



Scholastic Inc. 557 Broadway, New York 10012

Ernest B. Fleishman
Senior Vice President
Education & Corporate Relations
(212) 343-6330
(212) 343 6802 Fax
efleishman@scholastic.com

TO: President-Elect Barack Obama

FROM: Ernest B. Fleishman, Senior Vice President, Education and Corporate Relations, Scholastic Inc.

**RE: 21st Century Literacy Policy:
The Foundation for Achievement in School, Work and Life**

DATE: December 19, 2008

THE INFORMATION AGE DEMANDS 21ST CENTURY LITERACY SKILLS

For over 88 years, Scholastic has helped parents, teachers and schools nationwide to foster a love of reading and learning in all children. Scholastic is the world's largest publisher and distributor of children's books and a leader in educational technology, research-based reading instruction and children's media. We understand our important responsibility to help educators across the country deliver the next generation of readers, writers and thinkers. That is why we support a national literacy policy that will help us move 21st century literacy skills into every classroom.

In order for our country to be successful in the Information Age and for our democracy to advance, it is critical that we equip students to reach high levels of proficiency. Students must be able to apply these skills across disciplines and new media, to collaborate across cultures, to access and evaluate resources in multiple forms, to use information effectively, and to create content within a social, political and cultural context. Students who are prepared with 21st century literacy skills become globally competent graduates who not only succeed in college and work, but will become our nation's next generation of leaders able to negotiate and compete in a global economy.

Students will face challenges that will require creative, critical and entrepreneurial thinking, as well as the ability to solve complex, multidisciplinary, open-ended problems while working both as individuals and as part of global teams. A national 21st century literacy policy can help states and local school districts articulate and implement comprehensive plans for advancing literacy instruction; build capacity to deliver professional development for school leaders and formal and informal educators; and implement proven interventions that employ adaptive technology as a critical strategy for accelerating struggling readers. Only then will *all students* have the opportunity to receive a world-class education.

The challenge for the new President and Congress, working with the nation's Governors and education leaders, is to take the accomplishments of our best schools and bring them to scale. Today's students need to be empowered with extensive and expansive literacy skills, beginning in early childhood and continuing throughout their academic career. A national policy and strategic



new investment at the federal and state level is necessary in order for parents, communities and schools across the nation to teach and support students as they master 21st century literacy skills.

There is consensus among researchers and practitioners that a comprehensive national literacy policy requires three distinct strategies addressing the needs of all students, including English language learners and students with special needs—one for early childhood programs; another for the early grades; and a third strategy for the middle grades and high school.

21st CENTURY LITERACY DEVELOPMENT in EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS

- **1 out of every 3 children in America, enters kindergarten without the requisite skills for success.**¹
- **On the first day of kindergarten, children living in public assistance households will have heard 32 million fewer words than their peers living in households with professional parents.**²

Before a child enters preschool, it is critical to educate adult family members and caregivers about learning and development, in order for them to engage in both social and cognitive development activities at home and later, to become partners with the school in their children's education. At the onset of formal education, students in early childhood programs must be engaged in emergent literacy development - experimentation and play with letter-writing and with "reading" or storytelling through a book's pictures. Language and literacy development should be integrated into a curriculum that builds on children's eagerness to understand their world and closes the gap between children of poverty and their more affluent peers. Emergent literacy skills form the foundation for a child's literacy success.

21st CENTURY LITERACY DEVELOPMENT in the EARLY GRADES

- **Although the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data show fourth graders reading at record levels, only 33 percent are proficient nationwide.**

In the early elementary grades, developmentally appropriate strategies that build necessary cognitive skills and knowledge, including alphabetic awareness and rich language skills, must be taught. As they progress in school, students need to learn to read by unlocking the code with all forms of text that matters and increasing their vocabulary and knowledge, in order to learn more challenging curriculum. Comprehension strategies must begin early so that words have meaning and make sense to the developing reader.

21st CENTURY LITERACY DEVELOPMENT in the MIDDLE GRADES and HIGH SCHOOL

- **69 percent of eighth graders read below the proficient level, many without even the most basic literacy skills.**³
- **7,000 students drop out of high school each day. The majority read poorly.**⁴

Middle and high school students must develop the ability to read and comprehend the complex and increasingly specialized materials they encounter in the academic content areas; they must develop the ability to write for diverse audiences in varied ways; and they must develop the ability

¹ Rock, D. & Pollack, J. (2002) early childhood longitudinal study – *Psychometric Report for Kindergarten Through 1st Grade*. U.S. Department of Education, NCES.

² Hart, B. & Risley, T.R. (1995). *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American children*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

³ ACT, *The Nation's Report Card: Reading, 2005*.

⁴ Alliance for Excellent Education, *Who's Counted? Who's Counting? Understanding High School Graduation Rates, 2006*.



to use integrated media. In order to attain widespread academic achievement, all students need to develop deeper reading, writing and comprehension skills across curriculum. To enable all students to reach this standard, teachers of all middle and high school students—in all subjects—need to know how to teach reading and writing.

Those students struggling to read and to learn need ongoing intervention that accelerates their literacy development in preparation for challenging high school curriculums. Reading at a high level of proficiency is essential for success both in school and beyond. Whether the subject is science, math, history, or civics, reading with understanding is central to learning. The consequences of reading failure in the upper grades are devastating. For individual students, reading failure too often means either dropping out of high school, or entering college or the workforce under-prepared.

While the recent focus on intervention has been encouraging, we need to move past intervention “1.0” to a more sophisticated, differentiated and *accelerated* method of delivering the right treatment to the right students at the right time. Technology can and should be harnessed as an effective delivery vehicle in this effort.

NECESSARY RESOURCES

Adaptive Technology

Literacy in the 21st century demands that students develop skills that will facilitate their use of technology – an important tool for learning and accessing information and the medium of children born today. But technology itself can be a “force multiplier” in literacy teaching and learning, capable of accomplishing what even the most skilled teacher cannot: one-to-one instruction tailored to identified-student needs. Technology can support achievement by providing students with brain-based practices, personalization and engagement. It can also provide instructors, parents, caregivers and children themselves with easy access to data on students’ learning and strategies that link to growth.

Books

Critical to a comprehensive 21st century literacy plan is access to text. Environments where children live, learn and play, must provide access to books, a medium for which there is no substitute. Students across all income levels must have the opportunity to practice and develop the habits of minds of good readers. They must read texts that are meaningful and significant to their lives in order to build a textual lineage, and the texts must be leveled and age-appropriate.

Accountability and Formative Assessments

The power of accountability is evident by the spotlight that now shines on students who are in greatest need of intensive assistance — those whose struggles in years past were often hidden by assessments of progress based on school system performance rather than individual performance. Student-centered accountability and assessment:

- Creates a sense of urgency in the school, the district, and the country about the need to take intensive action to prevent students from dropping out of school and to make college attainable.
- Informs teachers of what skills students are mastering and which they have not. This allows teachers to effectively differentiate instruction and builds efficiency into educational delivery systems, pinpointing exactly what students need and eliminating wasted instructional time on what they do not.
- Provides the student and their family with access to this information, which serves as a powerful motivator for learning and engages families in their children’s educations.

**Professional Development**

Teachers must have access to the professional development that enables them to teach the fundamentals of reading and writing in the early grades; incorporate 21st century literacy skills across the content areas in middle and high school; and intervene when students at any level are struggling to read and to learn.

Informal Learning Times and Places

Quality student learning can also take place beyond the traditional classroom at home and in communities. It is critical not only for struggling readers to have extended periods of time in school for literacy development but for all students to achieve a level of literacy that equips them for the Information Age. In addition to schools, service providers committed to making a positive impact on children's lives can be found across the nation in after school programs, libraries, child welfare systems, and juvenile justice systems. These community-based programs and institutions can expand the walls of the classroom by implementing effective, research-based practices that aid in the development of children's literacy skills. Along with families, these systems must be encouraged to create literacy-rich environments for children.