

Implementing Law and Policy to Support Literacy and Reading Proficiency

Jill Krueger, J.D.

Reading and Health: What's the Connection?

Education has been identified as a social determinant of health. Disparities begin early in life, as children in households with lower incomes or lower educational attainment often experience a “word gap” in the number and variety of words they hear, and may have limited access to books. This matters because reading proficiency is a foundation of educational success. Two Healthy People 2020 objectives are increasing the proportion of parents who read to their young children and the proportion of 3rd/4th grade students who are proficient readers. These measures illustrate that education takes place in early childhood, as well as after a child begins school. Many fine programs promote early literacy-building activities, increase access to books, and offer reading instruction.

The Role of Law

This research focused on legal and policy interventions to support literacy and reading proficiency. The law provides tools to improve health by addressing physical health, the built environment, and social and economic factors that affect health outcomes at the population level.

The 2015 federal education law, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), provides some federal funding for elementary and secondary education and accountability for student outcomes. The Act recognizes that state and local governments have considerable authority with respect to education, including literacy and reading proficiency.

This document was developed by Jill Krueger, J.D., Director at the Network for Public Health Law—Northern Region. A version was first presented at the 2017 American Public Health Association Annual Meeting. The author may be contacted at 952-452-9705 or jkrueger@networkforphl.org. Support for The Network is provided by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The information contained in this document does not constitute legal advice or legal representation. For legal advice, please consult legal counsel.



Federal Law and Policy

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Provisions Include:

Literacy Education for All, Results for a Nation (LEARN):

Provides grants to states to develop comprehensive literacy instruction plans and to support implementation of high quality comprehensive literacy instruction for low-income children at the local level.

Specialized Instructional Support Services: Encourages consultation with school librarians, school nurses, and school counselors about efforts to provide a well-rounded education and improve school climate and conditions for learning.

Coordination with Early Childhood Education: Requires coordination with Head Start where applicable.

Other Federal Approaches:

WIC: Grant to Georgia’s Talk with Me Baby initiative in which WIC staff support parents to nurture language development.

Book Rich Environment Initiative: Public-private partnership to provide books in HUD-assisted housing.

State and Local Approaches

State and local laws have renewed importance under ESSA. Here are some sample approaches:

Vision and Hearing Screening (EPSDT): By negotiating contracts with Medicaid Managed Care Organizations, some states have increased access to early vision and hearing screening and treatment.

Free Glasses: The Baltimore Health Department is providing free glasses to students who need them.

Water Availability: Dehydration is associated with decreased cognition. Providing safe water sources in school hallways and cafeterias promotes learning.

Overdue Fines: Accumulated fines can deter children from using the public library. A growing number of public libraries have eliminated or reduced overdue fines for children’s books.

Socioeconomic Integration: Nearly 100 school districts and charter schools across the country use socioeconomic status as a factor in student assignment, through policies such as attendance zone boundaries and magnet schools.

School/Library Partnerships: School and public libraries can pool resources to achieve shared goals. Nashville Limitless Libraries shared part of the public library collection with local public schools and increased circulation.

Social Emotional Learning and Trauma-Informed Education: Help students develop resilience and coping skills to deal with adverse childhood experiences, thus enabling them to focus on academic learning.

Retention at Grade Level: Some states require retention of students who are not reading proficiently at the end of 3rd grade, but allow promotion to 4th grade under specified circumstances. Retention laws may incorporate additional teacher training in reading instruction.