

Wisconsin State Reading Association and Literacy Issues: Setting the Record Straight

Improving literacy for Wisconsin students is not a simplistic task and it has, and continues to be, the mission of the Wisconsin State Reading Association (WSRA). There are those in Wisconsin who mischaracterize who the WSRA is, what we represent, and our stand on literacy issues. In fact, some who misinterpret and mischaracterize the WSRA have called for a war against our organization and use both inflammatory language to describe their efforts and inaccurate statements. The purpose of this document is to set the record straight about who the WSRA is, what our mission is, clarify misconceptions about issues, and understand who these people are that mischaracterize us.

The Wisconsin State Reading Association is a professional organization that averages numbers close to 3000 members. Our members include classroom teachers, reading specialists, reading teachers, literacy coaches, administrators, university professors and various other education professionals.

Myth #1: The reading field is a “war” split between two ways of teaching reading, whole language versus phonics.

Fact: The teaching of reading is a complex process that requires the development of many skills and strategies including the ability to use letter/sound knowledge to figure out unknown words (phonics). Sometimes this “war” is characterized as guessing words versus phonics. This is an exceptionally simplistic view of the teaching of reading and is an argument that is more than twenty years old. This simplistic view negates the depth and breadth of the field including the critical and central role that comprehension plays as well as vocabulary instruction, the role that oral language and writing play in learning to read, and why motivation and background knowledge are critical factors. Understanding the comprehensive nature of teaching students to read is fundamental to student success.

In addition, the WSRA denounces the inflammatory language used to describe those, such as WSRA members, who do not share a limited view of reading. These literacy professionals have been described with language such as “love children of the IRA,” not “normal thoughtful people,” “insane,” “weird,” “moronic,” and critics have been encouraged to “paint them as lunatics.” Critics have also encouraged the “war” with language that includes “begin the battle,” “be unfavorable to your adversaries,” “death blow,” and “once we massacre them.” Instead, the WSRA supports and encourages engaging in professional and productive discourse that will result in collaborative efforts to promote student literacy achievement.

Myth #2: The Wisconsin State Reading Association does not support the teaching of phonics.

Fact: The Wisconsin State Reading Association advocates for the teaching of phonics. Teaching phonics is an important aspect of beginning reading instruction and needs to be developed in the context of a complete reading and language arts program. Instead of debating whether phonics should be taught, effective teachers of reading and writing ask when, how, how much, and under what circumstances phonics should be taught.

Myth #3: The Wisconsin State Reading Association’s approach to reading education is not supported by scientific research.

Fact: The field of reading has been extensively researched and contemporary research is continuously adding new information to the field. The WSRA has always promoted the importance of the role that research plays in understanding the teaching of reading. The complexity and comprehensive nature of reading instruction requires awareness and understanding of how the vast areas of research inform our thinking and practices. While some want to suggest that only certain kinds of research should be valued in the field of reading, most experts agree that there are a variety of questions that need to be researched. This requires choosing from multiple research methods.

To privilege one type of research is to exclude the possibility of discovering information that would be valuable in the teaching of reading.

Myth #4: The essence of reading is how to handle printed words the student doesn't recognize.

Fact: This narrow definition of the “essence of reading” ignores the complexity of the reading process as supported by a wealth of research in both the fields of psychology and literacy education. Experts believe that the “essence of reading” is understanding what one is reading, reading comprehension. Proficiency in reading, as measured by tests such as the NAEP, focuses on the reader’s understanding of text. Strong reading comprehension, figuring out what the author has written, making sense of what has been read, and interpretation, is central to both academic and professional success and leading a productive social and civil life.

While the ability to decode words is critical to comprehension, it is woefully inadequate for becoming a proficient, literate individual. To focus exclusively on the question of what a reader does when encountering an unknown word severely limits a discussion that also needs to explore the role of other factors – vocabulary and language skills, broad conceptual knowledge, knowledge and abilities to specifically comprehend texts, thinking and reasoning skills, and motivation.

Myth #5: The Wisconsin State Reading Association advocates for the status quo.

Fact: The WSRA believes and research strongly supports the fact that teacher expertise is the most important factor in improving student achievement as repeatedly stated on Governor Walker’s Read to Lead Task Force. We strongly advocate for changes in state policy that are designed to improve teacher quality and strongly advocated for these changes on the task force:

- Strengthening teacher education requirements both for new and continuing teachers.
- Improving literacy background for administrators and principals.
- Making sure every school district has a licensed reading specialist as required by law.

Myth #6: The Wisconsin Reading Coalition and the Wisconsin Branch of the International Dyslexia Association are two separate organizations.

Fact: As described in the Summer 2011 newsletter by Marilyn O’Conner, President of the Illinois Society of the International Dyslexia Association, the two organizations are one and the same.

What is in a name? It is being discussed that the name International Dyslexia Association is not perhaps the name that clearly defines who we are and what we do, and in some cases the term Dyslexia can be viewed as a negative and actually work against us. All this has been being discussed among the Branches and with the IDA Board of Directors. Some Branches have found that the term Dyslexia is one that in some respects hampers their ability to work within their state. In Wisconsin for example they found that school Districts were unlikely to work with them as Wisconsin Branch of the IDA and so they are now the Wisconsin Reading Coalition. With their new name new doors were opened and they are now able to work to bring much needed change to some failing schools. Though the process is slow they found that at least with the name change they were able to gain entry into the schools which before were closed to their organization.

