
Michigan's Reading Program: A Decade of Change

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In 1980 the Michigan State Board of Education's minimal reading objectives, developed in the early seventies and revised slightly in the mid-seventies, were scheduled for their five-year review. As a one-year veteran serving as the Michigan Department of Education's reading specialist, I already knew the dangers of minimal objectives, especially objectives that described reading in linear strands of isolated skills. Many local districts anxious to achieve respectability on the state's reading assessment test (based on the state's reading objectives) had reduced their reading instruction programs to rote drill on the 26 isolated reading skills. Unfortunately, these rote activities were replacing language-development activities, the reading of real books and other legitimate texts and other appropriate reading instruction. In 1981, a panel of reading educators determined that the basis for the existing objectives was too narrow and needed a major overhaul. This resulted in a statement describing reading which became known as the new definition of reading, or the redefinition of reading. This new view of reading appeared to be a radical departure from the existing definition. In the beginning of this project, a presentation to the state board of education, including the research documentation for the proposed changes in the reading definition, confirmed the perceived radical departure from the existing definitions of reading, of minimal reading, of objectives and of assessment tests.

Support for this new definition came in the form of a position paper comparing the existing and proposed definitions of reading. This was written by Karen Wixson, University of Michigan, and Charles Peters, Oakland Schools, and published by the Michigan Reading Association. A committee of interested practitioners was convened and a reading curriculum-review process was developed. This was considered to be a

logical first step in considering a new definition of reading. Preliminary presentations of reading research and of the proposed new definition of reading to audiences of educators across the state brought audible skepticism about any major change in the state assessment test—after all they were comfortably accustomed to the current, unsecured format, and many had in place a procedure for improving the scores. Later, in 1985, a spin-off from the curriculum review process was published—a multicolored, teacher-friendly flipchart that presented the reading research, what teachers needed to know and what it would look like in a classroom.

But the best ally turned out to be from out of state, a document from the U.S. Office of Education that placed the work we had done in Michigan in a national context. *Becoming a Nation of Readers* was our ally from out of state.

A statewide conference was scheduled to share the new decisions teachers would be making with this new definition of reading. Even though it was scheduled to begin on a Sunday afternoon, a capacity 1100 educators registered for the conference and another 200 waited on a list. We had a following of allies—educators willing to risk.

The rest is history for the staff-development curriculum portion of the Michigan program. We continued with focused conferences and ended with a leadership series of conferences that provided training of leaders in 22 one-hour inservice modules. The major outcome of these efforts was about 1700 trainers and, of those, many empowered teachers who have presented to their boards of education the problems of literacy that we face as state—with the expectation that their district consider the literacy problem and embrace a program for staff development.

In September, 1989, Michigan's State of Reading went national, inviting educators from across the nation to a conference. Individuals representing 18 states, a near-capacity audience, participated in a leadership conference that provided presentations by seventeen nationally recognized speakers and training in the inservice modules.

The companion piece to the reading objective is, of course, the state assessment test. From the beginning of the project, the committee developed objectives with an eye toward their accessibility. A contract for the development of the test was awarded to the Michigan Reading Association and a research grant to validate the objectives and assessment test was awarded to the University of Michigan. The earliest conceptions of the test made major departures from known tests of reading comprehension, using real text, both narrative and exposi-

tory, and real text length. Prior knowledge, later called topic familiarity, was considered.

Finding a way to get a good look at the text was eventually solved by Taffy Taphael, Michigan State University. After considerable effort to write items that reflected the structure of the text had failed, a think-tank session was scheduled. Near the end of the meeting, Taffy suggested that the text be mapped first. Well, that brought new life to the meeting and to the project! Many refinements, including a grid from the map that extended the questions beyond the text, provided the framework for preparing one to write test items on the test. The new test has as its base real text that asks the student to construct meaning and one that examines some variables along the way—prior knowledge, knowledge of reading, strategies and attitudes. The task at the onset of this project was to develop reading objectives that could be assessed with a test based upon an appropriate instructional model for reading. Two piloting years made this look very promising.

So what? Michigan in the past decade has made some major paradigm shifts—in how we teach reading, in how we prepare teachers to teach reading, and in how we test reading statewide. Meanwhile our state has changed.

In July of 1988, more people were employed in the fast-food industry than in manufacturing. Jobs paying above middle-class salaries once readily available to anyone who survived high school now demand higher literacy and academic skills. Although accountability measures contrived during the seventies to restore the community's faith in schools continue to show progress, the newspapers, television documentaries, and weekly and monthly magazines scream of discontent by universities, armed forces, manufacturing and other employing agencies with the "products of the public schools."

In October, 1989, the final chapter of the Michigan Reading Project will be written—full implementation of the statewide revised reading test, the work of nearly a decade. The challenge that began as an effort to develop a more appropriate set of reading objectives reflected in a revised reading test must continue. The stakes, however, have changed. We face a school population in which the majority of students are coming from the lowest levels of incomes and education. Every day in America forty teenagers give birth to their third child. The mismatch of employment skills and employee skills caused the latest automobile plant opening to search 96,000 applicants to find 3,400 employees. Every university, college, and other institutions of higher education has incorporated remedial, no-credit courses for incoming students.

The new challenge facing schools in Michigan is not how to implement the Michigan Educational Assessment Program's revised reading test but how to plan for the changes in the needs of the incoming students and the changing literacy demands upon their exit—a challenge that should keep Michigan educators well occupied over the next decade.

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