



Advocacy for All Readers

*Minnesota Reading Task Force
Legislative Efforts*

Up to 40% of 3rd grade students cannot read fluently...
Only 10% of these students can be classified as learning disabled...

What is being done about the problem?

John Alexander, Groves Head of School, has been instrumental in recent reading legislation passed in the state of Minnesota. View a compelling video about the efforts of Minnesota reading advocates and lawmakers to change the way reading is taught in our state: www.youtube.com/watch?v=YEQe6g6zFHY. (This video was independently produced and was not funded by Groves Academy.)

In December, 2006, John Alexander gave a talk about reading and the implications to individuals and to society if children do not learn to read. He highlighted that like the national statistics, almost 40% of Minnesota fourth graders do not read at a basic reading level and almost 70% do not read proficiently (with good comprehension). He also made a strong economic case for early identification and intervention with, students deemed to be at risk of reading failure based on a program he helped develop in California.

In the audience of almost 200, were a few State Representatives and Senators. Two of the Senators, DFLer Kathy Saltzman and Republican Gen Olson, pursued the topic of reading and initiated literacy hearings in the Senate Education Subcommittee. A number of people testified, including Alexander, and the Senators heard that children were not adequately prepared to learn to read largely because teachers were not adequately trained in colleges of education to teach reading.

The Executive Director of the Minnesota Board of Teaching, Karen Balmer, attended one of the hearings and asked the Senators if they would halt the hearings because a Reading Task Force had been commissioned by the Board of Teaching, the governmental board that licenses teachers. The Senators agreed to postpone the hearings as long as they could appoint representation on the Task Force. In January, 2007, Susan Thomson, a leader of Moms on a Mission—a grassroots reading advocacy group—and Alexander were appointed to the Task Force for what was supposed to be a one year commitment.

The charge of the Task Force was to review the licensure standards for any teacher who teaches reading in a Minnesota public school. There are five licensure categories involving reading and because of the critical nature of having students reading at grade level by fourth grade, Thomson and Alexander joined the Early Childhood and Elementary Licensure Committee.

What was supposed to have been a one year commitment turned into a three year responsibility largely because of differences of opinion between Alexander and Thomson and other members of the university professor-dominated task force. The professors on the committee disagreed that there was a problem with the way teacher candidates are trained to teach reading, and they would not agree with the new standards for licensure proposed by Thomson and Alexander. After a year of negotiation, it became clear that the process was not going to move forward, and Thomson and Alexander were prepared to offer a minority opinion to the Board of Teaching. To her credit, Karen Balmer, the facilitator of the Task Force, wanted a unanimous recommendation from the group so back to work the Task Force members went.

Both because Thomson and Alexander were in the minority opinion and because the Reading Task Force process was stalled, Senators Saltzman and Olson reopened the literacy hearings during the 2008 legislative session. At these hearings, parents, public school teachers, and students provided strong testimony that students were not learning to read because teachers were not adequately prepared by institutions of higher education to teach reading.

The testimony was so powerful that Saltzman and Olson, with strong support from local and national reading experts and advocacy from the growing advocacy group, Moms on a Mission, wrote a literacy bill that was introduced in both the Senate and the House during the 2008 legislative session. While there was strong support in the Senate for the bill and it passed, higher education and the teachers union were able to block the bill in the House.

The literacy bill's legislative success in the Senate gave Thomson and Alexander momentum within the Reading Task Force. By the end of 2008, the professors on the Task Force had agreed to most of the recommendations made by Thomson and Alexander. The literacy bill was reintroduced during the 2009 legislative session with deep involvement of local and national reading experts. Strong lobbying by Moms on a Mission, teamed with experienced MN teachers, commenced. The result of these efforts was the passing of the literacy bill in both the House and the Senate, and the Governor's signing the bill into law. In short, the bill requires that scientifically-based reading instruction is used in the classroom and that new teaching candidates pass an assessment that reflects scientifically-based reading instruction. The bill's becoming law also ensured that Thomson's and Alexander's recommendations to the Reading Task Force were not only heard, but were ultimately accepted by the Task Force and unanimously approved by the entire Board of Teaching.

As a result of the work done by The Reading Task Force and because of the new literacy law, teacher candidates in early childhood and elementary school will have to pass a new state assessment that tests their knowledge of the new reading standards. This should mean better prepared new teachers. Unfortunately, the teachers' union blocked teachers with existing licenses from needing to pass this same assessment. We are concerned that new teachers going to schools for their first teaching jobs will be overrun by misguided teaching practices in their new schools. Our work now focuses on making sure that districts implement scientifically-based reading instruction for all students and that all teachers be given the professional development required to ensure that our children become proficient readers. This is a big task but there is growing momentum within the community for addressing the issue.

For more information on Groves Outreach programming and advocacy, visit www.grovesacademy.org.

The International Dyslexia Association recently released a publication outlining the steps to enacting state literacy law. Information can be found at www.state-literacy-law.org.

Questions?
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