

Minnesota Senate Education Committee, March 11, 2003

Senator Kelley and members of the committee.

My name is Deborah Dillon and I am a Professor at the University of Minnesota in the Curriculum and Instruction Department; my area of specialization is reading. I am the immediate past president of the National Reading Conference (the primary researcher organization in the field of reading in the United States) and recently served as co-chair of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) 2002 Early and Middle Childhood/Literacy: Reading-Language Arts Standards. I am a teacher educator and was appointed chair of the C&I Department. Most importantly, I am a former 4-6th grade teacher and I am the parent of a Minnesota kindergartener.

My reason for testifying today is my commitment to the reading development of K-12 students in the state of Minnesota, their teachers and administrators, and to the parents of our state who want the very best education for their children. I want to talk about 3 key issues:

1. the need for clarity in the arguments surrounding how children learn to read and the approach necessary to support their literacy development;
2. processes used to create high quality standards in reading and language arts; and
3. suggestions I have for standards work in Minnesota.

1. There is a rich research base outlining how children learn to read and the “Reading Wars” are over.

Reading is a complex process that involves a learner’s ability to comprehend and construct meaning. Meaning does not go from the symbols on the page (e.g., letters; words) to readers. Rather, learners use a text (written materials, visual texts including internet sites, and oral texts), their own experiences and knowledge, and the purpose that guides their reading to make sense of what they read. Other factors shaping the reading process include:

- A reader’s knowledge about the topic;
- A reader’s knowledge about reading and about written language;
- The match between a reader’s language and the language in the text; and
- A reader’s expectations about reading based on his/her previous experiences and cultural background (Weaver, 1988).

The goal for teachers is to develop critical readers: individuals able to critique ideas, effect social change, and empower themselves to make a difference in their own lives and the lives of others.

As the above definition implies, a learner must use four cueing systems simultaneously as they read, write, listen, and talk. These four systems are:

The phonological system (the sound system of English with approximately 44 sounds and more than 500 ways to spell the 44 sounds). This includes developing early readers’ phonemic awareness, the ability to understand that speech is composed of individual sounds, and phonics, the ability to understand the sound-symbol correspondences and spelling rules.

The syntactic system (the structural system of English that governs how words are combined into sentences). This includes the structure or grammar of sentences including writing simple or complex sentences, adding prefixes and suffixes, and using capitalization and punctuation. When learners are reading a sentence they expect that the words they read have been strung together into sentences and when they come to an unfamiliar word, they recognize its role in the sentence even if they can't recall the term for the part of speech.

The semantic system (the meaning system of English that focuses on vocabulary). This includes learning the meanings of words, synonyms, antonyms and homonyms; metaphors; and using a dictionary and thesaurus. Many kids enter school with a vocabulary of 5,000 words and it is estimated that they can acquire 3,000 to 4,000 words each year in the elementary grades (Nagy 1988). Learners learn new words through formal instruction but many more words through informal work reading and writing across various lessons.

The pragmatic system (the system of English that varies language according to social and cultural uses). This includes understanding the purposes for which we use language and the need to vary our language to these purposes and to a variety of audiences; it also includes comparing standard and nonstandard forms of English. Language varies among social classes, ethnic groups and geographic regions—these varieties are known as dialects. School is one cultural community and requires formal, Standard English but other forms of language, such as those found in urban ghettos, Appalachia, and spoken by Mexican Americans in the Southwest, are classified as nonstandard English—the phonology, syntax, and semantics differ from Standard English. But these forms are neither inferior or substandard. Rather, they reflect the community of these speakers and these learners are effective within this community. As educators our goal is for children to learn Standard English and add it to their repertoire of languages used for various purposes—not to replace their *home* language with Standard English.

The point I wish to make is this: Effective teachers understand that learners use all four cueing systems.

First, effective teachers recognize that a phonics approach to teaching reading—teaching children individual letters and sounds and adding these up into words and then sentences—does not help students make sense of texts without the aid of the other three cueing systems. There is no question that students need phonics instruction—they just need to be taught phonics in a balanced way that integrates instruction in reading skills and strategies with meaningful opportunities for reading and writing. This instruction should focus on the most useful information for identifying words and should be systematic, intensive, and completed by the third grade (Adams, 1990).

Second, effective teachers know that merely learning a set of skills such as sequencing events or finding the main idea without using these in authentic reading experiences, will not foster effective readers and writers.

Third, with reference to so-called whole language—effective teachers of reading know that merely having students read good books without carefully planned and explicit instruction in strategies to help them comprehend these texts, will not help learners develop into strategic, competent, independent readers.

Effective teachers recognize that a balanced approach to teaching reading is key.

In a balanced approach, a teacher develops a flexible program of instruction that is built around a comprehensive view of reading (like that described above) (Fitzgerald, 1999). First, the teacher develops students' skill knowledge including decoding skills, their strategy knowledge for comprehension and responding to literature, and their affective knowledge, including nurturing students' love of reading. Second, the teacher uses a variety of instructional approaches like phonics instruction and literature-based reading. And third, students read a variety of texts including trade books, leveled books with controlled vocabulary, basal readers, content area textbooks, and their own or peers' writings.

In sum, a balanced approach usually includes these characteristics:

- Literacy is viewed comprehensively, as involving both reading and writing.
- Literature is at the heart of the program.
- Skills and strategies are taught both directly and indirectly.
- Reading instruction involves both word recognition and identification, vocabulary, comprehension.
- Writing instruction involves learning to express meaningful ideas and use conventional spelling, grammar, and punctuation to express those ideas.
- Students use reading and writing as tools for learning content areas.
- The goal of a balanced literacy program is to develop lifelong readers and writers; motivation is a key instructional factor. (Baumann & Ivey; McIntyre & Pressley; Spiegel, 1998; Strickland, 1994/1995; Weaver, 1998).

In short, there are no reading wars, that is, in the reading research community there are no respected scholars who believe in only a phonics or only a whole language approach. This is a false dichotomy set up to marginalize many reading researchers and teacher educators, often keeping them out of standards and curriculum reform initiatives or important research efforts. A balanced approach to reading development is clearly identifiable in the research literature.

2. There are processes that can be employed to create high quality standards in reading and language arts.

I would like to offer information about *the composition of standards committees and the processes necessary for the successful construction of standards*. I will draw upon the work of educators in various states and my own work with the NBPTS. The National Board is funded in part by the Department of Education and the National Science Foundation for \$119.3 million (45% of the budget) with another 55% of their funding coming from nongovernmental sources. Founded in 1987 with broad support from governors, teacher unions, school board leaders, administrators, college faculty and officials, business executives, foundations, and concerned citizens, this nonprofit organization recognizes that teaching is at the heart of education, that reform is basic to education, and that the single most important action the nation can take to improve schools is to strengthen teaching. The National Board's mission is to maintain high and rigorous standards for what accomplished teachers should know and be able to do,

provide a voluntary system for certifying teachers who meet these standards, advocate for educational reforms to integrate NBPTS standards into educational systems, and capitalize on the expertise of board certified teachers.

In the introduction of each NBPTS standards document the following statement is posted: “Standards committees are broadly representative of accomplished professionals in their fields. A majority of the committee are teachers regularly engaged in teaching students in the field in question; others are typically professors, experts in child development, teacher educators, and other professionals in the relevant discipline.” In addition, the members of the Reading Standards Committee I co-chaired (with a former outstanding preschool teacher from the Kamehameha Schools) represented ethnic and racial diversity, included teachers and literacy professors from across the country and from many school settings, reflected teachers from various grade levels and relevant positions in schools (e.g., reading specialists), and included individuals with diverse perspectives about literacy development. All of these individuals had expertise in reading and had worked with a broad range of learners. They desired to create a document that set high quality standards to support the learning of all children.

We began our work in the summer of 2000 and the board adopted the standards in December of 2002. This timeframe allowed the committee to study the research literature, meet and talk about what accomplished teachers should know and be able to do, seek advice from experts in literacy, write several drafts of the standards and obtain feedback from committee members, rewrite the document, reach consensus from an informed and reasoned position, and rewrite and polish the document. As we worked together, committee members learned to talk with each other, using the same terms for critical components in the standards. We began to create a shared meaning for these terms. Individuals with particular expertise on the committee also began to see the bigger picture of children’s literacy development and needs across grade levels as well as how individual children at a particular grade level may vary in their abilities and thus in what accomplished teachers need to be able to do to meet these needs. This level of knowledge and skill as standards committee members comes with time, a solid foundation of skilled individuals to participate in the process, and a shared sense of purpose and principles to guide our work. After the standards were developed they were disseminated in draft form for public comment and then revised by the committee. Parents, teachers, business leaders, and other concerned citizens’ views were sought and respected. Revisions occurred based on public comments prior to the document being presented to a board of directors, comprised of business leaders, parents, policy makers, and educators from across the nation.

It is clear that *the composition of standards committees matters*—knowledgeable teachers and reading researchers are needed from the outset on standards committees. The effectiveness of standards comes from these individuals working to craft the standards from the beginning and throughout the process vs. coming in at the editing phase or after the work has been completed to judge the final product. Further, *the time needed to develop high quality standards matters*. It takes time to determine what learners should know about reading, when the important skills and strategies should be learned, the

appropriate balance between particular content needed to be a good readers and the ability to put the knowledge into practice.

3. High quality standards are in Minnesota are necessary.

Informed, thoughtful work on Minnesota’s standards is critical because these are the statements that tell what students should know and be able to do in a particular discipline. However, these statements should be broad goals; and they should not dictate the details of student learning or how teachers should teach. Benchmarks are developed as a complement to standards and are the clear, specific descriptions of knowledge or skills that students should acquire by a specific point in time (e.g., a particular grade).

Benchmarks match up with standards and make them more explicit. Neither standards nor benchmarks are the curriculum that teachers teach from. Standards and benchmarks documents should not be so lengthy, detailed and in “checklist format” that teachers feel compelled to merely work through the list and tick off items.

Teachers in Minnesota are knowledgeable about what basic information students need to know and be able to do—past National Assessment of Educational Progress Tests indicate this quality learning. Good teachers study the standards; they carefully create and select materials and methods and design instructional frameworks to organize literacy teaching and learning based on larger principles of how students learn and what their particular students know and need to learn. They also consider what tasks and materials will motivate learning. Key to all of this is that standards need to be informative and aligned with curriculum, but must not prescribe or dictate the selection of particular curricula or materials, or particular teaching methods. There is a need for balanced learning goals and instruction and the teacher is most capable in matching the best instruction to individual learners’ needs.

Finally, assessments are developed based on standards and benchmarks. This is why it is critical that the standards are so carefully crafted—our students in Minnesota are at risk of not receiving a quality education if their instruction is guided with anything less than the best of what we know they need from the expertise of research and our most knowledgeable and effective teachers in Minnesota.

I respect the time and energy that the members of the four separate reading standards subcommittees have expended on a task of such importance over a three-week period of time. My continuing comments are not meant to show disrespect for these individuals’ intent or work. However, I want to offer helpful commentary about the composition of the committees (in comparison to other standards committees); the time frame for crafting new reading standards in MN; and the “approval process” for these standards (the need for external reviewers, some without literacy expertise). The NBPTS committee selection states: “committees are broadly representative of accomplished professionals in their fields. A majority of the committee [should be] teachers regularly engaged in teaching students in the field in question; others are typically professors, experts in child development, teacher educators, and other professionals in the relevant discipline.” The President of the University of Minnesota sent forth my name as a recommendation for one of the reading standards subcommittees as well as the names of several other nationally recognized U of MN reading researchers; I also volunteered via

the website sign-up form. From my own, as well as others' analyses of the composition of the four reading subcommittees 40 members, there appear to be no reading researchers or teacher educators from universities across the state of MN included as members. Further, there appear to be only two licensed reading specialists on the committees (one is teaching at the college level).

It is unfortunate that the highly qualified educators in Minnesota, particularly reading specialists and university reading professors, were not instrumental in the standards development process that has been occurring over the past three weeks. We entrust our children to these expert teachers; our teachers are knowledgeable and understand the learning needs of the many students that they work with daily. They need to be part of the very process they are being asked to use—this is what the research literature on change and reform clearly points out when studying what reforms work and which do not. It has recently been said that schools are not there for teachers—it is the public's schools. I would argue that schools are not solely in existence for the general citizenry's opinion about what should be done to educate children, although effective educators value and partner with parents on a daily basis. But a citizen's perspective is usually a general one, based on one's own experience as a learner or the learning of one's own child/children. *Instead, schools are in existence for our future citizens—our children. They deserve the best curriculum and experiences that we can offer them. And teachers are key to this endeavor.*

Second, the time frame of three weeks makes it impossible for individual committees to talk about the developmental levels of children they are writing standards for, consider the current research literature, create a common language from which members speak to one another and use within the document, or create balanced standards with a variety of learners' needs considered. Further, four committees were working on standards that eventually will need to be articulated across one another—e.g., kids will be moving from the early grades to later grades and there should be a common articulation of concepts and ideas so that learners are not placed at risk as they proceed from grade to grade. The ability to create this articulation lies in a common set of principles about literacy learning that would need to undergird the entire standards creation process.

In addition, Minnesota's Reading Standards should be grounded in National Reading and Language Arts Standards (National Council of Teachers of English; International Reading Association), the work of the New Standards (National Center of Education), and the Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) standards (a group that has been studying standards for over a decade and has reviewed standards of every state and professional organization and incorporated the best of these into their standards). However, it is one thing to state that these national standards have been or will be used in a document. Knowledgeable educators know what these standards are and how they look in action. It is more than using words or phrases—it is understanding the principles and linking these with research and practice.

In conclusion, I have shared three key issues this afternoon and the research data that supports these issues. I urge the committee to consider the arguments I have made about

processes needed to create high quality standards in reading and language arts; and suggestions I have for standards work in Minnesota.
Thank you for your time and attention.