

Make Independent Reading First Priority

by Regie Routman

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An excerpt from her upcoming book: *Literacy Essentials: Engagement, Excellence, and Equity for All Learners*. (Stenhouse, 2017)

One of my most popular tweets ever was this one: “Make daily indep reading #1 priority & work backwards from there. Use think aloud, guided read, shared read to support that end.”

Despite the fact that most of us do know that wide, self-selected reading is a necessity for becoming a reader, we don't routinely put that knowledge into daily practice in our schools. We understandably get sidetracked and overwhelmed by mandated programs, standards and assessments, curriculum requirements, guided reading groups, test prep, skills work, and more. It's no wonder sustained time for reading is so often first to go when we are pressed for time.

And yet. Our students will only become fluent, comprehending readers who develop deep engagement, stamina, competence, vocabulary, content knowledge, and self-monitoring abilities if and when we prioritize free choice, independent reading every day. That is, one of our core reading beliefs must be that uninterrupted—mostly self-selected—reading is a necessity for becoming a reader. Then we must put that belief into daily practice by allotting a minimum of 20-40 minutes a day for it, depending on the age and growing stamina of our students. I worry that reading enjoyment and getting lost

in a book are not seen as worthy school goals. We must work to change that. As well, kids today spend so much time “reading” their phones via Facebook, Twitter and countless apps, we need to make sustained, deep reading a regular part of daily school life.

Children who become great readers read voraciously. As teachers and parents, we need to be careful not to derail kids' curiosity and interests with early restrictions. With freedom of choice and our gentle guidance, our students do eventually move towards higher ground in reading. I believe it's because I spent so many years reading “lesser fare” through my teenage years—comic books and low-brow popular series—that today I gravitate towards very well-written fiction and nonfiction. My own experience has led me to encourage teachers and parents to let kids choose to read any genre or form that interests them, whether it is comic books, graphic novels or online texts. At the same time, we want to continue to read aloud great literature regardless of the child's age and to make engaging books readily available.

Easy access to interesting books and time to read them in schools are a necessity, especially for children from low-income families who may not own many books or have access to a neighborhood public library. Evidence

suggests that most U.S. high school graduates today lack the reading proficiency necessary to meet the challenges of higher education and the workplace. (Spichtig, Hiebert, and others. 2016.) While increasing poverty of school children is seen as one probable cause, I would humbly suggest that another might be that time for voluntary reading becomes increasingly scarce as students go through the grades. You can't get good at reading if you don't read.

A caution here. Just setting aside time each day for students to read may be fine for some students, but almost all need and benefit from having us do some monitoring of their reading to ensure they comprehend, self-correct, self-direct, set reasonable goals, and enjoy the books they are choosing to read. I also believe independent reading time must include—as needed—teaching and coaching on book selection, applying word-solving and comprehension strategies, and discussing and analyzing the text. Most of that monitoring and feedback occurs during reading conferences. (See Rely on one-on-one reading conferences, in this book.)

Independent reading works well when students:

- have easy access to a wide range of interesting texts
- know how to choose books they can read and understand
- have sustained time and opportunity to read and talk about books
- confer with the teacher to ensure understanding and enjoyment are occurring
- receive useful, actionable feedback for how they are doing as readers

TAKE ACTION

◆ Learn from expert teachers who get students to love reading. Educators such as Donalyn Miller, Teri Lesesne, Franki Sibberson, Nancie Atwell, Kelly Gallagher, Penny Kittle, Laura Robb and others have done groundbreaking work in getting kids to read by ensuring engaging books are easily available and accessible. See their websites for their publications and blogs; connect with them through Twitter and Facebook. Soak up and apply their good ideas. For one excellent example of a blog with some of their ideas, see “6 Simple Ideas to Get Kids to Read.” (Ripp, 2015)

◆ Make few requirements. If we want students to read and love to read, let's not mandate number of minutes to read each night, recording number of pages read, and/or extensive written responses. Our responsible intentions can backfire by undermining desire to read. Keep in mind that as kids go through the grades, recreational reading declines. Make reading logs voluntary. I have students keep a reading history, similar to what I do. See one page from my reading record in this book.

◆ Put into practice the research on libraries and becoming a reader. The quality of the school library is positively connected to literacy development. “Research also suggests that access to a good school library can offset, to a large extent, the negative impact of poverty on reading achievement.” (Krashen, June 2016.) As well, my teacher-research over many decades confirms that outstanding classroom libraries, established with students for easy access, choice, and student interest increases the amount and variety of reading students do.

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◆ **Assess our classroom libraries.** Whether we teach elementary, middle, or high school, I believe books need to be prominently displayed in our classrooms with most book covers facing out and a comfortable, inviting environment that advertises “We love to read.” Self-check. Are the books in our libraries captivating, culturally relevant, titles and genres that will appeal to all types of readers? Are they organized with students with consideration for access and choice for all? Does the collection respect and honor students’ preferences, interests, language skills, and reading abilities? Do we have sufficient titles for second language learners, for example, some bilingual books and books in Spanish? Is the collection well balanced between fiction and nonfiction genres? Is the sign out process easily manageable by students?

◆ **Teach students how to select “just right” books.** I strongly believe the classroom and school libraries need to be organized like our public libraries, that is, we

don’t level books or limit student choice. At the same time, we need to ensure students are choosing books they can read and understand and that these are plentiful. Too often, developing readers and readers who struggle cannot find books easy enough for them to read. In teaching students to choose books they can read, apply the optimal learning model and show and think aloud how to select a book where the reader can read at least 95% of the words and can tell someone what the book is about. Ensure students grasp that reading is about understanding, not just decoding and fluency. Be flexible about what makes a book “just right” for a reader. For example, a book that is a bit challenging might work if the child’s background knowledge and motivation are very strong,

◆ **Get to know our students’ preferences.** Early in the school year, informally survey students for their reading histories, interests, and preferences. For reluctant readers who often have difficulty choosing a book, we may need to put a book in their hands and say something like, “I chose this just for you because I know you like. . .”

◆ **Adopt a mindset that values massive free reading.** This belief holds for students of all ages, and is particularly important for students who have not been successful early in their school careers. If we make interesting reading materials available and accessible and teach students how to read them, the child can “catch up” anytime (Krashen, May 2016); this statement also holds true for second language learners. “In other words, ‘once a good reader always a good reader.’ (Krashen and McQuillan, 1998). That means for some

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students, we may need to find out what their passions are and write the materials with them. A caution here: Students do have to know how to read independently before we have them self-selecting books and spending lots of time reading on their own. Otherwise, students can waste precious time as “fake readers,” holding the book in their hands and turning pages, but without any real understanding. Elementary teacher Trish Richardson guides book selection: “I have a set time for different groups of students to switch and pick up books. I often sit in the library and watch and guide the initial book selections. I also check in regularly with the students and their book selections to make sure they have balance.” (email, July 2016)

◆ **Value and promote audio texts.** Some students find it easier, at least occasionally, to follow a professionally narrated story when they can just listen without worrying about decoding or fluency—and some audiobooks can be adjusted for speed. Significantly, audio books can transform elementary through high school students who have struggled with reading into students who see themselves as readers, as they finally have access to the same engaging and high quality literature as their peers. Make iPods loaded with high interest books and headphones available during reading time. (Kowalski, 2016 for last two sentences) Try e-

readers such as Epic and Reading Rainbow that will read to students.

◆ **Be flexible with student choice.** Let’s not limit students’ selections to only what we deem appropriate. Teenagers love edgy books, some of which might not meet with our approval. Also, allow students the pleasure and freedom of reading more than one book at a time, at least some of the time. Years ago, I recall telling students they needed to finish one book before they could begin another. Yet that’s not what I do as a reader. In the past month, while writing this book, I’ve had three books going simultaneously and I’ve read each one for different purposes, at different parts of the day, and in different places. My available time, mood, purpose, and attentiveness as a reader determine which book I pick up.

◆ **Limit rewards.** Reading incentives such as special prizes are common for getting students to read more books or move to a higher level in a program. While these can be motivating in the short term, research has shown that in the long run such rewards work against students’ desire to read more and enjoy reading. (Marinak and Gambrell, 2016) Make sure reading is its own reward. Showcase favorite books in the classroom; promote book talk that students lead; allow more library visits; add compelling books that pique students’ interest and curiosity to school and classroom libraries;

encourage families to donate books to classroom and school libraries to celebrate special occasions and accomplishments and/or to show gratitude for their child's education.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Regie Routman has more than four decades of experience as a classroom teacher, mentor teacher, literacy coach, and leader. Currently, she works side by side with teachers and administrators in diverse, underperforming classrooms, schools and districts in the U. S. and Canada to increase and sustain reading and writing achievement for all learners. Her most recent book is *Read, Write, Lead: Breakthrough Strategies for Schoolwide Literacy Success* (ASCD, June 2014.) Her upcoming book is *Literacy Essentials: Engagement, Excellence, and Equity for ALL Learners* (Stenhouse, 2017). For full information on Regie's publications, PD offerings, blog and contact information, see www.regieroutman.org

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November 5, 2016
California Reading Association: PD Institute
Annual Conference
Visalia, CA (Fresno, nearest airport)
Literacy Essentials: Engagement, Excellence, and Equity for ALL Learners
Keynote

April 20-21, 2017
Literacy and Leadership Institute
Seattle, WA
Keynotes/Interactive workshops for school teams
Presenters: Regie Routman and Sandra Figueroa
See: <http://www.regieroutman.org/professional-development/literacy-and-leadership-institutes/>