



Literacy Challenges in Nevada Schools

Executive Summary

Literacy is a foundational skill that is the gateway to higher learning. Achieving reading proficiency by the end of third grade is a strong predictor of high school graduation. Low literacy levels have high economic and social costs for both individuals and society.

Nevada faces major challenges in literacy. Students scored poorly on the 2013 National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), ranking 40th in the nation in fourth grade reading proficiency and 46th in the nation in eighth grade reading proficiency. Students performed better on the 2013 State Criterion Referenced Test (CRT), which is based on different standards. From 2007 to 2013, fourth grade reading proficiency improved on both assessments, but results were mixed for eighth grade. Performance gaps between white students and other groups have been substantial and enduring over this time.

While Nevada has a state literacy plan, it does not have any statewide literacy policies in statute. A total of 36 states plus the District of Columbia have early literacy policies based on research-based best practices. Common elements of effective literacy policies include early identification of students, parent notification and engagement, instructional and intervention practices, and professional development. States and school districts in Nevada have implemented these strategies with mixed results, illustrating that the quality of implementation and monitoring are intrinsic to successful outcomes.

To move towards improved literacy outcomes in Nevada, Legislators and school districts should examine the following strategies:

1. Standardize early literacy expectations across the state by adopting legislation that includes universal assessments to identify students needing intervention, parent involvement, intervention programs for students, and evaluation of the effectiveness of the interventions;
2. Retool professional development by providing sustained, job-embedded training to ensure that that instruction and interventions are being implemented effectively;
3. Refocus on literacy at higher grade levels given the significant number of struggling readers in middle school and high school;
4. Maximize resources by critically evaluating current uses of state and federal intervention funds and reallocating these funds to schools most in need and to the most effective strategies; and
5. Utilize existing school accountability structures to evaluate effectiveness of instruction and interventions as part of a continuous system of improvement.