not easily master other skills and is unlikely to flourish in school or in life.

Reading is a difficult skill to master and many children have difficulty learning. The reading problem is even more widespread among children from a high poverty environment. From the school perspective, low reading achievement is the greatest contributing factor to chronically low performing schools. In Louisiana, less than half of low-income 4<sup>th</sup> graders read at or above the basic level compared to nearly three quarters of their middle-class peers.

The development of reading skills is necessary for success in school or career. This is why Louisiana's accountability and standards system has "beamed the light" on literacy in public schools. This focus is intentional and intense: literacy provides every child the opportunity to build the skills to graduate from high school and prepare for post-secondary education and employment.

The good news is that a large body of research exists on reading and there is a consensus among educators and researchers on what we must do to help students succeed. This is captured in the "Report of the National Reading Panel" and has been combined with a study of best practices used by the Alabama Reading Initiative to develop the "Louisiana's Literacy Plan: Ensuring Literacy for All." ([www.doe.state.la.us/LDE/uploads/11190.doc](http://www.doe.state.la.us/LDE/uploads/11190.doc))

The Louisiana Department of Education is committed to improving reading instruction in all classrooms with an eye toward universal literacy among Louisiana's public school students. Currently, 175 schools (160 elementary schools with 15 middle and high schools) participate in this intense focus on "Ensuring Literacy for All."

Of course, the success of literacy instruction in Louisiana will not happen in isolation – it is dependent on the preparation and motivation of high quality teachers. Louisiana universities work to improve the undergraduate instruction of future teachers in the area of literacy instruction. School districts focus on professional development for existing principals, teachers, literacy coaches and reading interventionists. School leadership organizes instructional improvement around the belief that reading is fundamental.

### Fine by Nine: Early Elementary Literacy

A large body of research supports the fact that children without foundational reading abilities by nine years of age are very likely to struggle with reading throughout their school careers. When every child learns to read on grade level by the end of the third grade, Louisiana will begin to see huge improvement in test scores across the state. As it stands, analysis of NAEP 2009 results indicate that Louisiana's 4<sup>th</sup> grade students rank 50<sup>th</sup> in the nation in reading.

This large literacy gap is the reason for State Superintendent Paul Pastorek's declaration that the three areas of educational focus in Louisiana are literacy, literacy, and literacy. The major focus of Ensuring Literacy for All is in the early grades PreK-4. Louisiana's plan dedicates at least 90-120 minute blocks of time for every student in grades K-3 for reading instruction. These students spend their day – indeed their year – engaged in reading and writing.

Every day, teachers in “Ensuring Literacy for All” schools develop and deliver instruction in key areas including phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension. They individualize instruction to meet the needs of every child and create classroom environments that are rich with language and print. Key to the initiative is a quality teacher in every class who provides books and time for students to read.

### **Middle and High School: Preparing All Students for Success in their Future**

In NAEP 2009 national testing of 8<sup>th</sup> graders, Louisiana’s students ranked 49<sup>th</sup> out of 50 states and the District of Columbia in reading. This is extremely worrisome for Louisiana since poor academic achievement is consistently linked with truancy, high suspension rates, and increased entrance into the juvenile justice system.

Low reading achievement is directly correlated with dropping out of school. Students who find themselves behind in reading – if not corrected by the school – will be unable to keep up in any course. The result is students counting the days to their 17<sup>th</sup> birthday – the day they can drop out of school in Louisiana.

Whether students are struggling learners or high achievers, “Ensuring Literacy for All” will provide continual development of literacy skills in the middle and high school grades so that all students are better prepared to face a world more dependent on educational attainment than ever before.

### **Ensuring Literacy for All: Model**

“Ensuring Literacy for All” uses a Three-Tier Model to reach all learners and to give additional accelerated instruction to struggling readers.

In Tier 1, all students receive daily focused instruction on grade level reading/language arts curriculum. Teachers in all disciplines teach reading skills within the context of core academic subjects.

In Tier 2, students who struggle to meet grade level expectations receive additional targeted instruction in small groups of five or fewer. Student progress is

monitored every two weeks and lessons are adjusted based on data.

In Tier 3, severely struggling students receive additional intensive instruction by a specialized reading professional.

### **Ensuring Literacy for All: University Preparation and Worksite Development of Teachers**

Teachers can’t teach what they haven’t been taught; yet, too few teachers have been provided the necessary skills in research-based reading instruction during their pre-service or in-service professional development.

“Ensuring Literacy for All” is a comprehensive strategy to bring the best research and teaching practices in reading instruction to the classrooms of Louisiana. At the school level, the “spread” of the program is based on expert coaching and partnerships. Literacy coaches work with novice teachers in their classroom modeling “best practices” with real students.

School /university partnerships exist in some locations, but they are needed in each school. These partnerships provide a mutual benefit – the Education College provides guidance to PreK-12 schools and those schools in turn show university faculty the latest methods of literacy instruction.

### **Retention in the Early Grades**

The result of student reading difficulties is often student retention. Louisiana retains more students in kindergarten through fourth grade than the national average for grade retention in K-8<sup>th</sup>. In Louisiana, 33% of students fail to make it to the 4<sup>th</sup> grade on age-grade level despite overwhelming research and practical evidence that retention does not benefit children in the long run. In fact, student retention leads to higher dropout rates.

In Louisiana, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) mandates 4<sup>th</sup> & 8<sup>th</sup> grade high stakes testing (LEAP) with retention. However, each district’s local Pupil Progression Plan determines retention in the non-high stakes grades.

Three meta-analyses of the research on retention over the past 75 years with a total of 700 individual analyses of retention data indicated that retention is not the solution. Each study compared retained students with low-performing peers who were advanced to the next grade level. The research failed to support the use of grade retention as an early intervention to support academic achievement (Jimerson, 2003).

Impacts of student retention are as follows:

- There is a decrease in academic achievement.
- There is no increase in social-emotional adjustment associated with retention.
- Low performing but promoted elementary students performed no differently than their higher performing peers in terms of educational attainment or employment outcomes at age 20.
- Students retained in elementary school were less likely at age 20 to be employed or in post-secondary education, and those who were employed earned less and received lower employment competence ratings.

National studies have consistently identified grade retention as a leading indicator of high school dropout rates. Grade retention increases a student's risk of dropping out between 20% and 50%. Retained students are between 2 and 11 times more likely to drop out. The academic impact and outcomes of students retained in Louisiana mirror this national research on the correlation of student retention and graduation rates.

**Academic Impact of Retention**

A Louisiana student who enters high school (HS)...	... graduates from HS in Louisiana
14 years old (on age-grade level)	81.2% of the time
15 years old (retained once)	47.8% of the time
16 years old (retained twice)	18.9% of the time
17 years old (retained more than twice)	7.1% of the time

The frightening aspect of this data is that predictions can be made from the research. Louisiana can accurately predict the graduation outcomes of 80% of the state's 9<sup>th</sup> grade class based ONLY on their age & previous school attendance. There is an indication from these results that Louisiana schools should reexamine their approach to student retention.

Retention of students has not lead to significant positive outcomes. In fact, the use of student retention to improve future school outcomes has fallen prey to the law of unintended consequences—in this case, reduction in student achievement and higher dropout rates.

Districts and schools throughout Louisiana are working to solve the retention problem. The Literacy Goal Office of the Louisiana Department of Education conducted a survey of school principals to determine what is being done in schools throughout Louisiana to prevent retention. Some of the strategies listed include:

- Tutorials by certified teachers for Pre-K, Kindergarten, and 1<sup>st</sup> grade to prevent grade retention
- Targeted collaboration with Head Start and other childcare providers to ensure that students are receiving the instruction needed from birth through Pre-K to be successful in Kindergarten
- Focused literacy and numeracy for most of the school day with science, social studies, health, embedded in the literacy instruction
- Specific training and models for Pre-K and Kindergarten interventions
- Utilization of the Speech and Language Pathologist to provide early interventions in Pre-K and Kindergarten
- After school support for strategic and intensive students with required parent seminars
- Additional time in the school day and school year
- Increased exposure to reading with classroom libraries and targeted read alouds to develop vocabulary and listening comprehension
- More focus on literacy and numeracy in Pre-K classes
- Side by side coaching provided to teachers by skilled reading coaches
- Specially trained certified teachers serving as interventionists

## Ensuring Literacy for All: Final Thoughts

At the policy level, the full implementation of “Ensuring Literacy for All” will depend on political will. Resources are required to provide professional development, reading coaches, and interventionists. All teachers must be involved in teaching literacy – from PreK-4 elementary teachers to language arts teachers in grades 5-8 to math, science and history teachers at the middle and high school levels. Ultimately, the long term benefits of “Ensuring Literacy for All” will depend on College of Education programs in every university, providing “teachers in training” the instruction needed to meet the challenge.

Reading is the foundation skill of all learning. To this vision, the Louisiana Department of Education and Education's Next Horizon will continue to seek support and resources for a concentration on literacy beginning with the early elementary years and continuing through the late elementary, middle, and high school experience.

As Louisiana seeks to improve the reading level of all children, key questions that guide the “Ensuring Literacy for All” effort include:

- Does Louisiana have the political will to invest in state-wide literacy initiatives?
- How can we prevent retentions in the early grades with appropriate interventions?
- How can we improve literacy in middle and high schools?
- How can Louisiana be most effective in building the professional development and university preparation needed for a successful “Ensuring Literacy for All” initiative?