

New Report Finds that Writing Can Be Powerful Driver for Improving Reading Skills

Steve Graham and Michael Hebert author meta-analysis of effects of writing on reading performance.

Washington, DC-Although reading and writing have become essential skills for almost every job, the majority of students do not read or write well enough to meet grade-level demands. A new report from Carnegie Corporation of New York and published by the Alliance for Excellent Education (the Alliance) finds that while the two skills are closely connected, writing is an often-overlooked tool for improving reading skills and content learning. Writing to Read: Evidence for How Writing Can Improve Reading identifies three core instructional practices that have been shown to be effective in improving student reading.

"As the recent findings from The Nation's Report Card in reading demonstrate, nearly 70 percent of the nation's eighth graders fail to read at a proficient level," said Bob Wise, president of the Alliance and former governor of West Virginia. "Poor reading and writing skills not only threaten the well-being of individual Americans, but the country as a whole. Ensuring that adolescents become skilled readers and writers is not merely an option for America-it is an absolute necessity. As Writing to Read demonstrates, instruction in writing not only improves how well students write, but it also enhances students' ability to read a text accurately, fluently, and comprehensively."

Writing to Read is part of a series of Carnegie Corporation of New York-funded reports intended to reengineer literacy instruction across the curriculum to drive student achievement. The initial report, Time to Act: An Agenda for Advancing Adolescent Literacy for College and Career Readiness, and corresponding reports were published in September 2009. Writing to Read is an extension of this work and provides practitioners with research-supported information about how writing improves reading while making the case for researchers and policymakers to place greater emphasis on writing instruction as an integral part of school curriculum.

"In an age overwhelmed by information, the ability to read, comprehend, and write-in other words, to organize information into knowledge-must be viewed as tantamount to a survival skill," said Vartan Gregorian, president of Carnegie Corporation of New York. "As Americans, we must keep our democracy and our society from being divided not only between rich and poor, but also between those who have access to information and knowledge, and thus, to power-the power of enlightenment, the power of self-improvement and self-assertion, the power to achieve upward mobility, and the power over their own lives and their families' ability to thrive and succeed- and those who do not."

The three closely related instructional practices that Writing to Read identifies as being effective in improving students reading are:

1) Have students write about the texts they read. Writing about a text enhances comprehension because it provides students with a tool to visibly and permanently record, connect, analyze, personalize, and manipulate key ideas in text. Students' comprehension of science, social studies, and language arts is improved specifically when they

- respond to a text in writing;
- write summaries of a text;
- write notes about a text; and
- answer questions about a text in writing, or create and answer written questions about a text.

2) Teach students the writing skills and processes that go into creating text. Students' reading skills and comprehension are improved by learning the skills and processes that go into creating text specifically when teachers

- teach the process of writing, text structures for writing, paragraph or sentence construction skills;
- teach spelling and sentence construction skills; and
- teach spelling skills.

3) Increase how much students write. Students' reading comprehension is improved by having them increase how often they produce their own text. The process of creating a text prompts students to be more thoughtful and engaged when reading text produced by others. The act of writing also teaches students about the importance of stating assumptions and premises clearly and observing the rules of logic. Students also benefit from using experience and knowledge to create a text as well as building relationships among words, sentences, and paragraphs.

"Writing to Read explains how building and strengthening writing skills can form a pathway to successful reading practices," said Wise. "When students are required to write about what they learn, they are challenged to digest and organize the information in meaningful ways that enables them to successfully communicate the information to a second party. By forming these connections, students are better equipped to comprehend material as well as approach reading with a higher level of understanding and appreciation."

The report carefully notes that writing practices cannot take the place of effective reading practices and calls for writing to complement reading instruction, stating that each type of practice supports and strengthens the other. With lower-achieving students, an important key to success is providing ongoing practice and explicit instruction.

Writing to Read, commissioned by Carnegie Corporation of New York and authored by Steve Graham and Michael Hebert (both from Vanderbilt University), builds on the ideas presented in a 2006 Alliance report, *Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High School Literacy*. In both publications, a form of research called meta-analysis is used to collect, categorize, and examine experimental and quasi-experimental data. Writing to Read marks the first meta-analysis examining the effects of different writing practices on students' reading performance.