

Comprehensive Literacy Bill Summary

Literacy is Essential for All Learning

Research demonstrates that a literacy-rich environment in early childhood is an important prerequisite for school-age learning and academic success; research also shows that low-income children are less likely to have access to this type of environment. As children enter formal schooling—and throughout their elementary school years—it is crucial that they develop oral language, reading, and writing abilities through high-quality instruction and practices. These skills are critical because they provide the foundation for all future learning.

For adolescent students—defined in the bill as those in grades four through twelve—research reveals that higher-order literacy skills, such as the ability to analyze diverse texts and write using critical reasoning, are essential components of student success across the core academic content areas, including math and science. In fact, researchers at ACT have found that as early as eighth grade, academic achievement is highly predictive of college- and career-readiness at graduation. Unfortunately, according to *The Nation's Report Card*, a report released by the National Association of Educational Progress (NAEP), less than one third of all eighth graders read at a proficient level.

Many of the schools and districts that have successfully increased student achievement and graduation rates have made literacy the cornerstone of their school reform strategy. Yet, the most recent NAEP findings demonstrate that while literacy improvement has been made during the elementary school years where investments in literacy have been substantial, reading scores in the later grades—where attention and funding for literacy has been sparse—have failed to improve. Despite clear evidence demonstrating the need for literacy instruction and supports at all age levels, federal support for such efforts has been inconsistent.

Lagging Behind in Literacy Skills

Literacy skills of students in the United States lag considerably behind the needs of the global workforce and its employers. The fastest-growing professions have very high literacy demands, but almost half of all high school graduates and nearly all students who fail to obtain a high school diploma lack the literacy skills needed to succeed in college and work. This problem does not start in high school; it can be detected at all educational levels. According to NAEP, in both fourth and eighth grade, only about one third of all students read at a level considered proficient for their grade.

Poor and minority students are even less likely to obtain proficient scores on NAEP tests, a gap that exists not only in the fourth and eighth grades, but also from the very beginning of formal schooling. Kindergarteners from low-income families are less likely than students from higher-income families to come to school recognizing letters and understanding the relationship between letters and sounds. Many low-income and minority students arrive at school disadvantaged; without the literacy support they need, this disadvantage only persists. Growing awareness of student literacy skills and their importance to student success has led to support for high-quality literacy instruction for students of all ages and across all content areas.

The Comprehensive Literacy Bill

The Comprehensive Literacy bill would support comprehensive state and locally led literacy programs to ensure that children from birth to grade twelve have the reading and writing skills necessary for success in school and beyond. Specifically, the Comprehensive Literacy bill would:

I. Provide federal support for literacy programs by:

- a) authorizing \$2.5 billion for comprehensive literacy programs, providing funds for both existing and new state and local school-based literacy programs that span birth to grade twelve through the use of a state formula grant;
- b) allocating 10 percent of the \$2.5 billion for children from birth to age five, 35 percent for students in kindergarten to grade three, and 50 percent for students grades four through twelve; and
- c) requiring a rigorous national evaluation of the programs that includes stringent conflict of interest restrictions for the programs' peer review process.

II. Enhance each state's role in improving literacy instruction by:

- a) supporting the formation of a state literacy leadership team made up of literacy experts and relevant stakeholders;
- b) supporting the development of a comprehensive state literacy plan including a needs assessment and an implementation plan to ensure high-quality instruction in reading and writing from early education through grade twelve;
- c) requiring each state to provide competitive subgrants to local educational agencies;
- d) targeting funding to low-income schools (defined in the bill as schools with the highest percentage of students living in poverty);
- e) requiring each state to provide technical assistance to local educational agencies on how to implement high-quality professional development programs for literacy instruction;
- f) requiring each state to review pre-service course work as well as state licensure and certification requirements, and make recommendations on their improvement so that teachers of all age and grade levels are trained to provide high-quality literacy instruction; and
- g) allowing states with effective literacy instruction programs to keep their existing program structure;

III. Support local educational agencies' creation of high-quality literacy programs in schools by:

- a) providing high-quality professional development for instructional staff that is job-embedded, ongoing, and research-based, providing teachers with expertise in literacy instruction, analyzing data to improve student learning, and effective implementation of literacy instruction strategies;
- b) providing students with explicit, systematic, and developmentally appropriate instruction in reading and writing, including but not limited to vocabulary development, phonemic awareness, the use of diverse texts, and the use of technology for generating and presenting ideas;
- c) utilizing diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments to inform and improve instruction and student learning; and
- d) supporting schoolwide literacy programs as well as additional supports to address the specific learning needs of struggling readers and writers, including English language learners and special education students.