

Toward a Literacy Action Plan for Milwaukee Public Schools

Report of the External Literacy Review Team

REVIEW TEAM MEMBERS

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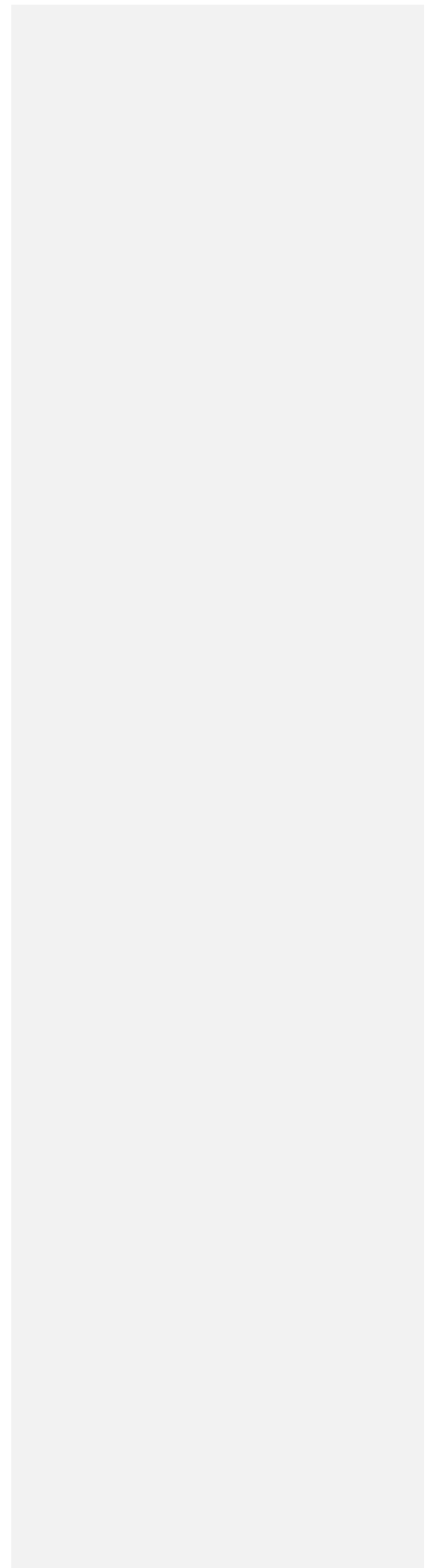
Catherine Thome

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## ORIGINS AND NATURE OF THE REVIEW

William G. Andrekopoulos, Superintendent of Milwaukee Public Schools, charged Dr. Catherine Thome with organizing an external review team to examine the literacy needs of students in the public schools. The review was enacted as part of the Corrective Action steps required by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) to address Milwaukee Public Schools' (MPS) District Identified for Improvement (DIFI) status. Specifically, the Department of Public Instruction charged the district with the following:

The MPS DIFI Director and key MPS administrators shall develop a comprehensive district-wide plan for literacy that is standards-based, articulated across levels, and utilizes a limited number of programs by December 15, 2008. The plan must be based on a review of the district's current literacy programs by external experts facilitated by the MPS DIFI Director with technical assistance provided by DPI. Implementation of the comprehensive literacy plan must be implemented at the beginning of the 2009-10 school year." From "Corrective Action for Milwaukee Public Schools: District Identified for Improvement – Level 3 (2008-09)

Dr. Thome pursued input from MPS personnel and external advisors on how to proceed with the review. At the same time, she solicited recommendations for possible reviewers. Subsequently, broad guidelines for the review were determined and a list of possible reviewers developed.

Reviewers were selected and arrangements made for site visits by the review team and periodic follow-up. The reviewers included a representative of the state department of education and three literacy experts with a history of engagement in literacy research, December, 2008

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program development and review as well as assessment and professional development. The literacy experts were Drs. Rob Tierney (Chair), Richard Allington and Donna Carry. Jacqueline Karbon represented DPI and Dr. Catherine Thome coordinated the review for MPS.

The district was keen to pursue a review that met Wisconsin DPI and MPS needs. Within the time constraints imposed by Wisconsin DPI the review began in September and continued through October with the formulation of observations, the suggestion of areas of concern and the development of an action plan. The review was intended to afford various groups opportunities for input and then provide for follow-up to assess progress by MPS on action recommendations.

The Review Team met with several groups and drew on a variety of input, data and observations. The committee met with the following groups:

- Superintendent of Schools – William Andrekopoulos
- Literacy Self-Study Committee – made up of representatives of MTEA, ASC, Literacy Specialists, Special Education, bilingual education, DIFI Supervisors, Teaching and Learning, Early Childhood, Research and Assessment.
- African American Educational Committee – Dr. Demond Means
- Greater Milwaukee Council – Sister Joel Read
- MPS Bilingual Department – Ivy Covert; Jesus Santos
- Milwaukee Teacher Education Association – Dennis Oulahand
- MPS Department of Research and Assessment – Deborah Lindsey
- MPS Professional Development Division – Victoria Frazier
- English/Language Arts – Patrice Ball
- Milwaukee Partnership Academy – Dr. Linda Post, Dr. Christine Anderson, Dr. Linda Gordy

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- Office of Instructional Leadership and Support – Arleen Dansby-White, Kathy Williams
- Assessment Sub-group (made up of representative members of Literacy Self Study Committee, ASC, MTEA, OSPS)
- Special Education – Patricia Yahle, Director of Special Services, Claudia Weaver-Hendricks, Peggy Holtman, Tracy Wozniak.
- Early Childhood – Ann Terrell, Director; Sandra Rosove, Coordinator of Reading First; Gina Lowery, Coordinator of Early Reading First
- Administrators and Supervisors Council – Julia D’Amato
- Optimizing Success through Problem-Solving (OSPS) – 3 representatives
- School Psychologists – 7 representatives
- DIFI Supervisors
- Literacy Specialists – Jodene Schluetter, Andrea Barton, Rita Majorelle, Bernadette Halloran, Debbie Kuether, Lindsey Buck
- Parents

## Document Review

The External Review Team reviewed and analyzed district documents related to literacy. These documents included district developed materials, student outcome data, program data, demographic data, and Summary Reports from the Literacy Self-Study as outlined below.

### Documents Provided to External Review Team

- a. District Strategic Plan
- b. Literacy Self-Study Committee’s Vision and Mission related to MPS’ Strategic Plan
- c. “Action Plan to Improve MPS 2007-2012: Information on Reading in MPS”

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- d. Superintendent's Addresses to Principals – August 2007, August 2008
- e. Council of Great City Schools report
- f. "A First-Class Education for Young Minds" booklet
- g. Literacy related grants (e.g. Reading First, Early Reading First)
- h. Office of Instructional Leadership and Support organizational chart
- i. 2005-06 Reading Adoption spreadsheet
- j. Reading Record Cards
- k. Evaluation of Direct Instruction Program in MPS
- l. WCER reports on Literacy Coaches
- m. Reading Verification Process: Summary
- n. K-12 Learning Targets
- o. Sample of reading pacing guide
- p. Reading level chart
- q. Fact Sheet: Milwaukee Public Schools at a Glance 2008-2009
- r. Action Steps recommendations from following groups:
  - Greater Milwaukee Committee
  - Bilingual Multicultural department
  - Literacy Assessment Sub-Committee
  - Special Services
  - MTEA
  - High School principals' cohort
  - Early Childhood
  - English/Language Arts
  - Milwaukee Partnership Academy
  - Reading Office
  - Literacy Specialists

### District Data

- a. District demographic data
- b. District statistics from ESEA plan
- c. WCKE results
- d. SIFI/AYP school lists
- e. Total student population
- f. Homeless statistics
- g. Teacher and student mobility rates
- h. Drop-out rates

### Schools Visited

During one of the site visits, the External Review Team members visited a cross-section of classrooms, seeking evidence that the literacy instruction and experiences ensure that students have the support that they need to acquire these literacy attributes and teachers the resources to do so. Specifically, using the same format as used in the Literacy Self-

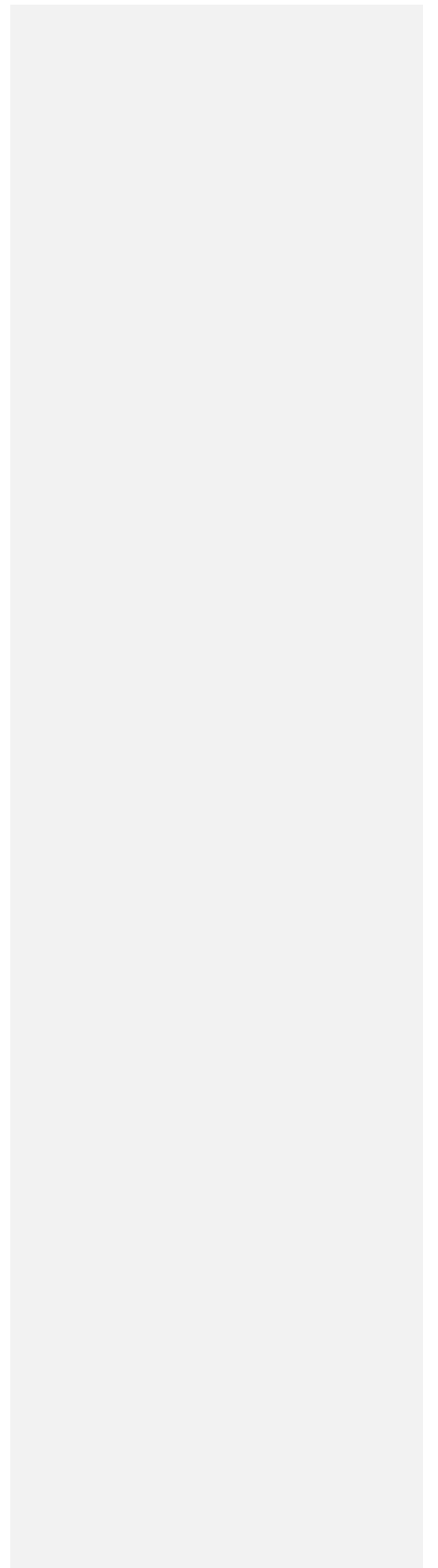
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Study Committee process, External Review Team members toured a sampling of buildings and classrooms looking for evidence of how a school values literacy, meets the literacy needs of their students and supports their teachers. The questions team members considered in their school visits included but were not limited to: Who helps you? Who do you go to for help? What assessments do you have for your students? How does assessment help you or not? Which assessment and how? What advice would you give us in terms of improving reading?

The sample size of schools visited was restricted, but was representative of the range of schools in MPS at least in so far as programs used and the students that are served. A comprehensive review of literacy programs should be undertaken, but was not viable given the constraints under which the external review team was working.

Maple Tree  
68th Street  
Hawley Road  
Forest Home Avenue  
Auer Avenue  
Metcalf  
Humboldt Park  
Hartford  
Burroughs  
Lincoln  
Roosevelt  
South Division  
Custer  
Reagan  
North Division Complex





### **Overview of recommendations**

The review team is suggesting that Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) initiate some major shifts if they are to address the pressing needs of their students who currently are struggling in reading. Without a major investment in these improvements, we would expect MPS students to continue to fall further behind and an increased number of schools to be identified as “failing.”

First and foremost, MPS needs to focus their attention on meeting the differential needs of all students. They need to ensure that all students are receiving the expert support, resources and the time needed to develop as readers and writers. At a minimum, this requires that:

- students have access to a range of reading materials and other resources on different topics and difficulty levels tied to their interests, backgrounds and literacy learning needs;
- students are afforded ample opportunities, especially significantly more time, for learning within the regular classroom, in small groups and one-on-one;
- students are engaged in a coordinated, comprehensive, consistent, culturally relevant and contemporary learning opportunities rather than disconnected, inconsistent, or piecemeal approaches to reading and writing;
- students receive high quality learning experiences involving integrated reading-writing-learning opportunities informed by complex and current understandings of literacy and literacy development, taught by qualified teachers;
- students be assessed in ways that inform their own literacy learning and their ongoing development concretely and richly;
- students of all ages (including secondary students) be given the support that they need to develop as literacy learners with the reading and writing tools that will allow them to advance in schools, the workplace and society.

MPS needs to proceed with major systemic and local adjustments and planning if they are to address this challenge and in turn monitor their progress toward achieving these goals. Various sources (district-wide, school, classroom and student-level) should be used to assess the progress as these goals are advanced.

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There are a number of essential developments that need to occur as first steps. MPS needs to ensure that **teachers** have the background and resources to meet the needs of the range of students for which they are responsible. This entails that teachers and the personnel that support them pursue the following:

- develop a fuller understanding of literacy and literacy development;
- collaborate and coordinate their efforts to meet the needs of students;
- ensure that all students receive the time, resources and instruction needed to develop as readers;
- use student data (student/classroom-based and district-wide) on a recurring fashion to plan, monitor and guide their instructional initiatives for different students;
- develop a coherent literacy program based upon students' needs, building upon their backgrounds, interests and abilities with a range of materials and educational insights from their observations of students and growing knowledge in collaboration with other professionals;
- pursue a comprehensive, contemporary and coordinated literacy development program that involves an integrated, meaning-oriented and strategic approach to reading and writing and includes opportunities to develop digital literacies.

Again, MPS needs to examine the current status of teachers in the district as well as initiate hirings, placements, support services, program development, professional engagements and ways to monitor progress in these activities.

MPS needs to proceed with major systemic changes to ensure that these and other developments occur within the district to achieve the aforementioned goals. To do so, the status quo will need to be changed—sometimes dramatically. In particular, we are recommending changes in the following directions:

- develop a revised budget model for the district that allows for resources to be distributed to meet the needs of students who need more support;
- revamp structural elements to support a team approach that addresses the needs of students and teachers at a local level across MPS;
- make adjustments to student support services (including curriculum coordinators, special education educators, school psychologists, literacy coaches and others) to meet the needs of teachers and students in a manner that is coordinated,

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collaborative and consistent rather than silo-ed, diffuse and sometimes detached or distant;

- develop a single informed, comprehensive, coordinated and contemporary literacy framework to be used district-wide, and in so doing, reduce and/or displace the number of programs directed at better meeting the integrated, strategic and developmental literacy needs of all students;
- develop, hire and invest in highly qualified literacy professionals as well as in professional support for all teachers in order to meet the needs of different students;
- support learning teams presently in schools, including the school leaders, to endeavor to meet the needs of students and teachers and to ensure that the proposed literacy agenda moves forward honestly and proactively at the building level;
- develop classroom-based assessment systems to ensure that teachers are using ongoing systems (e.g. running records, observations of students' strategies and improvement, learner-centered reflections across a range of materials of all aspects of reading) as a basis for meeting ongoing student needs and advancing their literacies in a manner that is less reductionist;
- develop approaches to assess and monitor the classroom, school and district that give a richer, ongoing and fuller sense of the value-added in a fashion that is more constructive and informative than the current model of determining school success or failure;
- support approaches to educational engagement with students, their families and communities where schools become hubs for a range of support services for these groups.

Much work needs to be done, but it was our impression that MPS has the ambition and commitment to address these matters. Indeed, MPS personnel reading this report will not find the observations in this report startling nor our comments disparaging. Many share the same concerns. A number of the report's suggestions are derived from suggestions that were offered by MPS.

Background to current report

MPS has been straining to respond as best they can to improve the reading performance and proficiency levels for all students. While some of these efforts have been successful, overall, the school district is struggling to address the needs of a large number of students and, in turn, a high percentage of their schools that have been designated as “failing.” On the one hand, the designation of “failing” is an artifact of the reform model and the technicalities associated with what is designated as proficient; on the other hand, the district does not deny that many of the students and schools are struggling.

The review team hopes that it can assist MPS in developing an understanding of their situation as well as ways to better meet student needs. To these ends, the report begins with some background on No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and related mandates. In this section, the review team explores some of the inherent limitations of NCLB and these mandates. The report then proceeds to offer specific comments pertaining to MPS’ reading improvement efforts. The review team highlights some of the strengths and weaknesses of the MPS reading curriculum initiatives against what we know from recent research on reading development. In addition, systemic matters (budget, staffing, structural elements), professional support and development, as well as assessment matters

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and community relationships, are discussed. The report was developed with the view that MPS would respond to the review team's suggestions of directions and, in turn, begin the implementation of selected improvements. It was assumed that the review team would be engaged in monitoring the response of MPS periodically.

### Some background on MPS, NCLB and related mandates

United States' school reform models have shifted from addressing issues of equity to highlighting the achievement gaps, and in turn, demanding more accountability of schools and students (Nichols and Berliner, 2007). NCLB and related initiatives such as Reading First represent the government's attempts to implement a nationwide school reform model that sought to leverage school improvement by stressing advances in test performance, and to require the use of selected reading programs to ensure that certain skills were taught in certain ways.

Increasingly, studies and a number of educators (including the review team) suggest that the mandates and these developments have some major limitations. Many of the initiatives have had unintended consequences and sometimes served the self-interest of selected parties instead of student needs. The use of high-stakes testing to leverage educational change has been questioned along with the ethics and educational merits of simply teaching to the test. There has been significant debate around the specific approaches to teaching, testing and definitions of learning that have been imposed.

The review team recognizes the worthwhile intentions of the federally mandated reform effort related to NCLB and the emphasis upon accountability, but has concerns about overly test-driven curricula, if tests become the surrogates for reading improvement. The review team decries the overemphasis upon teaching only a subset of selected skills over a coherent, comprehensive, integrated approach to literacy development. The review team agrees that the identification of several MPS schools as "failing" warrants concern, but are troubled by overreactions to such data or responses by school boards that simply teach to the tests and displace meaningful pursuits with narrowly conceived models of literacy development and learning improvement.

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By subscribing to only selected recommendations of national reports such as the National Reading Panel (NRP) and derivatives of NCLB such as Reading First, the review team is concerned that several MPS personnel have committed to certain of these findings at the exclusion of others, leading to a basic skills orientation. The review team contends that, if one wants to develop and pursue effective reading curriculum and instruction, then one must look beyond selected recommendations from the NRP report. The NRP elected to examine only *some* of the research on only *some* of the topics important to early reading growth and in several places in the report acknowledged the limitations of its scope and findings.<sup>i</sup> In MPS, a number of schools and personnel do not appear to acknowledge these limitations and have adopted programs and practices that represent a limited view of reading development and a restricted diet of reading skills.

The review team contends that there is growing research and support that points away from some of these pre-packaged programs. Instead, these findings direct educators toward more reading-intensive interventions where struggling readers select the texts they will read from a wide assortment of interesting texts, and are afforded reading-to-learn opportunities that involve a more expanded view of literacy and literacy development. In particular, various syntheses and meta-analyses (Purcell-Gates, 2008; Guthrie and Humenick, 2004) and a number of recent studies of effective beginning reading approaches (Torgeson, 2005; Torgeson et al., 2007; Vellutino & Fletcher, 2007, Scanlon et al., 2005; Schwartz and Gallant, 2008), indicate that what children know, and do not know, goes far beyond (but includes) simply letter names, phonemic awareness or sound/symbol relations. These research studies indicate that children learn basic skills such as letter/sound relationships better and faster when they are presented in the context of real reading and writing activities. In addition, longitudinal studies of reading and writing development (see Tierney and Sheehy, 2006), as well as the recent study of the impact of Reading First (Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, 2008), indicate that teaching models that strip down reading and writing to technical skills outside of meaningful practice may show what looks like good results on skills tests, but these gains are quickly lost after grade two.<sup>ii</sup>

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Some strengths and weaknesses of MPS reading initiatives

Based upon the review team’s observations and the aforementioned research references, we are persuaded that MPS has a long list of programs intended to meet the needs of students, but few fully match the essential elements identified and discussed in recent research evidence. Additionally, they are not adequately resourced or implemented to meet the needs of students—especially struggling readers. The adherence or allegiance to certain programs is problematic, and the talents of MPS should be directed to develop a single framework for literacy for all schools and for all students, including those with special needs. The review team believes that MPS should develop or select a reading program that is not only well-informed, coherent and comprehensive, but that also is contemporary and well implemented.

Currently, in MPS, there seems to be little reason to expect struggling students to ever catch up with their achieving peers. In many classrooms these students are not provided texts they can read accurately, fluently, and with strong comprehension in every subject area. In fact, too often these struggling readers may simply sit through grade-level reading, or English language arts lessons or high school subject areas. There is simply too much research evidence indicating that this situation extends the struggle for these students while providing no acceleration of reading development. Also, few schools have the expert staff to provide additional, daily, high-quality reading lessons. In other words, few struggling readers (including pupils with disabilities) appear to be receiving more and better reading lessons than their achieving peers either in their classrooms or outside their classrooms. The outcome is predictable; there are a large number of struggling readers on a negative trajectory with little hope for improvement unless major shifts in practices occur. Further improved performance on certain tests (e.g. DIBELS) may provide false hope when sustainable improvements beyond grade two are unlikely.

If we, as educators, expect struggling readers to exhibit accelerated growth in reading, we first need to provide these students with 90 minutes of high-quality classroom reading instruction every day, and many may need carefully integrated and coordinated one-on-one instruction. <sup>iii</sup>Struggling readers need an additional amount of daily high-quality



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reading instruction if we expect more than one year's growth per year. How much additional reading instruction is needed depends on how much growth we expect. For instance, an additional 30 minutes of reading instruction cannot, typically, be expected to add an additional year's growth in reading, though that is what many struggling readers, third grade and above, will need to add if they are to catch up with their peers. It may be that at the middle years and high school levels, for instance, struggling readers will need 90 minutes of high quality reading instruction (not English language arts instruction) and another hour or more of high-quality reading instruction if they are to be expected to make up a three or four year deficit in reading achievement (e.g., ninth grade students reading at fifth to six grade level).

To effectively meet the needs of struggling readers, the review team is recommending that MPS make changes in what should be taught, when and how. In so doing, the review team does not want to discount that it observed some praiseworthy reading instruction in MPS—in particular, the team observed classrooms where children had texts appropriately matched to their reading levels, where literate conversation about the text being read was evident, where good decoding and comprehension strategy lessons were offered, and where reading and writing were well integrated. However, the team noted that struggling readers were often provided small group and one-on-one instruction by less-than-qualified personnel who taught skills and programs that were not coordinated or consistent with a fuller set of reading goals for the students. In both the regular classroom and in special education settings it was observed that students lacked reading resources at appropriate levels and there was an excessive reliance on worksheets and skill pages. Furthermore, there was an undue commitment to teaching reading in a fashion that fails to integrate learning-to-read with reading-for-meaning. Review team members observed mostly lessons in K-3 settings that focused on two targets, both of which were word level skills (e.g., from MPS grade two targets: increase knowledge of letter/sound system; know various methods of recognizing words). These observations suggest that a basic skills model, reminiscent of models prominent in the 1970s may dominate the thinking of many of the teachers in MPS. Certainly, there was evidence of the influence of a very strict allegiance to teaching only basic skills as a result of alignment with Reading First

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mandates or the restrictive nature of Direct Instruction, DIBELS and other selected Reading First practices without knowledge of recent reviews and studies which have highlighted the shortcomings of selected initiatives. In terms of comprehension, teachers were observed asking far too many questions, many of which were of a literal nature and which were often trivial. While the MPS reading targets were often observed posted in schools and classrooms there were many targets that the team never observed (e.g., from MPS targets for grade two: child selects appropriate texts to read for enjoyment; analyze and state main ideas from non-fiction; use text structures to aid recall and analysis; use non-fiction to research). As we stated earlier, it seemed that teachers had an unquestioning commitment to certain practices. This was particularly evident when questions were raised about these approaches through the lens of recent research-based models of effective meaning-based reading instruction with children in high poverty schools. The team was concerned that a number of teachers were working hard delivering reading instruction that was unlikely to produce reading growth.

The situation for a number of the high school students is mixed depending upon their circumstances (i.e., history, achievement level, setting, etc). On the positive side, some high school teachers seem to have integrated selected learning strategies into their support of students (e.g. KWL, think-alouds for strategy development). In science, and in other areas, hands-on experience and the use of visually graphic material were sometimes enlisted as powerful supplements for learning. In some sites, there appeared to be an effort to connect to contemporary literacies via students being given access to web tools to supplement their learning and resources. However, on the negative side, our observations in the high schools suggested that a large number of students are still struggling and that the trajectory for them is problematic with little hope of improvement or recovery. The major mode of instruction appeared to be by teacher presentation or the use of a single textbook or anthologies without supplements, substitutes or support for students who might struggle with these texts. The review team was concerned with the number of high school students who were dropping out or appear to be simply in a holding area rather than in vibrant spaces offering alternatives. In particular, in some of the high school settings, schools seem to have sidelined some students due to their lack of responsiveness, belligerence or for other reasons. Some high school students seem to be

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subjected to prolonged isolation lest they interfere with the learning of successful students.

**Developing and implementing a coherent, comprehensive and contemporary literacy program**

The magnitude of developing a coherent, comprehensive and contemporary literacy program should not be underestimated nor should its implementation be viewed as automatic or straightforward. MPS has operated an excessive number of programs as a series of discrete initiatives. As students move from one program to the next, too many fall through the numerous cracks created by a disjointed system. The review team urges that the links across the schools and between the grades, including with preschool initiatives, be strengthened. There seems to be limited emphasis on comprehensive programming and pedagogical alignment of learning goals, curriculum, teaching and assessment. There is great ambiguity surrounding the definitional and operational differences between alignment (of standards, curriculum and assessment) and transition/continuity activities. Additionally, there is virtually no vertical alignment of pre-kindergarten and kindergarten to third grade programs' standards, curricula, or assessments. Likewise, horizontal correlation from one school to the next or one program to the next (even for the same students—e.g. special education students) is extremely limited.

By adopting a developmental view of learning that aligns literacy programs and learner goals from preschool with the early and later elementary years as well as secondary levels, MPS will reap a better return and such alignment will have a long-lasting benefit for the children who participate. While the Milwaukee Public School district has taken the first steps in identifying the importance of developing a comprehensive approach, the team concludes that much work still needs to be done, such as envisioning "transition" or "alignment" as a system that encompasses all aspects of literacy development across the grades including early childhood education.

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It is recommended that the district re-evaluate how it can change or eliminate the boundaries of its silos and strengthen its capacity to do work for young children. The team poses the following challenges for MPS to consider:

- think about whether there is something important about the distinct initiatives or silos and lack of alignment that makes them useful; and ask questions such as “what does this silo protect?”
- think of transition as a process that occurs over time rather than a one-time event. When transition is viewed as a process, this encourages thoughtful planning and collaboration between early childhood programs and elementary school programs.
- ensure two types of alignment: 1) horizontal alignment—synchronization among standards, assessments and curricula *within* a given age level; and 2) vertical alignment—synchronization among standards, assessments and curricula *between* given age levels.

Without such alignment, it is impossible to gauge if that which we want students to know and be able to do relates to what is being taught (the alignment of standards and curriculum) and if that which is being assessed relates to either what students should know (the standards) or what is being taught (the curriculum).

Assuming MPS invests in the development of a new coherent, comprehensive literacy program for all students, they should also strive to be contemporary and not overlook the development of the new or multiple literacies (New London Group, Coiro et al., 2008). Being literate is no longer finding the right book or writing paper-based text or doing literary analysis papers in high school English or using just readers or literature anthologies that do not include the literacies that most students need. It is not simply learning to master a set of preset skills such as decoding or comprehension, or being able to retrieve certain information about characters and plots of narrative or informational texts. Being literate involves research and development on-line as well as collaboration and community engagement across a host of digital spaces. The meaning-making construction zone of literacy learners may occur with a mix of paper and laptops and in spaces similar to television studios, spaces that allow for the generation of texts and

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images that when integrated with sound can be cut, edited, compiled and pasted from a variety of sources. To get there, learners need to engage in a form of research and development involving skills in defining and refining goals, searching and selecting various documents, web sites and other sources for relevant material. Learners need skills in gathering relevant material and considering how they connect, or they might create relevant compositions from these searches. They need a sense of agency (empowerment, responsibility and support) as they engage in research and design as well as ongoing conversations that are complex, multi-layered, virtual and face-to-face, global and local, identity shaping as well as informing. Rather than the traditional triad of pre, during and post, a different array of strategies and skills receive emphasis as one considers engaging with multiple literacies associated with project-based ventures incorporating web searches and other resources, multi-media and multi-layered project development, and postings on the internet for consumption and connections.

### **Professional personnel needs, support and development**

Not only does MPS need a coherent, comprehensive and shared literacy framework to guide its efforts, it also needs an infusion of qualified teachers with the expertise necessary to provide high-quality learning and guidance for students' needs. At the same time it lacks a coordinated district-wide strategy that ensures collaboration and a convergence of resources and professional development.

MPS needs to ensure that struggling readers are receiving quality literacy instruction for sustained periods of time in a fashion that is coordinated and concentrated. Special educators, school psychologists, literacy coaches, professional development personnel, assessment office staff and the reading and language arts personnel at the district and school levels must work together in a fashion that is coordinated around agreed upon student needs and literacy improvement goals and elements that work together.

In some settings, MPS has provided highly qualified personnel to support the students, but the number of teachers and supportive response personnel may not match the

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demands in other settings. Indeed, whereas various forms of professional development support are provided, the teachers in some of the MPS settings are not getting the level of support that they need to address their students' needs. Not surprisingly, there is an unusually high attrition rate of teachers in those settings that are most challenging. Indeed, coupled with teacher turnover, certain sites are struggling to provide adequate numbers of professional support personnel to ensure the sustained learning opportunities for many of their students. MPS has distributed resources equitably, but the needs for student support are more differentiated than the current budget model and administrative structures allow.

The decision by MPS to adopt the Title I school-wide projects model means that class size may be reduced modestly, but the schools may no longer have funds to employ certified reading specialists to provide additional, daily, high-quality reading instruction. And, while MPS provides a multitude of support programs and staff (Optimizing Success through Problem Solving (OSPS), school psychologists, literacy coaches, guidance counselors, curriculum generalists, etc.) none of these people currently allocate most of their time to providing high-quality reading lessons to students. When considering early struggling readers, MPS should carefully examine how resources can be found to support daily high-quality reading interventions. The Response-To-Intervention (RTI) process may be one way to begin. As defined by federal law, RTI is a general education initiative. RTI requires 90 minutes of high-quality classroom instruction in Tier 1. Currently, this is not typically happening. In Tier 2, RTI assumes daily high-quality small group reading lessons, in addition to the 90-minute classroom reading block. However, MPS schools typically have no general education staff with expertise in reading available to provide such interventions. Finally, in RTI Tier 3, struggling readers would receive another daily dose of high-quality reading tutoring (one-to-one). Again, schools have no one to provide that expert tutorial intervention. However, given that 15 percent of a district's special education budget can be tapped to provide some of the funding for RTI initiatives, MPS should seriously consider utilizing that budget source to fund general education teachers to provide Tier 2 and Tier 3 reading support.

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With few exceptions, MPS literacy programs and personnel are dispersed, diffuse and oftentimes siloed, rather than coordinated and concentrated to ensure the improvement of the students in greatest need. Contributing to the problems is the separation within the central office of these teams and the perceived separation of central office staff in general from educators at the school level.

In school interviews by team members, typically with principals, they found broad support for retaining literacy coaches. However, in general, less support was indicated for retaining Optimizing Success through Problem-Solving coordinators (OSPS) and school psychologists. As one principal reported, “OSPS was very useful in helping us establish problem-solving teams but we haven’t really used them the past couple of years. We don’t need them anymore.” Another principal indicated a similar situation with school psychologists, “They do things for us but nothing he/she does couldn’t be done by someone else in the building.”<sup>iv</sup>

The separate teams of personnel recognize the shortcomings—especially in terms of how they are perceived and how they work with the teachers and students whom they serve. It is strongly recommended that these silos be challenged around the unifying goal of working together to meet students’ needs. In a number of school sites, there was evidence of an effective teaming toward meeting student needs. The literacy coach together with faculty advisors and school-based curriculum personnel, as well as “DIFI” supervisors, seemed to be working together, but other resource personnel (e.g. school psychologists, special educators, OSPS) did not appear to be involved in this teamwork.

At present, in the area of literacy, MPS operates in a train-the-trainer model. Within this mode of professional development, seven district literacy specialists train school-based literacy coaches or school designees with the intent and expectation that the individuals take the shared information back to their staff. Schools are not required to have literacy coaches; some schools, therefore, do not receive professional development from the district within this model. The district employs one K-12 English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum specialist. This person provides all professional development related to ELA,

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with the exception of reading. The district places itself at risk when one individual is responsible for such an array of development and growth for the entire district.

If a primary goal of MPS is to ensure that all students are successful in a rigorous literacy curriculum, then a primary pursuit must be to build instructional capacity at the district, school and classroom levels—resulting in a comprehensive and focused effort to improve teaching and learning. The current form of centralized and decentralized professional development and train-the-trainer model is not working. While there are pockets of instructional excellence present, professional development provided by the district and the district-appointed coaches is less than fully effective. This is due in part to the limited presence of coaches in the school to monitor implementation of preferred instructional practices as well as a coherent, comprehensive professional development model clearly connected to the improvement of teaching and learning of students. Moreover, since the district has countless literacy programs, it has been difficult for it to provide ongoing, meaningful support and professional development that would assist new teachers in their assigned schools.

It appeared to the review team that newer teachers often received the toughest assignments and were experiencing isolation rather than support in very challenging classroom circumstances. The review team hopes that there is an earnest effort to ensure that new teachers receive a range of supports, and that these supports be heightened for teachers working students with the greatest challenges.

At the school level, some schools offer new teacher support meetings and provide an in-school mentor (often referred to as a “buddy teacher”) to help acclimate the teacher to the school environment and expectations. Additional support staff such as reading resource teachers, literacy coaches, mathematics teacher leaders, district curriculum generalists, and program implementers, department chairs, or lead teachers may provide further assistance. Support may be provided in the areas of learner-centered assessments, data analysis, strategic learning, lesson planning, curriculum mapping, modeling, co-teaching, coaching and locating resources. It must be noted, however, that there are numerous



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schools that are not able to provide the aforementioned support due to staff allocation and budgetary constraints. Yet, some schools are also able to provide support through the use of outside consultants.

The external review team stresses the importance of anchoring professional development in teacher reflection and the use of student work to guide teacher planning and monitoring of students' literacy development. Barbara Taylor (2002), former co-director of the Center for Improving Early Reading Achievement (CIERA), examined the research studies of effective schools where reading achievement is much higher than predicted. Several components of those schools were identified as in common. They were:

- collaborative leadership;
- learning as a school-wide priority;
- a collective responsibility among teachers in teaching children to read;
- a strong professional community among teachers;
- a strong and ongoing professional development scheme;
- regular monitoring of student of progress;
- balanced reading instruction; and,
- productive relationships with parents.

Likewise, in a recent set of case studies of effective teaching of struggling readers, Mary Lose (2008) found that more effective teachers of struggling readers had the following characteristics:

- used examples of the children's work to judge progress, plan instruction and engage students in developing strategically;
- embraced and operated from an underlying complex theory of literacy;
- embraced a complex theory of learning—taking nothing for granted at any time, either the child's current knowledge or what would be needed to support his or her learning;
- planned ahead—recognizing and accommodating the child's changes over time; and,

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- pursued ongoing assessment of the child's literacy knowledge and strategies.

In contrast, the external review team observed MPS teachers had difficulty meeting students' needs, and were unable to use student data to develop multiple instructional pathways to ensure students' strategy development and understanding of texts as readers, writers, and speakers. Based upon these findings and our observations of MPS, we recommend several cornerstones for MPS' professional development:

1. A framework of learner-centered literacy developmental goals as the basis for language and literacy activities within supportive classroom environments.
2. A professional development model that links knowledge with practice through reflective practices based upon assessments including teacher observations of students.
3. A comprehensive, differentiating formative assessment system using both classroom-based and district measures.
4. A seamless transition – PK-12.
5. A team orientation that supports students directly.
6. An emphasis upon developing in teachers reflective practices tied to understandings of the complexities of literacy and literacy learning, especially students' acquisition of reading strategy systems.

Professional development initiatives and practices should be driven by learner goals, the nature of literacy development, and the development of learners with a repertoire of reading strategies. In addition, these initiatives and practices should develop in teachers the skill of crafting learning engagements to meet students' needs and support student literacy growth. There must be evidence of teachers and administrators who are, for example, learning as learners, learning as teachers, and learning as evaluators of good instruction that impacts student achievement.

**Assessment matters: Data-based decisions, formative assessment**

The current review of MPS had as its antecedent the results acquired on the state's tests of reading and mathematics and the failure of selected schools to repeatedly meet the proficiency cutoff that was arbitrarily imposed. The state of Wisconsin assesses students' skills in reading, English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies in grades four, eight and ten using the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examinations (WKCE). Priority needs include moving large numbers of students into the "proficient" and "advanced" categories on the WKCE, reversing teachers' under-utilization of research-based reading instructional strategies, and addressing the lack of curricular coherence throughout Milwaukee Public Schools. While pursuing improvements in test performance may be essential, MPS and the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) need to be realistic about what is attainable. There have been several critiques of the ballooning nature of tests and heightened expectations around proficiencies that should prompt MPS and the Wisconsin DPI to be far more tempered in their orientation to schools that do not achieve set proficiency levels. Schools should not be portrayed as failing when the true failure is the mismatch between what is mandated and what should reasonably be expected. Ideally, proficiency targets should be set in a fashion that is collaborative, achievable and ongoing, rather than in the misconceived and demoralizing fashion that it is currently. At a minimum, MPS and the Wisconsin DPI should acknowledge the progress schools are making rather than the extent to which they are falling below an arbitrary bar based upon a limited form of testing.

There are a host of other well-documented dangers to this form of assessment and accountability. They include: redefining literacy in terms of what is tested, aligning the literacy curriculum to what is included on the test, or identifying growth by what is set as proficiency level rather than in a host of other ways. To some extent, this has occurred in MPS. A number of schools are narrowing the scope of what they do to ensure that students perform well on the tests alone while lamenting that other important pursuits are being displaced. They are concerned that growth is narrowly defined and the improvement of their students is overlooked. Both administrators and teachers express

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support for the focus upon every student that the testing and accountability have brought to the forefront. However, they are keen to pursue a course that places students first, rather than tests. They are committed to literacy development that is more expansive than what the current set of tests measure. The team recommends that MPS pursues goals and forms of accountability that reflect a fuller definition of literacy and richer forms of assessments, including classroom-based, learner-centered, and district-wide measures and benchmarks. In a world increasingly dependent upon a wide array of literacies, including digital literacies, the district should set goals that address proficiencies and improvements other than just the narrow set represented by the test and arbitrary levels of proficiency. The schools are committed to improving student needs and are succeeding on a number of fronts that appear to have been displaced by an over-emphasis on publicizing the SIFI shortcomings within different sites.

As an alternative, we encourage Wisconsin DPI and MPS to build upon some of their own assessment initiatives. The team encourages the MPS to reconsider how they might further supplement or counter an approach to assessment that overemphasizes the use a proficiency-based system tied to arbitrary leveling of expectation. In several states, there has been a shift to a concept of value-added, which focuses on individual patterns of improvement at the individual and aggregated to the school considerations. While this approach has some flaws, it may be preferable to the current system. It would seem preferable to replace what seems to be a punitive system with a developmental orientation—that is, an approach to literacy assessment that displaces the proficiency model with a “value-added” approach involving rich, longitudinal assessments of progress in terms of literacy development. The MPS seems well positioned to develop, implement and support alternatives that might better serve the students and MPS stakeholders.

Assessment systems should serve teachers’ and students’ needs in ways that enhance learning. To this end, learner-centered or classroom-based forms of assessment need further development. While the school district has a range of different forms of assessments that vary across and within sites, teachers need help implementing the various forms of classroom assessments and using such assessments in their moment-to-

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moment teaching. Various forms of district assessments may not be sufficient to address the multitude of teachers' and students' needs. Some district forms of assessment data afford a broad view of the performance of sets of students across selected skill areas as an aid to district level or school monitoring of progress in certain areas. However, these assessments might not be useful to teachers as they attempt to meet the full range of students' literacy and learning needs in their classrooms. The district needs to recognize that there is a need for assessments that address system-level needs as well as teacher and learner needs.

In situations where teachers are dealing with the mobility of students from one school to another, they need common forms of assessment in common that afford the school and the teachers with the understandings that they need to meet the needs of students. Although the school district has enlisted a variety of data-based conversations with teachers and school staff to inform priorities and broad directions, the district seems to lack sessions that focus upon more qualitative consideration of individual student's needs. These considerations will require not just common forms of district-wide assessment, but also concrete samples of student work, protocols for yielding a combination of interpretable scores, and concrete benchmarks for judging students and planning support. The demands placed upon administrators, teachers and students necessitate a broader and richer range of measures than the prescribed programs currently afford. Perhaps for consistency, MPS could consider using a curriculum-based assessment system, either Words Correct Per Minute (WCPM) or Running Records (RR) district wide. Such data could serve to monitor student progress, as guides to selecting appropriate material for students to read and to afford some comparative data—especially if the passages were calibrated in a manner that afforded benchmarking development.

### **Parental and community engagement**

While student and teacher security is an imperative, MPS should not perpetuate community or family lock-out. Parents suggested that in some settings they felt that the schools were welcoming, whereas in others, they were quite unwelcoming—especially in

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connection with security personnel's manner of scrutiny and the disposition of some staff to parental engagement as intrusive.

MPS community stakeholder groups and parents are very committed to students and schools, and are looking for a more receptive relationship with the school board and the schools. Community groups are keen to assist the schools as they move forward and are not naïve about the limitations of, and problems with, the current pursuit of test-driven reform models. Parents expressed an interest in their own professional development in terms of understanding literacy, literacy development, and the teaching and learning occurring in their children's classrooms. They also expressed interest in ongoing updates about their children's literacy development, but queried the informative value of current report card practices. They preferred reports that were concretely connected to their reading and writing versus scores and grades.

Also, parents were very concerned with how schools were being portrayed as successful or deficient in terms of publicizing of the SIFI results. MPS recognizes that they must address students' needs at the same time as they address state mandates, especially the forms of accountability and identified proficiency levels that have marked schools as failing. They recognize the limitations of teaching to the test and are committed to developing a response to student needs that transcends tests, and that truly prepares students to meet the changing literacy demands of the world. They have expressed a commitment to rethinking literacy to more fully address student needs, to engage with community groups, and to work together in teams in a fashion that is complementary rather than diffuse or piece-meal.

Some schools are striving to support home-school connections and community development, but in order to do so they need more support from school and community leaders, including the media. School success or failure has been touted and narrowly defined in terms of test performance, but clearly other indices should be sought at the same time as a range of investments in a variety of school-community development projects. For some students and their families, schools are sites of hope for the future. For others, the mantra of test scores and the isolationism of schools represent gates that

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perpetuate exclusion from educational advancement as well as a disconnect from their realities. The struggle for principals and other school personnel is to ignite hope and support development, while countering notions that schools are sites that perpetuate despair and failure.

The schools need to be hubs for community development and teachers need to be agents for change (see Rose, 1995) in ways that build upon what students bring from and to their communities. We encourage MPS to build upon some community engagements, and we encourage teachers to look for ways to better bridge with parents, community leadership, resources, and needs. The efforts of researchers such as Victoria Purcell-Gates are notable as they might serve as a guide for such initiatives.

### **Summary and closing remarks**

Certainly, MPS has a strong and committed leadership team of administrators and curriculum specialists who are conscientiously and thoughtfully pursuing school improvements. The leadership is both centralized and decentralized with qualified and earnest educational leaders working within and across schools. In selected areas (e.g., support for ESL students, English and language arts curriculum development, teacher mentoring, selected other professional development areas and assessment efforts) progress is marked. In other areas it is occurring, but is less apparent.

Lest progress remain diffuse and not likely to have sustained, long-term, positive influences, there is a need for more synergy, a team approach, a clearer commitment to teachers and all students, a greater investment and some shift in resources, and considerably more coordination of resources and practices district wide.

As we have discussed, MPS has several major systemic problems including a budget model, support services and educational resources that are inadequate to meet the needs of all the students in its schools. The budget model strives for equity when a more differential distribution of funds is needed. The staffing model appears oftentimes to be diffuse and silo-ed, rather than coordinated so that the needs of students are adequately

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met. There is need for the enlistment of teachers and staff with more expertise in reading if student reading is to advance to the levels to which the district aspires. There is a lack of resources to meet the range of reading needs of students. Many of the resources that are used represent competing and sometimes misguided goals. Again, MPS has distributed resources equitably, but the need for student support is more differentiated than the current budget model and administrative structures allow. In some settings, MPS has provided highly qualified personnel to support the students, but the number of teachers and supportive response personnel may not match demand within certain settings. Indeed, while various forms of professional development support are provided, teachers in some of the MPS settings are not getting the level of support that they need to address their students' needs. Not surprisingly, there is an unusually high attrition rate among teachers in the settings that are most challenging.

A major priority should be the development of a single, coherent, contemporary and comprehensive program that addresses the needs of all students. The review team has outlined the research that should inform the selection and development of such a program, as well as some considerations for its implementation. The review team cautions that the current proliferation of programs and the elements within the current set of programs used in MPS have major limitations. At the same time, as they recommend a shift to a single framework or program for all, they are not suggesting that a published program is unlikely to exist in a single prepackaged form. Rather, it might be derived from the selection of a complementary set of materials, tied to an agreed-upon framework developed and implemented by expert teachers.

In developing such a program MPS needs to do the following:

- increase their investment in time and resources to meet the needs of struggling students;
- re-address the over-emphasis on discrete skills in the primary grades and teach reading in an integrated, meaning-centered fashion;
- recognize the complex nature of literacy development;

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- address learner-centered strategy development;
- enlist classroom-based assessments to support teaching and learning;
- provide a range of materials matched to the students' needs as they learn to read;
- examine the extent to which the teachers who are supporting struggling readers have the professional expertise and support to meet students' needs;
- develop a program that is contemporary and culturally relevant; and
- ensure that special needs students have support that complements classroom efforts and overall program goals.

At the secondary level, the review team recommends a follow-up examination of what is occurring structurally in the secondary schools as well as what is happening within classrooms so that the literacy needs of all students are met. The needs of high school students, and pursuits that they need to initiate prior to high school, should not be shortchanged despite the challenges that MPS is facing. They need literacy opportunities that are challenging, supportive and developmental. They should not be denied access to such opportunities nor should they be subjected to literacy experiences that are neither engaging, achievable, nor useful.

Meeting the literacy development needs of all MPS students should be the responsibility of all school personnel and should be supported in a fashion that provides carefully crafted learning support by educators in a manner that enhances the possibilities of learning. The support should be coordinated and complementary rather than diffuse and divergent. It should afford the necessary time for students to learn, with appropriate resources, the strategies and skills to read, write and pursue other forms of literacy.

Finally, the review team hopes there will be progress on the recommendations in a way that reflects thoughtful, district-wide and local consideration of the literacy goals for all students. This will entail consideration of local conditions and community development

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needs, knowledge of effective practices, and investments in terms of coordinated support and shared and distributed responsibilities of school personnel.

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<sup>i i</sup> As Michael Pressley noted in a white paper commissioned by the National Reading Conference, "A complete summary of the scientific evidence on reading instruction cannot depend only on problems that have already been studied in great depth. In fact, a summary of the scientific evidence that includes only findings that are massively supported is an historical document more than a scientific document, a look backwards." (2002. p. 182).

<sup>ii</sup> As Pearson (2007) stated:

I see a system in which (at least) three of these fundamental values and practices—insistence on transfer of learning, faith in teacher prerogative, and regard for individual differences as the hallmark of learning and assessment—have all but disappeared from the educational landscape; we seldom hear them in our public pedagogical conversations or see them in our curricular practices. And when we do see them, they often appear as perversions of their original constructs. ... we have made a mockery of the whole notion of transfer of learning as the gold standard to which all students and teachers should

aspire. If an assessment does not look just like the instruction that prepared kids to take it, we question its validity, and, even more pernicious, we operate in exactly the other direction by adjusting our instruction to mimic the high-stakes accountability assessments. Regarding teacher prerogative, in our quest to achieve a consistent standard of instruction for all students in all classrooms in all 35 schools, we have reduced teachers' professional choices to decisions about when to begin and end the reading block—and even that is predetermined in many schools and districts. Finally, in the world of No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002) and Reading First, we have decreed that individual differences will not exist, either in the outcomes of education or in the means by which we attempt to achieve those outcomes. (p. 1-2)

Pearson contends, that rather than scripted practice where certain skills and strategies are taught in the same ways to all students, teaching requires the creative energies of professionals who have carefully considered the students themselves, their development and a pursuit of the enterprise of teaching and learning in a fashion which is flexible, adaptive and subjected to continuous refinement and revision. Rather than focus on the elements of the National Reading panel that highlight teaching a select set of skill areas, educators should focus on the special needs of students and the variations that exist within and across students even if these students are classified the same. They should view the students through a lens that accounts for a fuller definition of reading than they are doing—at least in response to the NRP panel report.

From my perspective, the danger arises that NRP suggestions for practice may contribute to students performing better on phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, comprehension/ retelling, but not in terms of larger goals for literacy (expanded uses of various literacies to serve a range of purposes). Arguably, NRP and its proponents seem to have fallen prey to believing that what they propose for teaching reading and in turn as treatments and perhaps what is measured become the same as what one envisions as literacy development. We know that students can learn what we directly teach them, but I would suggest that our goal is to achieve more.

The narrowing of reading is consistent with a larger issue of the narrowing of the direction of instruction—especially for students who might be at risk or falling behind. As Kris Gutierrez suggested in a talk to some national leaders:

What I see is that for poor kids in schools deemed underperforming, you have more reductive literacy practices. By reductive, I mean that there is an emphasis on the acquisition of autonomous skills such as vocabulary, decoding, and phonics, instead of making these skills a part of a larger menu within a literacy program. They are not engaging students in meaningful texts and learning. (Adam 2004, p.1)

In a report prepared for and distributed by the National Education Association, Pressley focused on the scientific research the NRP did not discuss. He presented much evidence and relevant research citations for each of the characteristics listed below:

- Parents can be taught to interact with their children in ways that promote literacy achievement;
- The availability of books that young children are likely to engage in promotes language and literacy skills;
- literature-focused instruction increases children's independent reading and understanding of story structure;
- children's comprehension increases when they have conversations about what they have read with peers and teachers;
- Writing is an essential skill that has an impact on reading achievement; and
- There are no quick fixes that are easy and permanent for struggling readers and that work for all students in reading.

Pressley's research-based principles have two distinct foci that the NRP report lacked. First, the focus on using children's literature in the classroom reading program and second, the lack of any quick fix for struggling readers. In terms of the former, it is notable that an NRP panel member, S. Jay Samuels, has recently noted, "Unfortunately, there were also battles I lost, and they turned out to be important ones. One battle I lost was on a disclaimer in the report [NRP] about the efficacy of independent reading as part of the reading curriculum." (2006, p. 341) As Samuels noted, one of the major goals of reading instruction must be the development of students who elect to read when given the time. Access to children's literature is one way to build this. Additionally, using children's literature as one of the instructional tools has also, as noted above by Pressley, proven effective in fostering reading growth, especially reading comprehension growth.

While Pressley notes that there are no "quick fixes," two leading NICHD researchers found that at least 70 percent of all struggling early readers could be brought to average with one semester of expert tutoring, and that they could maintain this level through 4th grade. They concluded, "Finally, there is now considerable evidence, from recent intervention studies, that reading difficulties in most beginning readers may not be directly caused by biologically based cognitive deficits intrinsic to the child, but may in fact be related to the opportunities provided for children learning to read." (Vellutino & Fletcher, 2005, p. 378). Scanlon et al. (2005) compared two early intervention approaches: a text emphasis treatment and a phonemic skills emphasis approach. The text emphasis treatment produced the best comprehension and word reading performances, but not at a level that was significantly higher than the phonemic skills emphasis group. Both approaches yielded significantly higher scores than the control students. The difference between the approaches was largely differences in time spent engaged in reading or time engaged in phonemic skills development. Both worked to address student needs but the intervention where the majority of the time was spent reading and rereading text produced the superior results. Contrast this with Foorman, et al.'s (2004) findings that up to 70 percent of the reading period is spent passively listening to the teacher and very little time is spent actively engaged in reading. Torgeson also argues that as students age they exhibit substantial deficits in reading volume. This means that for older struggling readers it may take years of remediation in which "the reading practice of the previously disabled children was actually *greater* than that of their peers" (Torgeson, 2005, p. 535). In other words, when children struggle with reading acquisition they typically are provided reading lessons that engage them in less and less reading. They also begin to avoid

reading independently which further restricts the actual reading volume they do. Likewise, in a large-scale and federally funded experiment, Torgeson and colleagues (2007) found no effects for several popular commercial reading intervention programs: "However, in a time-by-activity analysis of the instruction that was actually delivered, it was determined that three of the programs—*Spell Read P.A.T.*, *Corrective Reading*, and *Wilson Reading*—focused primarily on the development of word-level skills” with little time for actual reading activity, and, perhaps, because of this “for students in the third-grade cohort, we did not detect significant impacts of the four interventions combined on reading test scores from the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment. For students in the fifth-grade cohort, the interventions lowered the reading and mathematics scores." (p. xiv). In other words, even in this well-controlled study the reading interventions provided did not produce accelerated gains and improved performances on state achievement tests. In a similar vein, a recent study of Reading First initiatives suggested that an emphasis on decoding and fluency did not advance students’ reading comprehension skills to the expected level and moreover, reduced their interest and engagement in reading (Centre for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, 2008). Schwartz and Gallant (2008) present evidence for accepting a more complex view of development for literacy development and teaching that integrates using specific skills in the context of reading for meaning and developing of other skills that students enlist from different sources as they learn to read strategically.

Recent research syntheses and programmatic assessment provide some convergences on what should be viewed as essentials for literacy programs. Guthrie and Humenick (2004) who performed a meta-analysis on studies of improving classroom reading lessons and found huge positive effects on general reading comprehension achievement for two factors: access to interesting texts and allowing students to choose their reading materials. Allington (2009) has argued that recent studies of reading are pointing toward more reading intensive interventions where struggling readers select the texts they will read from a wide selection of interesting texts. This model also requires both classroom and intervention teachers who can manage such an environment while also offering high-quality reading lessons from the student-selected texts. Allington cites the extensive analysis of “what works” to emphasize that published reading intervention programs may not offer a pre-packaged solution. According to “what works,” research reported for most published reading intervention programs suggest that very few accomplish any

substantial reading growth among struggling readers (see the evidence, or lack of it, on 150 different commercial reading programs at [www.wwc.ed.gov](http://www.wwc.ed.gov)).

In a similar vein, Purcell-Gates (2008) has proffered that recent research on reading development shows that children come to school with clear models, gained from their homes and communities, of what literacy is—who does it, what it is for, and familiar texts. They learn to read and write—take their instruction from—from these models. Teachers must be aware of what the children come to school knowing, and not knowing, and then must be allowed to tailor beginning reading instruction that will make a difference for all children. What children know, and do not know, goes far beyond (but includes) simply letter names, phonemic awareness, or sound/symbol relations. Building upon these models they stress that children learn basic skills such as letter-sound relationships better and faster when they are presented in the context of real reading and writing activities.<sup>ii</sup> Teaching models that strip down reading and writing to technical skills outside of meaningful practice may show what looks like good results on skills tests, but these gains are quickly lost after grade two. As Purcell-Gates has argued, children learn to read and write better when teachers respond to them based upon knowledge of them as individuals and as members of cultural communities. In his analyses of the highly successful Reading Recovery, Robert Schwartz and Barbara Butler (2008) have argued that developmentally, students’ learning of strategies profits from an approach that does not limit the teaching of reading to selected skills in a linear, isolated fashion, but in fashion that enables an integrated use of skills and strategies.

<sup>iii</sup> The value of 1-1 instruction is immense if the teachers are qualified and the instruction carefully planned and coordinated with meaningful classroom efforts (see Schmidt, 2008, Schwartz, 2008).

<sup>iv</sup> It is well known that an effective reading program requires highly qualified teachers with an understanding of literacy and its development, as well as the opportunity to pursue a curriculum that reflects what we know to be core components and considerations. Currently, there is no cohesive district-wide plan for professional development and curriculum leadership in a sustainable fashion. In MPS, there is no identified entity directly responsible or accountable for professional development of classroom teachers. The sole professional development supervisor is responsible for duties that include supervising a team of literacy specialists, coordinating PI 34 initial educators and induction programs, keeping track of the teaching and learning professional development calendar, and serving as a liaison for certifying agencies.

Largely, professional development in MPS exists through a variety of venues. Classroom teachers are offered training from district staff from multiple departments, training from consultants outside of the district, and training from instructional leaders within their school. In addition, various teachers and

principals receive professional development from mentors or coaches. By and large, details of district expectations and current initiatives are not consistently nor clearly communicated to mentors, coaches and consultants. Therefore, the direction of professional advancement may differ, overlap or conflict within the district.