



# Turning the Page: Refocusing Massachusetts for Reading Success

Strategies for improving children's language  
and literacy development, birth to age 9



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Dr. Nonie K. Lesaux is Marie and Max Kargman Associate Professor in Human Development and Urban Education Advancement at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. She leads a research program that focuses on increasing opportunities to learn for students from diverse linguistic, cultural, and economic backgrounds, a growing population in today's classrooms. From 2002–2006, Lesaux was the Senior Research Associate of the National Literacy Panel on Language Minority Children and Youth. In 2007, Lesaux was named one of five WT Grant scholars, earning a \$350,000 five-year award from the WT Grant Foundation in support of her research on English-language learners in urban public schools. In 2009, she was a recipient of the Presidential Early Career Award for Scientists and Engineers, the highest honor given by the United States government to young professionals beginning their independent research careers. Her studies on reading and vocabulary development, as well as instructional strategies to prevent reading difficulties, have implications for practitioners, researchers, and policymakers. This research is supported by grants from several organizations, including the Institute of Education Sciences, Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and the Council of the Great City schools. A native of Canada, Lesaux earned her doctorate in educational psychology and special education from the University of British Columbia.

# Executive Summary

Many are applauding Massachusetts' reading scores on national and state tests, yet substandard performance is prevalent in the suburbs and the cities. Forty-three percent of our third graders (two-thirds from low-income backgrounds and one-third not low-income) do not read at grade level. These children deserve our serious attention. The costs of reading failure are high; the majority of this large group will go on to experience significant academic difficulties, jeopardizing individual potential, and also compromising our society's vitality. At the same time, meeting "proficiency" on state or national tests does not guarantee success in college or the workforce, as proven by both the rates of incoming freshmen who need remediation, and the underpreparedness of new college graduates for the literacy demands in the workplace.<sup>1</sup> With the goal of improving third-grade reading statewide, and for all children, we undertook a study of external and in-school barriers to reading achievement. Our findings call for a major, comprehensive refocusing of our efforts to create strong readers in the Commonwealth; we must do more, and we can do better.

To refocus Massachusetts on reading success, we should direct our efforts toward improving the quality of infants' and children's language and reading environments across the many settings in which they are growing up, playing and studying. Why focus on quality? A decade into this 21st century, science has never been as clear and convincing about the long-term effects of the quality of a child's early environment and experiences on his brain architecture.<sup>2</sup> These lay the foundation for important outcomes, including children's reading and academic achievement, and are also related to how well a child will be able to think; every new competency is built upon competencies that came before.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, science has never been as clear and convincing about how dependent reading skill is upon high-quality environments and experiences. Becoming a skilled reader—one with strong language skills, well-developed knowledge about the world, and critical thinking skills—is a process that begins at birth and continues through to adulthood.

Given today's sophisticated science of language, reading, and child development, we could capitalize more on what we know. So in pursuit of better reading outcomes, we need to take a more scientific and a more preventive approach. We need to alter our course, and this involves revisiting some basic assumptions and practices. First, we need to think more broadly about reading itself, which means much more than deciphering words on a page. We also need to commit to identifying the struggler, long before that child

takes the third-grade reading test. In addition, we need to think more broadly about who can promote children's reading development, and then support them to do so. This means educating and supporting adults in classrooms and homes, and also adults working in early education and care settings and other parts of communities. Finally, we need to rethink our indicators of success. Currently, many programs and supports are using "reach"—the number of children and/or families served—as the indicator of success. Instead, we need to become more strongly committed to using impact on children's outcomes as the indicator, which necessarily demands high-quality programs and supports.

## Massachusetts at a Glance<sup>A</sup>

**480,422** children ages 0-5

**70%** of young children in early education or care settings

**1 million** school-age children

**149** home languages

**1 in 6 children** comes from a multilingual home

**310** school districts

**1,846** schools

**70,396** teachers

The recommendations we present are rooted in several sources and lines of study. We drew on the findings from the most current and salient research, including seminal national reports, policy reports, regulations, state guidelines and standards, and relevant national and state-level data. We also undertook research in 15 communities, cities and towns, to get a sense of trends and a snapshot of services and programs that promote children's language and reading development and provide support for those who are struggling to read in Massachusetts. An Advisory Committee comprised of individuals with significant knowledge in education policy and practice offered key insights and helped shape the study design and recommendations in important ways.

Our analysis of the collective efforts in the Commonwealth to promote children's reading revealed a vast quantity of programs and supports. Many of these are designed to effectively support reading, but suffer from low-quality implementation, while others lack sufficient intensity to encourage the lasting behavior changes in children and/or adults that will lead to reading success.

As we have learned from so many other efforts to promote children's health and well-being, to have an impact across the state and boost all children's reading requires a multi-pronged approach. In many cases this is not about new resources, but about reallocating resources—doing a better job of what we are already doing. In other cases, we need a new approach. And, building off of prior learnings, much of this is not about mechanical solutions. At the core of this comprehensive plan are intensive capacity-building efforts—increasing adults' and children's competencies related to assessing, supporting and promoting children's language and reading development, from birth to age 9.

This report features five recommendations for producing measurable success in children's reading outcomes. These recommendations are outlined below and described in detail in the following pages.

1. Program Design and Impact: Reallocate funds and alter policy to ensure programs are delivered with sufficient intensity, effectively.
2. Assessments of Children and Settings: Conduct early and ongoing assessment of children's language and reading and of the quality of services and supports.
3. Professional Education: Increase adults' capacity to assess and support children's language and reading development.

4. Curriculum: Bring language-rich, rigorous and engaging reading curricula into early education and care settings, as well as PK-3 classrooms.
5. Partnerships with Families: Expand and strengthen work with families across learning settings and within communities.

This is not about sounding an alarm; it is about ringing the bell louder, so that our policymakers, philanthropists, educators, medical professionals, business and community leaders, parents, and caregivers take note. While there are committed and hard-working people devoting every day to helping children become proficient readers, the end result still falls far short; often our efforts to improve outcomes do not translate into reading success. Yet Massachusetts is rich with intellectual capital, including more universities and colleges per capita than any state in the nation, it is steeped in a history of public education for all its children, and it is small enough geographically to be amenable to statewide initiatives to promote reading proficiency. Capitalizing on these attributes, we can make key changes that will improve our children's health and well-being, elevate the bar for children at every reading level, and make a difference to our knowledge-based economy and to our society. We must pull our *at-risk* readers along and we must push *all* readers forward. It is time to turn the page.

## Increase the quality of children's language and reading environments across the many settings in which they are growing up, from birth to age 9

Program design & implementation for impact

Ongoing assessments of children & settings

Redefined adult capacity-building models

Language-rich, rigorous, & engaging curricula

Partnerships with families focused on language & learning

- 1 Massachusetts Board of Higher Education and Massachusetts Department of Education. (2008). *Massachusetts School-to-College Report High School Class of 2005*. Retrieved from: <http://www.mass.edu/library/Reports/2005SchoolToCollegeStateReport.pdf>; Daggett, W.R. *Jobs and the Skills Gap*. Retrieved from <http://www.leadered.com/pdf/JobSkills%20Gap%20White%20PaperPDF>.[www.leadered.com](http://www.leadered.com); Wagner, T. (2008). *The Global Achievement Gap*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- 2 Shonkoff, J. and Phillips, D. (Eds.). (2000). *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press.
- 3 Fox, S., Levitt, P., and Nelson, C. (2010) How the timing and quality of early experiences influence the development of brain architecture. *Child Development*, 81(1), 28-40.