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**STATEMENT ON THE NATION'S REPORT CARD:  
*NAEP 2009 Reading***

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I've been a teacher for 29 years, and 24 of them were spent in a fourth grade classroom. So today's results, which showed that average reading scores for our nation's fourth graders remain unchanged from 2007, deeply resonated with me.

The results got me thinking first about what affects a student's ability to learn and master reading, and what instructional methods make the deepest impact in reading comprehension and skill. My school district in Toledo, Ohio, has a reading academy through which several district educators—who went through a special training program operated by the American Federation of Teachers—teach strategies to other instructors that aim to improve students' reading skills, vocabulary, and comprehension.

The academy incorporates, among other things, five components first established by the National Reading Panel. The first component is phonemic awareness, which is being sensitive to speech sounds and includes the ability to recognize how many words are in a sentence and the number of syllables in a word. Second, there's phonics, which is all about the sound/symbol relationship of our language. The third component is reading fluency, which refers to the ability to read accurately and at a minimal rate, with expression and understanding. And then there are the last two components—vocabulary and comprehension—essential reading components that students need throughout their lives.

And even within that, there are three tiers of instruction: whole class, small group work, and independent practice. In this age of accountability, instruction is data-driven. Therefore, practicing strategies for these five components and three tiers of instruction can make a positive impact on all learners. Without effective instructional strategies, we won't be able to challenge our students enough.

I would like to give several specific examples from a fourth grade reading passage that appeared on the 2009 Assessment. The passage is titled "What's the Buzz," and it is an informational article about bees and why they are important. Students were generally able to locate information in this passage and to make simple inferences about what they had read. This is illustrated by a sample question that asks students to identify one way stingless bees gather pollen. On this item, 62 percent answered correctly.

But when students were asked to answer more challenging questions, they did not perform as well. In the question on page 23 of the Report Card, students were asked to explain why bees are important to plants and animals and to support their answer with information from the article. Only 20 percent received the highest score on their written responses. More students at all grade levels need to master these important, complex types of reading skills and strategies, since these are essential as students read to learn in science, social studies, and other subject areas.

For the last year or so, I've been on special assignment away from regular classroom instruction and have served as an education technology trainer for my school district. In this position, I help teachers in various schools integrate technology into their lessons and classroom projects. Working in different environments every day has exposed me to various classroom techniques to improve reading among students of various backgrounds.

An important factor involved in academic success, especially when it comes to reading, is a student's life experience. And I think this is sorely underplayed. Some students likely struggle, in part, because they read stories and encounter words that aren't part of their everyday environment. So it's not a question of innate ability, but rather limited exposure that makes it hard to grasp certain ideas.

So it behooves educators to figure out ways to make our students more engaged in reading, and to try to make connections between their everyday realities and the larger world. Are there things in students' lives that educators can tie to stories and words, thus expanding vocabulary and general understanding of concepts? Are we taking passages and asking students probing questions to elicit detailed responses? Do we have the goal of encouraging younger and older students to be critical thinkers in every subject? Are we linking subjects and projects together and seeing how building strengths in one area spills over into other areas?

The data from the NAEP Reading Assessment certainly sheds light on this last question. In 2009, fourth graders who wrote about what they read once or more a week scored 7 points higher than their peers who did not write about what they read. And eighth graders who did two to three projects about what they read scored better than their peers who never did any projects related to their reading. This gap was larger in 2009 than in 2007, increasing from 2 points to 5 points.

The phrase "reading is fundamental" may be something of a cliché, but it's a hard and fast truth. Students who don't master all the facets of reading will have a difficult time in other subjects. I'm delighted that our new Reading Framework, which guided this report, is introducing students to more challenging material, including poetry for fourth graders. But both educators and students need to be challenged when it comes to reading. It is far too important to our children's future.