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From the Editor

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The national reading summit: A commentary

On September 18 and 19, the U.S. Department of Education hosted a national Reading Summit in Washington D.C. The charge for the summit participants, as stated by Secretary of Education Richard Riley, was “to lead a new crusade to dramatically improve child literacy in America.” Riley called for a collaboration of policy makers and educators. Each governor received an invitation to put together a team of seven people representing the states’ and territories’ stakeholders in young children’s early reading; I served as one of the seven from the Michigan delegation. The National Academy of Science’s report *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* served as the organizing focal point of the summit.

Secretary Riley set the tone for the conference in his opening remarks highlighting five challenges deserving reading educators and researchers attention. He challenged:

1. Parents and/or other family caretakers to read to and with their children at least 30 minutes a day;
2. Reading researchers to “once and for all end the reading wars;”
3. Each state to collaborate and link all the schools and agencies providing early childhood services;
4. Those who work with learning disabled, African American, and limited English proficient children to help them read well; and
5. Teacher educators to do a better job of preparing teachers of reading.

Then Catherine Snow, Chair of Report Committee, presented segments of The Academy’s reading study emphasizing that the reading community of researchers and educators do have a scientific basis through replicable research to know how to prevent reading difficulties in young children. Following Snow’s comments, the summit then had a series of workshops devoted, in one way or another, to improving young children’s reading. The summit culminated in each state and territory coming to a closure around a plan to implement findings in The Academy’s report.

Had the summit equitable represented teachers who task it is to teach young children and those who prepare teachers as well as responsible policy makers whose knowledge comes from being in schools where reading instruction occurs, the summit might have been

something more than a political maneuver. While the following comments are specific to the conference and its tone, they are not necessarily divorced from the report; the summit and the report on which it was based were so inextricably bound.

One had only to read *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* to stay abreast of the conference proceedings, I found the workshops lacking and self-serving. Some workshop presenters advocated specific school reforms in an attempt to reform literacy education — reform programs which cost big money to purchase and maintain. I found this offensive. In the middle of one workshop in which the presenter was pushing a rather costly school reform, a fellow participant slipped that day's Carl Rowan editorial under my wandering eyes. Rowan's article, titled "It's the Teachers, Stupid" reminded me that literacy reform is in the hands of teachers. It's always the teachers. They know what works and with whom. They were conspicuously absent from this conference.

Depending on the individual participant's background, the summit may have been helpful and encouraging, or even informational for preventing reading difficulties for our young children. Effective classroom teachers and teacher educators would have learned nothing new from this summit. They were conspicuously absent from this summit. For my part, I consider the following summit aspects as new:

1. The national endeavor to link up all state departments of education with each other and the federal government; and
2. The federal challenge asking for a commitment from each state and territory to submit a plan to assure successful reading in young children by the end of grade three.

The collaboration appeared to be the only new aspect.

My response to the *new* aspects of this reading summit is best characterized as mixed. I am heartened at the attention being focused on early reading by the federal and state government. With such attention focused on early reading instruction, legislative bodies may see the necessity for stricter requirements for pre-school education agencies and an appropriate place for resource allocation. I am also encouraged that the focus on those populations who traditionally have reading difficulties (i.e., from poor urban areas and limited English proficiency backgrounds) should receive "the amount of instructional support needed as gauged by the entry abilities of the school's population" (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998, p. 328). The study points out that this type of resource planning would fly in the face of the current and ill-conceived "practice of giving schools bonuses for high test scores" (p. 328). The summit did not emphasize the above point, but the study addressed this issue.

A troubling point emphasized at the summit revolved around the issue that scientific evidence does exist to prevent reading difficulties. This bothers me; I am not eager to see what *does exist* construed

as a “quick fix” to early reading difficulties. One could have left the summit with the notion that all that early education personnel have to do is implement all the pedagogical suggestions listed in The National Academy Press to prevent reading difficulties. Another quick fix I fear is the basal publishers’ response to this report as a mandate to assemble systematic, consistent, formal, and well-articulated phonics and word patterned basals. (*Here we go again!*)

What was *not new* at this reading summit can best be outlined as:

1. A reinforcement of the artificial establishment of two reading camps — “phonics” and “whole language;”
2. The attempt to end the “reading wars;”
3. An attempt to blame one or another institution/agency for reasons why our children have reading difficulties;
4. The mistake that poor teaching and impoverished teacher education, not power and politics, are at the base of reading difficulties in our nation’s children;
5. An oversimplification, if not miss-statement that our fourth graders are scoring poorly in reading; and
6. An obvious lack of teachers’ voices.

What was *not new* at the summit revisits some of the old problems plaguing the reading world. First, the “phonics” versus “whole language” terminology bandied about at the summit keeps an artificial war waging. I must add, as an aside, that no reading educator nor researcher in attendance spoke of “phonics” versus “whole language.” However, the fact that so many outside the reading research world used that phrase means it is a popular perception keeping alive a war — a war with, unfortunately, real armies. My real concern in this call to end the reading wars appears to be a call to end the debates and close down the voices of alternative research. The second, and unfortunate, point addresses the profession of choice to blame for many of the reading difficulties. Teacher educators were clearly the profession receiving blame. While the reading study’s *suggestions* regarding teacher preparation should serve as a mandate to state legislative bodies to support institutions of higher learning, at the summit those suggestions became *criticisms* of teacher educators. Third, there can be no mistaking what this summit clearly communicated, i.e., that teaching methodologies, not power and politics, are the causes for our reading difficulties. Power and politics must be factored in the blame through the following forces: moneys not appropriated for literacy support; basals purchased and mandated by states and school districts; and state mandated curricula devoid of teachers’ voices. These factors leave out classroom teachers as decision makers in reading instruction as well as teacher educators. Last, the presence of classroom teachers (elementary and high education) was sorely lacking; they were conspicuously absent. They were outnumbered greatly and gravely by state departments of education personnel and politicians of

one sort or another. Where was the collaboration? How can you call a summit calling for collaboration and have it attended mainly by state department of education personnel and attempt to blame teachers and teacher educators for reading difficulties?

The summit's intent "to dramatically improve child literacy in America," remains to be seen. I am afraid that the summit, like much of the curricula governing reading, will not involve the classroom teachers of literacy nor many of those who prepare classroom teachers. The responsibility shifts to teacher educators to make sure this happens. While the "landmark report of the National Research Council" as Secretary Riley labels it, offers cogent suggestions, imperative caveats, remedies, and timely concerns, they are issued to *all stakeholders* in young children's early reading initiatives — not just teachers and teacher educators. One did not leave the summit with that shared responsibility. Fortunately, much of the study may succeed where the summit failed. But the study will fail if it is accepted as a canon for teaching reading to young children. It is *a way* for some, not *the way* for all.

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