

# CARE: Calls on DPI, schools, and parents to improve reading achievement and close gaps

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MADISON, WI - In a press conference at the State Capitol today, a group of Wisconsin parents, teachers, educators, administrators, school board members, and researchers raised an alarm about the low levels of reading skill among children in our state, and discussed solutions that have worked in other states to raise achievement for all students and close achievement gaps. They have formed a group, WI-CARE to call on the State Superintendent, DPI, parents, and educators to make resources available to teachers and schools, and make parents aware of the problems. The group is advocating for voluntary teacher training and other activities that require no mandates and no additional funding for schools.

The group included John Humphries, Superintendent of Schools in rural Thorp, Wisconsin, which has successfully used the Science of Reading. Humphries shared the distressing status of reading achievement in Wisconsin. "Wisconsin was once a leader in elementary education, with top-ten rankings in 4th grade reading until the early 2000's. Today, Wisconsin ranks 27th. We have the largest Black-White achievement gap of any state (39 points), a difference of almost 4 grade levels, even for children in

4th grade.” Humphries emphasized that this problem is not isolated to urban schools, saying, “Wisconsin’s white students rank 34th among white students across the nation, and significantly below their national average. The most advantaged white students (those who are not low-income and have no disabilities) rank 40th, with about 50% proficiency.”

Noted UW-Madison Neuroscientist and author of *Language at the Speed of Sight* Dr. Mark Seidenberg expressed concern over a recent statement by the State Superintendent endorsing phonics and committing to providing resources. “We are reaching out today and in the coming months to parents, educators, and leaders because we are concerned that DPI is not up to this task. DPI has done little to address literacy issues that have existed for decades. The agency’s unwillingness or inability to learn from the research and from other states that have successfully implemented the research has been the source of great frustration among many educators, advocates, and especially the thousands of parents whose children struggle with reading. The research is clear; we know the best ways to teach children to read. Wisconsin is simply not using them, and our children are suffering.” Seidenberg called for new state-level leadership to address these problems.

Retired reading specialist Donna Hejtmerek discussed teacher engagement. After training dozens of teachers in the last few years on the *Science of Reading*, she kept hearing frustration and anger that they didn’t get this information in college. “After hearing it so many times, last August I decided to start a group on Facebook called ‘*Science of Reading—What I Should Have Learned in College.*’ In six months, the group has grown to over 12,000 members world-wide. We are now adding one thousand new members each week. Clearly, there is a huge demand for this.” Hejtmerek called for

voluntary teacher training.

Dr. Kelly Thompson, Curriculum Director for the DC Everest School District near Wausau, shared her experience training hundreds of teachers in her district. She wondered whether teacher training programs could do a better job preparing new teachers for the classroom. Thompson stated, "Our elementary teachers shoulder a tremendous responsibility to provide our students with effective literacy instruction that will provide the foundation for all their future learning. We owe it to our teachers to empower them with this knowledge. Our students deserve nothing less." Thompson called for improved pre-service teacher preparation.

Thorp School Board member and parent Amy Penterman shared anecdotes about her children. "With my 5 year-old son, I am seeing much quicker development of language and vocabulary. I didn't realize it until a few months into the school year. I would say a word and my 5 year old would be figuring out what letter it starts with and sounding out the syllables. Then he started saying the alphabet with hand motions he learned at school, and knew all the letters and sounds they made. He was having fun with it too! I can really see a difference in the development of reading skills with the new approach." Penterman called for changes in the state report card system so parents have better information about the percent of students who are proficient readers. "Many schools that meet or exceed expectations on the DPI report card have less than 50% proficiency in reading. Parents can't act if they don't have accurate information."

Chan Stroman is an attorney; a pro bono reading tutor; and an advocate for educational equity, especially for Wisconsin's students of color and students with disabilities. Stroman has a vast knowledge of the many aspects of state and federal laws related to education and education reform, including the federal Every Student Succeeds Act

of  
2015. She said, “Some laws are there so that teachers, administrators, school board members, and the public can know which reading programs are in use in the most successful districts. Other laws are there so that high school students and other aspiring educators can find out which educator preparation programs have the most success teaching the Science of Reading as measured by the Foundations of Reading Test.” Stroman called on DPI to closely follow all state laws relevant to reading programming, including those to be identified in a recently proposed audit of DPI oversight on reading.

The Call to Action can be accessed on the group’s website [www.Wisconsin-CARE.org](http://www.Wisconsin-CARE.org)