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## **APPROACHES TO READING INSTRUCTION**

The scope of reading achievement problems in Wisconsin is difficult to determine because test scores vary and many factors contribute to reading success. Wisconsin fourth graders have generally scored well on reading comprehension tests, especially when compared to national averages. However, not all are reading at a basic level. For example, the State's 1997-98 Knowledge and Concepts Examination showed 7 percent of fourth-grade students in Wisconsin scored below the test's basic reading level, while the 1994 National Assessment of Educational Progress test results showed 29 percent of Wisconsin fourth graders scored below the test's basic reading level. Many parents and educators believe that one way to improve reading achievement is to change the teaching approaches used for reading instruction.

Debate about reading instruction focuses on two instructional methods: phonics and whole language. Phonics is considered a skills approach to reading instruction; whole language, which teaches reading in the context of literature, is considered a context approach. There is strong disagreement among advocates of each approach as to which teaches students to read more easily, promotes better reading enjoyment, and is more appropriate for students who are having trouble learning to read. There is no consensus among academic researchers about which reading approach is best. Most recently, the trend among national education professionals and researchers has been to support mixing approaches in order to combine strengths of both the skills and the context approaches.

### **Wisconsin Teachers Report Using a Mixture of Approaches to Reading Instruction**

We surveyed kindergarten through third-grade classroom teachers in Wisconsin and received 1,006 responses. Over 90 percent of the surveyed teachers use some type of a mixture of approaches to reading instruction; however, 40.6 percent of all surveyed teachers report a skills (phonics-related) emphasis, 33.1 percent report a context (whole language-related) emphasis, and 20.8 percent report no specific emphasis in their teaching approach. From the survey results, we found indications of a relationship between teaching approach and grade level: kindergarten, first-grade, and second-grade teachers use a skills emphasis more frequently than do third-grade teachers. We also found a relationship between teaching approach and district size. For example, 6 of the 10 largest school districts responding—all with student enrollment over 10,000—use a context emphasis. Nevertheless, it cannot be concluded that a particular approach is followed uniformly within any specific school district, in part because teachers within the same school district often reported using different approaches for reading instruction. The survey also shows that teachers use a variety of both phonics and whole language-related instructional resources and techniques in their classrooms, regardless of their approaches to reading instruction.

### **Teacher Training in Phonics Will Soon Be Mandatory**

1995 Wisconsin Act 299 requires kindergarten to sixth-grade teachers to successfully complete training in reading instruction that includes appropriate instructional methods, including phonics, in order to receive or renew a license. This law takes effect on July 1, 1998. To ensure teachers meet this requirement and all other teacher licensing requirements established by the Department of Public Instruction, the Department reviews and approves the State's 33 teaching degree programs at both public and private universities. In response to a survey by the Department, 25 institutions offering elementary education programs indicated that they offer one or more courses designed to teach instructional methods for reading and language arts that include phonics.

### **Broad Participation Is Needed in Future Curriculum Guide Revisions**

The Department has created 29 guides for school districts to use as an aid for curriculum development: three of these guides are reading-related. Of the 271 district curriculum professionals we surveyed, 76.4 percent reported that all three of the reading-related guides were used to help create their districts' current kindergarten through twelfth-grade reading curricula. However, the reading guide was last updated in 1985 and is in need of revisions because of significant changes in research involving phonics and whole language, public concern about reading scores, and state initiatives since its development.

Because the Department intends its revision process to be similar to the process used in developing the original curriculum guides, we determined who was involved in the past process and how guide content was chosen. We found that representation of elementary teachers was lacking, especially for the reading guide. However, at least 65 percent of the research included in this and the other reading-related guides came from refereed publications, which are generally accepted by researchers as having a high degree of validity. We recommend that in future revision processes, the Department include more elementary and middle school teachers and seek a broad review of current research in order to ensure reading instruction issues are comprehensively addressed.

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