

Read Is a R



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Step-by-step guidance to promote literacy as a matter of social justice

BY STEPHEN PETERS

Reading is an issue of social justice that tops the list of 10 fundamental human rights, according to the International Literacy Association (ILA). The right to read means giving each student the capability to access information that can allow them to reach their fullest potential.

Classroom learning isn't perfect, and it continues to vary widely among communities based on racial, ethnic, and economic factors. But the rapid shift to distance learning instituted in the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic has heightened many of these disparities and put many students at risk of developing long-term disadvantages.

With the pandemic exacerbating inequities already present in K-8 education, the right to read is under threat for many students from historically disadvantaged communities and low-income backgrounds. Principal leadership sets the tone for how literacy is viewed across disciplines, and leaders must marshal their power to make effective literacy instruction the foundation of efforts to protect children's right to read.

ILA lists 10 tenets under that fundamental human right:

- 1. Children have the basic human right to read.** Principals can champion that right with the school board, asking members to sign a pledge to guarantee that right in your community, as well as display Children's Rights to Read posters in the school, library, and offices.
- 2. Children have the right to access texts in print and digital formats.** Connectivity is key to ensuring equity in access to texts. Without equal access to computer hardware, software applications, and the internet, some children will be at a disadvantage—especially now, with distance learning becoming an indispensable part of the school day.

3. Children have the right to choose what they read.

Freedom of choice encourages children to read more by allowing them to follow their interests. When children can unlock information about the things they care about through reading, their curiosity is rewarded with improved fluency.

4. Children have the right to read texts that mirror their experiences and languages, provide windows into the lives of others, and open doors into our diverse world.

The printed word is the original equity lens, and when children read about their cultures and those that differ, they can develop an appreciation for all expressions of the human experience. Stock school libraries and media centers with texts that represent the diversity of the school and the world.

5. Children have the right to read for pleasure.

While schools have a responsibility to help kids “crack the code” of reading, they should allow children to develop healthy attitudes toward reading by making it more than a chore or testing requirement.

6. Children have the right to supportive reading environments with knowledgeable literacy partners.

Ensure that your school hires qualified, knowledgeable literacy professionals, including teachers, literacy specialists and coaches, and librarians who can assist students with texts.

7. Children have the right to extended time set aside for reading.

Dedicate time in the school’s master schedule for independent reading, and designate dedicated reading-only spaces for students to prioritize their right to read.

8. Children have the right to share what they learn through reading by collaborating with others locally and globally.

Distance learning has blurred the boundaries of the school community during the pandemic—and that is not necessarily a bad thing. Create literacy projects that encourage kids to collaborate across town and around the world.

9. Children have the right to read as a springboard for other forms of communication, such as writing, speaking, and visually representing.

Literacy is the key to learning and expression. Extend reading instruction across disciplines to create students who can excel in a range of activities and professions.

10. Children have the right to benefit from the financial and material resources of governments, agencies, and organizations that support reading and reading instruction.

Tap every resource available to deliver quality reading instruction in your school, and make it a budget priority to bring reading resources to children and professional development opportunities to their instructors.

The Right of Instruction

Another ILA position statement, “Children’s Rights to Excellent Literacy Instruction,” outlines the ways in which schools must ensure that every child has access to the education and resources needed to learn to read. “Excellent literacy instruction builds a strong foundation for learning and, in turn, equips children to develop their potential, growing into adults who participate fully in their communities and society,” it says. To aid in this effort, schools must:

Ensure knowledgeable and qualified literacy educators. Teachers matter more to student achievement than any other school-related factor, but teachers and their students can’t be successful without the supports of other knowledgeable and qualified school personnel, such as principals, reading/literacy specialists, literacy coaches, and literacy coordinators.

Action item: Define a leadership structure that coaches, mentors, and supports teachers in the literacy curriculum of choice.

Ensure integrated support systems. Student learning depends on the successful alignment of a complex system of stakeholders working cooperatively to strengthen teaching and learning practices and knowledge-building frameworks.

Action item: Create support systems that include students, classroom teachers, reading/literacy specialists, school staff, school leaders, families and caregivers, volunteers, and community members.

Ensure supportive learning environments and high-quality resources. Accessible learning environments that provide robust, literacy-rich experiences, interactivity, and exploration of thought should be inclusive of teachers, students, families, and communities.

Action item: Educators must not only acknowledge social and cultural identities at local and global levels, but also audit their resources and practice to ensure they are bias-free, culturally responsive, and student-centered.

Ensure policies for equitable literacy instruction.

Nonacademic barriers to education, such as those that come in the form of poverty, physical health, mental health, and lack of social-emotional competencies, impede a child’s ability to learn.

Action item: Extra financial and educational supports must be provided to the children and families who need it the most, and it is the responsibility of policymakers to address these needs. Today, examples might include tablets and internet connectivity needed to access instruction remotely.

As a former teacher, principal, and superintendent, I've seen the impact literacy can have on students, schools, and districts firsthand. It is all too easy to lose sight of that goal in times like these, but it is our job—our responsibility—to keep that from happening.

—Stephen Peters, *ILA board*

Excellent literacy instruction builds a strong foundation for learning and, in turn, equips children to develop their potential. It allows them to grow into adults who participate completely in their communities and society, and enjoy the fullness that continuous learning brings to their lives. It is our collective responsibility to advocate for, ensure, and protect these rights for every child, everywhere.

Reading Through Crisis

We have entered a season of challenges to education and those responsible for its leadership. As I write this, districts and state departments of education are making decisions about what K-12 education will look like in the 2020-2021 school year—decisions that will impact your teachers, your staff, and your students, not to mention their families.

As a former teacher, principal, and superintendent, I've seen the impact literacy can have on students, schools, and districts firsthand. It is all too easy to lose sight of that in times like these, but it is our job—our responsibility—to keep that from happening.

As you navigate your way through these uncharted waters, I encourage you to embrace the principles outlined in *ILA's 2019 guide, "Advocating for Children's Rights to Read."* Seek partners in finding new ways to grant and guarantee these principles. Remember that even in our darkest times, getting the right book into the hands of the right child could change the trajectory of that child's life. ●

Stephen Peters is 2020-2021 president of the *ILA board*.

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