

President's Message

Reading Specialists, Reading Teachers, Reading Coaches: A Question of Credentials

by Richard L. Allington

The business section of my local newspaper today carried an article noting that across the state of Tennessee (and nationally) there was a severe shortage of credentialed math and science teachers. I imagine articles such as this one have appeared in your local paper as well. What strikes me, though, is that I have never seen a newspaper article noting the shortage of credentialed reading specialists. Yet in many, if not most, schools today you would find substantial numbers of reading specialists, reading teachers, and reading coaches who have never earned a reading specialist credential, even though most states have established such credentials.

In another odd turn of events, there seem to be no advanced expertise requirements at the federal level or in most states for any of the job titles listed in the title of this commentary. Odd because under the mandates of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act all teachers must demonstrate that they are highly qualified (even if the criteria seem minimalistic). But reading specialists, reading teachers, and reading coaches must only demonstrate the same reading qualifications as elementary classroom teachers in most, if not all, states.

It isn't that elementary classroom teachers should not be highly qualified in the teaching of reading, but rather it seems to me that the qualifications we want for reading specialists and reading coaches would substantially exceed those we hope all classroom teachers might meet. It isn't that high-quality standards for reading personnel do not exist, because IRA has developed and disseminated high-quality standards for the preparation of reading specialists/coaches (www.reading.org/resources/issues/reports/professional_standards.html). But many state education agencies and the U.S. Department of Education seem to have ignored the IRA standards in considering how best to ensure that all students have access to high-quality reading instruction.

One would think that in any attempt to improve the quality of reading instruction, policymakers would focus on ensuring that all schools employ credentialed reading specialists/coaches. And schools with exemplary reading programs do. IRA Board member Rita Bean and her colleagues reported,

in an article published in the February 2003 issue of *The Reading Teacher* (vol. 56, no. 5, pp. 446–455), that reading specialists in schools with exemplary reading programs were appropriately credentialed, and they noted that it was the advanced expertise of these individuals that supported the high-quality reading instruction in these schools.

These schools seem like rarities though. Consider a recent article in *Education Statistics Quarterly* (http://nces.ed.gov/programs/quarterly/vol_6/6_3/3_6.asp), which reports that only about a third of reading specialists have earned a graduate degree with a specialization in reading and thus might meet the IRA high-quality standard. Two thirds of the reading teachers have earned a degree in elementary education but without a concentration in reading theory, assessment, and instruction.

Earning a graduate degree is not the only way for teachers to develop expertise in reading, but it is the most commonly recognized path to earning advanced credentials as a reading specialist/coach. But while most states and the U.S. Department of Education seem interested in assuring advanced specialized knowledge for special education teachers, for instance, there is currently no similar commitment to ensuring that every reading specialist/coach has similarly acquired advanced technical knowledge of the reading process and reading assessment and instruction. In other words, openings for special education positions almost always indicate that special education certification is necessary, while openings for reading specialists/coaches seem rarely to require that candidates possess reading specialist certification.

Given the emphasis state and federal policies place on ensuring children have access to high-quality reading instruction, I find it disturbing that so little concern is evident for ensuring that every school employs at least one person with advanced expertise about reading. I find it particularly frustrating that so many school personnel who work with struggling readers seem seldom to have completed a program of graduate study focused on developing advanced expertise in reading.

A primary goal of federal and state educational reform policies is improving student reading achievement. Of most concern is narrowing the reading achievement gaps that exist between poor and non-poor students, between minority and majority students, and between students with disabilities and those without.

Explicitly tied to this goal is the necessity of raising the quality of reading instruction offered to all children but particularly those groups of children whose reading development has historically lagged behind that of their peers.

A key aspect of the IRA standards for reading specialists/coaches is their emphasis on developing specific expertise that addresses reading difficulties—expertise that can be put to use in adapting, modifying, and delivering more expert reading instruction to struggling readers either directly or indirectly through effective coaching of classroom teachers.

The IRA standards for reading specialist/coaches require 24 hours of course work in reading with at least 6 hours of that earned in a supervised clinical practicum. This is the standard that institutions of higher education must meet to have their graduate reading programs earn accreditation from the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education. It is the standard that many states have adopted for those wanting to earn a reading specialist/coach credential. (See related article on page 8 describing the Keystone State Reading Association's success in blocking a multiple-choice test path to licensure as a reading specialist.)

Many states seem to have adopted the IRA standards for their reading specialist credential but then fail to require that schools employ only persons who have earned that credential as reading specialists/coaches. These same states do require special education teachers to have earned a special education credential, require school principals to have earned their school administrator credential, and require their school psychologists to have earned their license. It is only in hiring specialized reading personnel that credentials seem unnecessary.

School districts also bear some responsibility because they could hire only specialized reading personnel who are appropriately credentialed (or persons working toward that credential). But while few school districts would hire an art major to teach special education or hire a physical education teacher as a school psychologist, these same school districts seem wholly at ease in hiring uncredentialed persons to serve as a reading specialists/coaches.

This situation points to a substantial failure of IRA and of its affiliated state, provincial, and local councils. Our failure to instigate legislation or regulations that would require high-quality credentials for every reading specialist/coach must be addressed. Now may be the best time for a concerted and coordinated effort to establish state and federal policies that would rectify the current situation.

The troubling incongruity that we must confront is that both states and the U.S. Department of Education have established goals to raise the quality of reading instruction, but neither has yet produced any substantive plan to ensure that every school has even one faculty member with specific expertise in reading (as indicated by having earned

a reading specialist credential). I cannot see how improving the quality of a school's reading instruction, especially for struggling readers, can be accomplished if no one on the faculty has acquired advanced expertise in the teaching of reading. It was those credentialed reading specialists who provided the literacy leadership in schools with exemplary reading programs. Without such personnel, who leads?

IRA should be working to ensure that the supply of reading specialists/coaches who meet the IRA standards is dramatically expanded and that the reading specialist credential be required for every reading specialist, reading teacher, and reading coach.

These are the recommended policy actions that that I would suggest should be central for IRA and its councils:

- bulletWork to establish regulations that all reading specialist/coaches, and especially those funded in whole or in part from state or federal monies, must have earned an advanced credential that meets the IRA standards for reading specialist/coach.

- bulletWork to develop legislation that would provide funding incentives to school districts or individuals, in the form of tuition reimbursement or fellowships for graduate study, for teachers interested in earning reading specialist/coach credentials.

- bulletDevelop a state and national campaign to inform legislators, commissioners of education, school board members, and school district administrators of the need to employ only appropriately credentialed educators as reading specialists/coaches.

Perhaps we should set a goal similar to the NCLB goals: All reading specialists, reading teachers, and reading coaches will have earned licensure and developed the expertise set forth in the IRA standards for reading specialists and coaches no later than 2010. That is four years before all children will be required to meet state reading standards, but it may be four or more years too late to help schools meet the NCLB achievement goals.

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