



4-1-1979

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### Recommended Citation

Searfoss, Lyndon W. (1979) "Student rights and the reading program," *Educational Considerations*: Vol. 6: No. 3. <https://doi.org/10.4148/0146-9282.1941>

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**Students have the right to be the focal point as reading programs are planned, organized and evaluated.**

# Student rights and the reading program

by Lyndon W. Searfoss

As curriculum specialists formulate reading programs for students in elementary and secondary schools they generally try to incorporate student needs as the central core around which programs are organized. Some kind of formal or informal assessment or surveying of student needs is often done. This data is then analyzed and used to plan reading programs. As curriculum specialists consider student **needs** they are also considering student **rights** which are inexorably, yet often unknowingly, tied to student needs. A **need** is defined as a condition in which something is found to be required or wanted, i.e. there is a lack of something necessary or desirable. A **right** is defined as something which may be claimed on just, moral, legal or customary grounds, i.e. there is an established claim to something.

The obvious difference in meaning between the terms **need** and **right** comes into clearer focus when curriculum specialists begin to discuss them in relation to educational planning. A **need** is discovered for students through assessment or surveying by others, usually those charged with planning educational programs. Needs are often portrayed as mysteriously hidden until discovered for the students by others. This type of thinking has led us to ignore a pre-existing condition to needs assessment: the inherent, granted rights that students have which do not require discovering or assessing. Rights exist whether we choose to consider them or not.

The whole issue of student rights and the reading program aroused the author's interest during the summer of 1978 when he taught a graduate seminar at Kansas State University on organizing reading programs. As the class discussed the bases upon which good reading programs are developed, a publication of the International Reading Association devoted to reading and the law triggered much debate over the issue of student rights (see **References**).

Criteria for developing programs were collected from

local, state, federal, and professional reading organizations. Nothing could be found which stated clearly and succinctly what rights students have as reading programs are planned for them. After much discussion, reading, and searching the class devised the following list of student rights.

**1. Students have the right to a comprehensive reading program which has been professionally planned and organized.**

This right mandates that any reading program within a school be planned school-wide, not piecemeal. If a district reading program is being developed, then it must be planned with all grade levels incorporated, kindergarten through grade twelve. Elementary, junior and senior high programs must exist as an integrated, coordinated program with each component existing as part of the whole.

**2. Students have the right to be taught by personnel trained in reading education.**

Colleges and universities need to carefully examine requirements for admission to teacher preparation programs and courses required to meet basic certification in reading education. Some suggested changes in current teacher preparation practices are:

- admission based on personal interviews as well as test scores.
- admission would be probationary until completion of an intensive observation/internship program under tutorial supervision in public schools by college or university and school personnel.
- establishment of specific criteria to identify applicants who do and do not appear suited for a career in teaching during the observation/internship program.
- counseling and career guidance would accompany the observation/internship program.
- students would be moved from probationary to regular admission status upon completion of the observation/internship program.

The observation/internship program would aid students in selecting which type of teaching career might be the most rewarding. It could also function to prevent certification requirements and tenure laws as our only quality control on teachers.

**3. Students have the right to an environment for learning to read which meets their physical, emotional, and intellectual needs by providing:**

- a) **Acceptance**
- b) **Development of positive self-concept**
- c) **Success**

Although this right sounds a bit trite, an examination of reading programs often reveals that mechanistic approaches and systems have become increasingly popular, with the role of the teacher reduced to that of a manager of classroom instruction. The teacher must view reading as a dynamic communication process and children as users or consumers of that process as a tool to manipulate their world. Such a view necessitates a classroom reading environment where more than learning to read is being stressed. It requires an environment where the teacher understands as much as possible (given the current state of the art) that reading is not a science but a tool and children are learners, eager to use that tool.

**4. Students have the right to participate as actively as they can in the planning, organization, and evaluation of their reading program.**

Curriculum builders and reading specialists who plan programs for students must begin to plan programs with students. A reading program developed during the summer by a faculty committee or during the school year by a consultant ignores the right students have to participate in the development of reading programs designed for them.

**5. Students have the right to a reading program which views reading as a:**

- a) Functional, social survival tool
- b) Communication tool for gathering information
- c) Recreational activity

Such a definition of reading lifts reading from a skills mastery process to its proper role as an active, dynamic communication tool. Teacher preparation programs which include courses and experiences in basic principles of language, cognition, psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics will provide preservice teachers with the knowledge necessary to teach reading as a communication tool. Most of our current teacher preparation programs fall short in these areas.

**6. Students have the right to knowledge of their reading ability, including strengths and weaknesses in reading skills and strategies.**

This right is one of the most violated of all the rights students possess. We simply do not make our students aware of why we are doing to them what we are doing to them in the name of learning to read. Lesson plans developed by the teacher, with information available only to the teacher and gleaned from testing and observation may be completely meaningless to students. If students knew their strengths and weaknesses, then perhaps they could be involved in setting goals and objectives with the teacher and thus see the purpose for reading instruction, a basic prerequisite to effective learning.

**7. Students have the right to know their responsibilities in meeting the goals of their reading program.**

Involvement in the planning, organization and evaluation of the reading program as mentioned earlier also requires students sharing in the responsibilities for its success. Rights assume responsibility. Students have the right to know what they must do, day-by-day, in order to learn to read. If students are active participants in the reading program, getting them to assume their responsibilities for its success would be more easily accomplished.

**8. Students have the right to appropriate diagnosis, both immediate and long term, of their reading strengths and weaknesses using reliable and valid instruments.**

The reading program should provide valid and reliable, formal and informal assessment instruments to measure student progress in reading. Teachers with a solid foundation in testing and measurement will use these instruments as guides and not eternal truth. Without this foundation teachers can become slaves to test manuals, written by the publishers and authors who wish to sell their product. The buyer beware . . . seems to be the message. So buyers (teachers) must be trained and prepared to protect the consumer (students).

**9. Students have the right for assistance from other specialists when it becomes apparent their reading problems may be caused, in part, by factors other than educational.**

Referral mechanisms through which students can receive help from psychologists, speech therapists, social workers, and counselors should be part of every reading program. It is often the special reading teacher who first detects the need for assistance from other professionals.

**10. Students have the right to sensitive and flexible placement in appropriate short term or longer term remedial programs when necessary.**

Corrective and remedial instruction should be a part of every comprehensive reading program. This compensatory component, however, must be coordinated with classroom instruction and not viewed as a replacement for regular classroom instruction. The tendency for classroom and compensatory instruction to become separate and uncoordinated can be avoided if compensatory instruction is carefully monitored to be certain it is supportive of the core reading program of the classroom.

### Summary

Reading programs should be designed to provide a broad range of learning experiences that are motivating, relevant, enjoyable, student-centered, and which consider student rights. Students have the right to be the focal point as reading programs are planned, organized and evaluated. This and other student rights are not granted, but are rights to which students are entitled. We, as educators, must become both legally and morally more sensitive to the rights of our students.

### References

- Harper, R.J. and Kilarr, G., editors. **Reading and the Law.** Newark, Delaware: International Reading Association, 1978.

The author expresses his gratitude to the members of a class in organizing reading programs taught at Kansas State University during the summer of 1978. They were a remarkable group of sensitive and competent teachers whose concern for quality education helped bring this paper from a vague class discussion to its present form: Shari Heerman, Shirley Hopkins, Jim Karasiewicz, Dottie Noyce, Dan Plummer, Elizabeth Pollock, Jean Radtke, Ardella Schmidt and Mary Shoop.