

The Status of Literacy and Literacy Teacher Education in Georgia: Highlights from the 2006 Literacy Summit



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In the summer of 2006, the University System of Georgia's Reading Consortium¹ and the Georgia Department of Education hosted a Literacy Summit, bringing together faculty from public and private institutions in Georgia and representatives from the Department of Education and the Georgia Professional Standards Commission. The purpose of this summit was to analyze the status of literacy and literacy teacher education in Georgia, to reflect on research which could inform the state's progress, and to develop position statements and recommendations to guide future work in this area.

The notion of bringing together key stakeholders to consider literacy issues and envision possibilities is not a new one. In 2005, the Conference on English Education (CEE) convened educators from across the country with the purpose of rethinking the preparation and professional development of English language arts teachers and teacher educators (Fox & Miller, 2006). Patterned after the 1966 Dartmouth Seminar (Muller, 1967) and the 1987 English Coalition Conference (Lloyd-Jones & Lunsford, 1989), the CEE Leadership and Policy Summit addressed critical issues related to English education, English teacher preparation, education of diverse learners, technology and

multi-modal literacies, and the politics of research and literacy.

Although the concept of the Literacy Summit was stimulated by these meetings², this colloquium also differed in several ways. In contrast to the national agenda and the concentration on English education in previous sessions, the 2006 Literacy Summit was designed to focus specifically on literacy achievement and literacy teacher preparation in the state of Georgia. To establish the context, keynote speakers addressed the status of literacy and the preparation of teachers from the national perspective (Dole, 2006) and from the state perspectives of the Board of Regents (BOR) (Kettlewell, 2006), the Georgia Department of Education (DOE) (Domaleski, 2006), and the Professional Standards Commission (PSC) (Wiseberg, 2006). Next, over 80 university faculty members, Regional Educational Service Agency (RESA) staff, BOR representatives and DOE educators focused their attention on Georgia public school students' performance on the Georgia Criterion-Referenced Competency Test (CRCT) and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), on Georgia teacher assessment and accreditation data, and on research focusing on best practice in literacy and literacy teacher education. Based upon this information, small groups participated in lengthy discussions to determine where Georgia's students are now, where Georgia's teacher education programs are now, and where they need to be. In light of these discussions, specific recommendations were made and position statements were developed for the various working groups.

Highlights from the 2006 Literacy Summit

Literacy in Pre-K Through Grade 3

The working group focusing on the status of literacy achievement of Georgia students in Pre-K through grade 3 was convened by Sheryl Dasinger from Valdosta State University. After analyzing data related to early literacy in Georgia, the participants noted the following:

- Readily available CRCT data does not

provide enough information to fully understand what is needed, instructionally, for the young children of Georgia.

- The NAEP data show a lack of significant growth from 1992 – 2005.
- A review of the content of the NAEP suggests a higher level of proficiency is needed in the areas of critical reading, thinking, and responding to text.

An analysis of research in the literacy field related to achievement in Pre-K through Grade 3 led the group to also note that while the areas of alphabetics (phonemic awareness and phonics), fluency, and comprehension (vocabulary) identified by the National Reading Panel are important, there is a more comprehensive set of dimensions that are necessary in the development of the complex processes of literacy.

Elementary Literacy Teacher Education

Another group, focused on the literacy preparation of early childhood teachers, was led by Beth Pendergraft of Augusta State University. This group's analysis identified confusions that were apparent regarding the Georgia reading endorsement (Beatty, Feaster, & Many, 2000) and the state requirements for undergraduate preparation in teaching reading. According to the Professional Standards Commission, students who graduate from PSC-approved teacher preparation programs have earned the equivalent of the reading endorsement; however, students who have graduated have not been receiving this designation on their certificate.

1 The USG Reading Consortium is a collaborative initiative of reading faculty, classroom teachers, and representatives from the Department of Education, Professional Standards Commission, and the University System who are focused on meeting the needs of Georgia's teachers and students. The consortium provides for statewide collaboration among professionals engaged in improving the literacy performance of students P-12. For more information see the USG Reading Consortium's website: <http://msit.gsu.edu/readingconsortium/>

2 Our appreciation is extended to Dr. Dana Fox from Georgia State University for sharing information regarding the organization and implementation of CEE's 2005 Summit. Her input was instrumental in the conceptualization of Georgia's 2006 Literacy Summit.

The position of the elementary literacy teacher preparation subgroup was that undergraduate students do not obtain the same competencies in their initial preparation programs as graduate students who enroll in the traditional reading endorsement programs in our state. To earn a reading endorsement at the graduate level requires an advanced level of implementation, knowledge, and commitment. Based on this discussion, the elementary literacy teacher education group prepared the following recommendation which was approved by the USG Reading Consortium board members and presented to the Professional Standards Commission:

- Undergraduate students should not receive the reading endorsement.
- Undergraduate students should receive a designation of “highly qualified” in reading.

In addition, the elementary teacher education group noted that to achieve consistent standards for literacy teacher training, every Georgia elementary teacher preparation program should ensure that its teacher candidates have essential core knowledge. In addition, these teacher candidates should be able to apply their acquired knowledge and skills to positively impact PreK-5 students’ learning. Members noted that this core knowledge must go beyond the five areas identified by the National Reading Panel’s report and should be aligned with current professional standards and the new Georgia Framework for Teaching.

In the article “Literacy Learning and Teacher Education in the Primary Grades” in this themed issue, summit participants Sheryl Dasinger, Sallie Miller, and Beth Pendergraft explore in detail the work of the P-3 Literacy and the Elementary Literacy Teacher Preparation groups and the data which informed their discussions. Their article describes the educators’ critical conversations, their beliefs concerning a core body of knowledge that all reading teachers should know, and how the educators are working to improve reading instruction to impact student reading achievement in Georgia.



Literacy in Grades 4 and 5

The working group focused on the literacy achievement of Georgia students in grades 4 and 5 were led in discussion by Alicia McCartney from the Georgia Department of Education and Michelle Commeryas from the University of Georgia. The following key points emerged in their discussion of the data related to literacy:

- Results from the CRCT show that English language learners (ELLs) and students with disabilities have the greatest need for better instruction in reading and language arts. Students identified as “Black” or “Hispanic” represent the next level of need. Students identified as “Asian, White, Native American/Alaskan and Multiracial” have the greatest success in passing the CRCT.
- Results from the NAEP show that students identified as “Black” scored an average of 27 points lower than their “Asian, Pacific Islander or White” peers. Students identified as “Hispanic” scored an average of 23 points lower than their “Asian, Pacific Islander, or White” peers. From a

socioeconomic (SES) perspective, students who qualify for free/reduced lunch scored an average of 28 points lower than those who did not. And, from a gender perspective, 4th grade boys scored an average of 10 points lower than their female peers.

After analyzing research focusing on literacy achievement at the intermediate grades, the 4-5th grade group determined that in addition to the recommendations made by the National Reading Panel, literacy teachers should understand that:

- literacy instruction and learning changes as students move from the beginning to intermediate stages of literacy; and,
- literacy teacher education efforts and reform should involve a partnership between education institutions and policy-making entities such as the local boards of education, the GA legislature, the Professional Standards Commission, and the Georgia Dept. of Education.

Literacy in Grades 6-8 in Georgia

Joyce Many from Georgia State University facilitated the work of group members focusing on literacy in grades 6-8. This group's data analysis for middle graders' literacy achievement in Georgia indicated:

- CRCT and NAEP results illustrate a large gap in achievement based upon ethnicity with students identified as "Black" and "Hispanic" struggling to meet even basic achievement levels.
- NAEP results indicated Georgia students from lower income families score far below students from families with more financial resources. Forty-eight percent of the children on free and reduced lunch score below the basic level of proficiency as compared with only 20% of those whose family income makes them ineligible for free and reduced lunch.
- According to the NAEP results, Georgia's 8th graders' literacy levels have not changed significantly since 1998.

The middle grades literacy group's analysis of related research led to the following position statements:

- Effective literacy instruction for middle grades students is developmental in nature and essential for systemic change leading to improvements in literacy achievement for Georgia's students.
- Middle school students must be exposed to and nurtured as critical consumers of various forms of texts within academic, social, community, and political contexts. Teachers and teacher educators must systematically scaffold students' development of strategies for critical thinking across multiple texts and media formats.

Middle Level Literacy Teacher Education

The working group focusing on the literacy preparation within teacher education programs for middle level teachers was led by Faith Wallace of Kennesaw State University. This group's analysis of the status of Georgia's middle level literacy teacher preparation noted that there is currently a lack of highly qualified middle-grades reading teachers in Georgia. Few initial teacher preparation programs include reading as a concentration of emphasis for middle childhood majors. In addition, only a small percentage of the Georgia teachers who have pursued a reading endorsement or a reading specialist certificate are employed at the middle grades level.

This group's concerns with the current status of teacher education programs led to a position statement that included the following beliefs about middle grades literacy teacher preparation:

- teachers should be familiar with the vast psychological, emotional, social, physical, and cognitive changes that are typical of most early adolescents while recognizing the need for instruction that is individually appropriate;
- there should be an increased emphasis on the need to understand the literacy learning processes of early adolescents;

- teacher preparation programs should emphasize the need for extensive collaboration with teachers in a variety of content areas;
- the acquisition of literacy learning is both social and political, and as such, teacher preparation programs should stress social justice and equity.

The work of the Literacy in Grades 4-5 group, Literacy in Grades 6-8 group, and Middle-Level Teacher Preparation group is synthesized and expanded in this issue's article, "Literacy and Literacy Teacher Education in Grades 4-8" by Faith Wallace, Joyce Many, Barbara Stanley, Shannon Howrey, John Ponder, Teresa Fisher, and Eudes Aoulou. These authors contend that while the percentage of Georgia's students achieving even a basic level of literacy has not changed significantly since 1992, the literacy demands of today's society has changed at a rapid pace. Given this fact and the emphasis on reading in the new Georgia Performance Standards, the authors call for an increased focus on reading preparation for middle-level teachers.

Literacy in Grades 9-12 and in Secondary Teacher Preparation

Another summit working group focused both on literacy achievement of 9th-12th graders in Georgia and the degree to which secondary teachers are prepared to address the literacy needs of these students. Participants' discussions were led by Harriett Allison and Donna Alvermann from the University of Georgia. The group determined that literacy practices for Grades 9-12 education are not sufficiently reflective of the opportunities and skills that all students, including culturally and linguistically diverse youth in Georgia, need to succeed in an increasingly technological and globalized economy.

Although a small but growing research base for 9-12 literacy practices is available, it is generally insufficient for guiding teacher preparation and school-based practice. This insufficiency is due in part to lack of a concerted state-wide focus on 9-12 literacy. One way of addressing this issue would be to focus attention on grades 9-12

literacy that is comparable to the emphasis placed on early literacy.

Georgia needs to raise standards and expectations for all students, especially for the 42% of youth in Georgia who score below the basic level on NAEP tests. There should be widespread awareness of the importance of literacy strategies for enabling student mastery of content in all disciplines. Recognizing that young people's literacy practices outside of school can serve as bridges to motivate students' in-school literacy will assist both teachers and students in the various disciplines (e.g., history, mathematics, biology, literature, and so on). For this to happen, however, there must be a concerted effort to develop school structures that support and encourage flexible, dynamic, collaborative, and interdisciplinary literacy practices, which in turn reflect real-world literacy competencies.

In this issue's article, "Secondary Literacy Education: Refocusing National and State Interest," Jacqueline Tobias addresses these issues as she substantiates the group's contention of the need for an emphasis on adolescent literacy through state programs and professional preparation.

Literacy for Students with Disabilities and Special Education Literacy Teacher Education in Georgia

The small group addressing the needs of Georgia's students with disabilities and the literacy preparation of their teachers was facilitated by Phil Gunter and Julia Reffel. These Summit participants found that, legislative reforms (e.g., NCLB; IDEA 2004) and state policy (e.g., GaDOE) goals regarding integration of students with disabilities may have resulted in what appears to be positive changes for students with mild/moderate disabilities. Domaleski (2006) indicated that 4th grade students with disabilities have increased in the percentage meeting or exceeding standards on the Georgia CRCT over the past five years by 25%. During this time period, NCLB was passed in 2001 and IDEA was reauthorized in 2004. Both of these explicitly directed that a greater



percentage of students with disabilities would be presented the general curriculum; NCLB by restricting the number of students exempt from the general education curriculum assessment and IDEA 2004 by requiring an increase in the amount of time students with disabilities spend in general education curriculum.

In anticipation of IDEA 2004 changes, the Georgia DOE Director of Special Education directed all school districts in Georgia to increase the percent of time students with disabilities spent in general education classrooms; in turn, Georgia moved from 49th among states in this measure to near the midpoint. At the same time, while much progress has been made in all areas of achievement of

students with disabilities, they still remain among the lowest performing subgroups in reading and English language arts, as measured by the Georgia CRCT.

This working group also noted that Georgia's teachers of students with disabilities may or may not have received sufficient training in literacy education. In the past, teachers of students with disabilities have only been required to take one reading course. On the other hand, most special educators are required to teach reading and students with disabilities do not make the gains that their peers without special needs make in the area of reading. Recent changes in state certification policies, however, have addressed this issue. The Georgia Professional Standards Commission established new Special Education rules effective November 15, 2005 (SS 505-3-.30). According to the rules, the Special Education General Curriculum Program requirements include: "the completion of a content concentration in social science, science, math, language arts or reading. A content concentration shall consist of fifteen (15) semester hours of academic content that conforms with the requirements of content concentration for middle grades."

Although the group members noted that this was a positive step, certification still does not require that all special education teachers, regardless of concentration, take more than one course in the teaching of reading. Therefore, while many programs in Georgia may now be including the content area of reading as a concentration area in the Special Education General Curriculum program, special education programs could still be developed with only the one-course reading requirement.

Literacy and Literacy Teacher Preparation for English Language Learners

Educators interested in English language learners (ELLs) and preparation of teachers of English to speakers of other languages (ESOL) in Georgia were participants in the small group facilitated by Evelyne Barker of the Georgia Department of Education. The needs of ELL students in Georgia also emerged as a theme

running through many of the other small group discussions. From 1992-2002, Georgia led all 50 states with a 378% increase in English language learners. In 2002, this phenomena and the fact that 116 districts in Georgia had ESOL learners, led the PSC to create a new initial certification in ESOL focusing on individuals who wish to become ESOL teachers but who are not already in education. In their article, "The Status of ESOL Teacher Education in the State of Georgia," Cathleen Doheny and Gertrude Tinker Sachs draw on the issues raised in their small group as well as the concerns noted in other groups to explore the how to improve the education of second language learners in Georgia.

Addressing Literacy and Literacy Education in Georgia: Next Steps

Following the 2006 Literacy Summit, USG Reading Consortium members met to consider the recommendations of each of the working groups. One theme running through the recommendations was the need for research examining how literacy teacher educators are prepared. As a result, three research teams were formed to address the following questions: (1) What do universities in the state teach elementary preservice teachers about the teaching of reading? (2) What do universities in the state teach middle school preservice teachers about the teaching of reading and/or literacy in the content areas? (3) What do universities in the state teach secondary content area (math, science, social studies, or English) preservice teachers about the teaching of reading and/or literacy in the content areas?

Parallel studies began in spring 2007 to examine the preparation of teachers at private institutions, state and regional institutions, and research universities. This research will inform policy makers, university faculty, and literacy researchers regarding the content of teacher preparation programs with respect to reading/literacy instruction. These comprehensive state-wide studies are the first step toward understanding not only the content of

Georgia's teacher preparation programs but also the effectiveness of these programs.

In addition, USG Reading Consortium and Summit members began working in spring and summer 2007 with a Georgia Department of Education Reading Advisory Board to conceptualize a state reading initiative for K-12 literacy in the state. Acknowledging the developmental nature of literacy abilities across students' elementary, middle and secondary years, this initiative will take into account the changing nature of literacy in today's society. Discussions have focused on the need to give attention not only to readers who are struggling to develop their reading abilities but also to readers who, while proficient, must move beyond fluency and basic comprehension abilities. To ensure all of our students' success, education in Georgia must address the complex literacy strategies demanded in the content areas and teachers at all levels must have access to professional development and resources to support such efforts.

Through these initiatives, educators in schools, universities, and public institutions are collaboratively examining the issues surrounding literacy and literacy teacher preparation in Georgia. The 2006 Literacy Summit provided the opportunity to evaluate the literacy performance of students across the state and to explore issues related to teacher preparation. The articles which follow in this themed issue provide an in-depth examination of these areas and draw on research in the literacy field to highlight recommendations and future directions. By continuing to work together, education professionals can effectively address the literacy needs of all of Georgia's students as well as the teachers who will support them.

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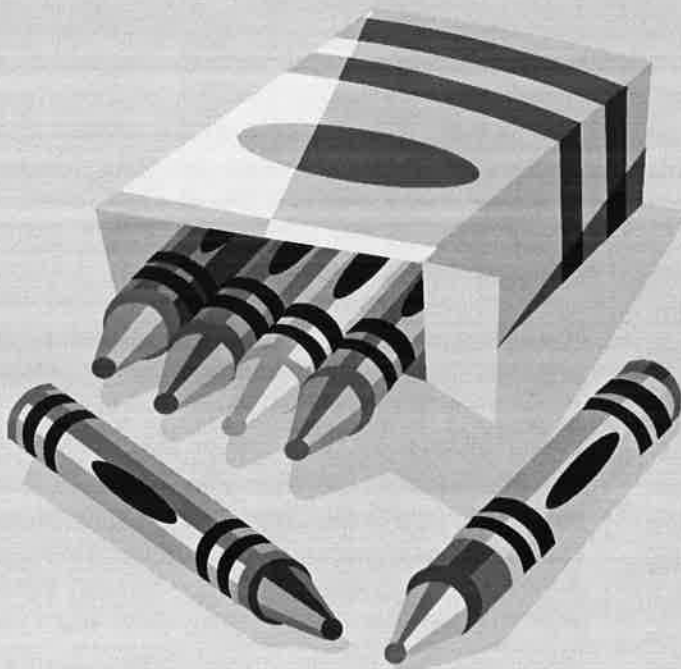
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