Literacy Is Necessary, But Neglected, Component of Competitiveness Agenda

Recently, much attention has been focused on how to maintain our nation’s competitiveness in the New World marketplace. Countries, including China and India, threaten to overshadow the United States (U.S.) as new economic leaders, and the search for “home-grown” researchers, scientists, and engineers, we are told, is the answer to maintaining our economic edge. Despite the best efforts of educators, the declining academic performance of American students is reason for concern. The number of U.S. students pursuing science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) careers is one signal that we need to do more to encourage our students to pursue—and help our schools to provide—more engaging and rigorous coursework in these fields.

But focus and support for STEM initiatives alone is not enough. While the very important task of improving the overall rigor of math and science programs is vital, and encouraging students to enter highly competitive STEM fields is necessary to national economic security and national security itself, we must also ensure that we have a literate population. Literacy is the critical foundation that supports all other learning. Without literacy, there is little hope that students will do well in other subject areas or have the necessary skills to pursue STEM careers, not to mention pursuit of their own personal goals and aspirations.

Just over two years ago, NAESP and NASSP created a list of priorities we believe are necessary to support a comprehensive pre-K–12 literacy agenda. We have made some progress, but more needs to be done. A critical missing component is support of adolescent literacy programs. Results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) indicate that the transition from elementary to middle school is where the U.S. begins to lose ground with respect to literacy. In fact, research is beginning to show that the dropouts of later. Consider the following research findings:

- Estimated annual loss of federal and state income taxes exceeds $50 billion for all U.S. high school dropouts aged 20-67.
- A 1 percent increase in the male high school graduation rate would save as much as $1.4 billion dollars per year in reduced costs from crime.
- A 10 percent increase in graduation rates would reduce murder and assault by 20 percent, car theft by 13 percent, and arson by 8 percent.
- Converting high school dropouts to high school graduates would save between $7.9 billion to $10.8 billion annually in TANF, Food Stamps, and Housing Assistance.
- High school dropouts have higher rates of heart disease, diabetes, and other ailments. They require an average of $35,000 in annual health-care costs, compared with $15,000 for college graduates.
- Improving the achievement levels of all 600,000 high school dropouts in 2004 by one grade would save $41.8 billion in health-related costs.
- 75 percent of America’s state prison inmates are high school dropouts.

Congress has made a good initial investment in early childhood literacy development with the Early Reading First and Reading First programs—funding for these programs must continue—and test scores indicate we have made gains as a result. But data reveals that grade-level literacy proficiency dramatically trends downward as students move from elementary to middle school. It becomes apparent that we must do more to help struggling adolescents learn how to read and comprehend at higher levels of proficiency. Literacy for adolescents means not only identifying and comprehending words on the page, but reading at a level of sophistication that allows them to make references, draw conclusions, and apply new knowledge to problem-solving situations.

Congress provided just under $30 million for the Striving Readers program last year to fund eight local grants addressing adolescent literacy. With a focus on schoolwide programs, intensive targeted intervention for struggling readers, and professional development for all teachers in a school—not just reading and writing teachers—this program has the potential to show results. But Striving Readers funding barely addresses the need. National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) results indicate that 15 million students are at risk because they cannot read and write at grade level. NAESP and NASSP support President Bush’s request for an additional $70 million (a total of $100 million) for Striving Readers this year.

In response to the need, NAESP and NASSP have provided resources to school leaders to help them implement effective adolescent literacy programs. NAESP’s The Literacy Principal and NASSP’s Creating A Culture of Literacy guide school leaders on the best literacy practices required to create well-defined intervention plans that not only will improve the literacy of all students, but also the long-range academic success of students. We need Congress to provide the funding that will support these efforts. The International Reading Association provides a succinct and compelling reason to support pre-K–12 literacy instruction:

Adolescents entering the adult world in the 21st century will read and write more than at any other time in human history. They will need advanced levels of literacy to perform their jobs, run their households, act as citizens, and conduct their personal lives. They will need literacy to cope with the flood of information they will find everywhere they turn. They will need literacy to feed their imaginations so they can create the world of the future. In a complex and sometimes even dangerous world, their ability to read will be crucial. Continued instruction beyond the early grades is needed.

Congress and the president are appropriately focusing on the skills that students will need in the new era of globalization. An important part of that agenda includes an assurance that all students are equipped with the literacy skills required to function as productive citizens. NAESP and NASSP agree that support of STEM education is important. We also support an equal effort to improve literacy skills for all students pre-K–12 if we are to maintain our economic standing, prepare our nation’s students for the rapidly changing world of tomorrow, and enhance their future quality of life.