

I am Betsy Sisson, the International Reading Association State Coordinator and a board member of the Connecticut Reading Association. I am here today to speak to the proposed certification requirements for administrators.

Achievement results represent snapshots of what is taking place in communities across the nation. Within the United States today, one in four children will grow up without learning how to read (Kutner, Greenberg, Jin, & Paulsen, 2006). In analyzing adolescent performance, dropout rates are hovering at 30% (Sparks, Johnson, & Akos, 2010). For African-American and Hispanic students, these rates swell to approximately 50% (Barton, 2005). Of those who do graduate, 20% can be described as functionally illiterate ("Grim illiteracy statistics indicate Americans have a reading problem," 2007).

Do these statistics have any bearing on the children in Connecticut? Yes! In 2009, Dr. Mark McQuillan stated that while our state testing scores show "positive movement, we should be concerned with the 30 percentage point gap in performance among racial and economic groups that persist. We need to do more to help all children succeed."

How do we do that? There is a strong correlation between school improvement and the leadership skills of administrators (Dufour, 2007). As schools continue to struggle with illiteracy (Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, & Kolstad, 2002; Kutner, Greenberg, Jin, & Paulsen, 2006; Sweet, 1996) and escalating dropout rates (Barton, 2005), it becomes increasingly important for administrators to serve as the instructional leaders in literacy. National leadership reform initiatives within the last two decades have demonstrated a unifying theme of the necessity for leadership preparation programs to include a focus on instructional leadership (Educational Leadership Policy Standards, 2008; Leadership for Student Learning, 2000; National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 1989).

In 2008, the U. S. Department of Education affirmed that leaders must have a clear vision of effective reading instruction. They must be constantly monitoring the progress of programs and instruction to be certain that high-quality program implementation is occurring and all students are making satisfactory progress. Instructional leaders must be able to recognize effective reading instruction when it occurs in the classroom. Furthermore, they must be able to determine when reading instruction is not being effectively implemented. This enables them to identify and communicate the gap to teachers so necessary changes and adjustments can be made to instruction and program delivery.

In many ways the school principal is the most important and influential individual in any school. He or she is the person responsible for all activities that occur in and around the school building. It is the principal's leadership that sets the tone of the school, the climate for teaching, the level of professionalism and morale of teachers, and the degree of concern for what students may or may not become. The principal is the main link between the community and the school, and the way he or she performs in this capacity largely determines the attitudes of parents and students about the school. If a school is a vibrant, innovative, child-centered, place, if it has a reputation for excellence in teaching, if students are performing to their ability, one can almost always point to the principal's leadership as the key to success.

How can our principals become the kind of strong instructional leaders that Connecticut needs? We recommend that the state follow the recommendations of national leadership reform initiatives, educational theorists, researchers, and experts in the field of literacy. Require principal candidates to have a minimum of six credits in reading/language arts as part of their master's degree program. We will not gain the leaders that we so desperately need if we are to close the achievement gap if we do not provide future administrators the foundation to lead change for our children, our schools, and our communities.

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