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Minnesota educators, leaders, and policy makers,

In this letter, I respond to a recent statement by literacy faculty from Minnesota State University, Mankato, regarding the statewide discussions around the science of reading, current proposed literacy legislation, and policy efforts at the MN Department of Education. Although I am the dean of the College of Education and Human Development, I do not write this on behalf of my college or my employer, the University of Minnesota, but as an education scholar and Minnesotan. I am a member of the Design and Analysis Committee of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (since 2013) and I chair the Technical Advisory Group of the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards (since 2016). I am a recipient of the 2005 Harris Research Award from the International Reading Association. Perhaps most importantly, I received the 2022 *All My Relations Equity in Action Award* from the MN Education Equity Partnership, an organization I have worked with since 1990. I am a fifth generation Minnesotan and a first generation college graduate—a proud First-Gen Dean!

Unfortunately, the statement from the Mankato faculty included several incorrect points. For over two decades, I have worked with educators and school leaders from Thief River Falls to Albert Lea on improving assessment and data literacy. It is critical for educators and policy leaders, as well as families and community members, to understand what our young people know and can do, and how we know it.

The Mankato faculty stated:
- "The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) claims to release MCA 'test results' every year; however, test scores are never actually reported. Because of changes in the MCA and MTAS test, the MDE advises that year-to-year comparisons not be made. Instead, students' results are put into four arbitrary defined categories."

Actually, MDE reports two pieces of information:
- ✓ Scores: measurement of student performance against grade-level state academic standards
- ✓ Achievement levels: four levels of performance with standards-based descriptors that support criterion-referenced score interpretation relative to what students know and can do

Minnesota has one of the most advanced testing programs in the country and employs adaptive testing to improve precision of scores by reducing the use of test questions that are either way too hard or too easy for a given student. MDE classifies student scale scores into achievement levels (required by federal law), that were defined by Minnesota educators. MDE engaged in rigorous research-based standard setting processes to set cut-scores on each test associated with well-defined achievement levels, vis-à-vis academic standards. In fact, the achievement level descriptions are the best tools we have to make claims about what our students know and can do, not individual scaled scores. That process of identifying achievement levels across reading tests

involved over 100 MN teachers, with a slight majority from outside the Twin Cities area, including some with licensure in English as a Second Language and Special Education. Minnesotans defined the academic standards and the achievement level descriptors, and set the cut-scores associated with the achievement levels. These achievement levels reflect what we decided are important outcomes for all Minnesota students. This process was <u>not</u> arbitrary.

Is our state test and performance level reporting useful? Yes. Because of the high quality scaling and scale stability, we can report MCA scores over time and interpret trends <u>within</u> grade. However, each grade-level test is based on different content and academic standards—MCA scores cannot be compared <u>across</u> grades. But within each grade, schools rely on the stability of these scales not only to monitor trends, but to set targets and goals, and especially to monitor our success with students in different racial/ethnic groups, those in special education, and multilingual learners. Schools also receive subscores and benchmark reports, providing programmatically relevant information about standards-specific achievement, and where teachers could provide greater support to achieve state standards with all students. Although we cannot compare MCA-II scores to MCA-III scores, since 2013, scores from all MCA-III reading tests can be compared over time. MN Testing123 provides guidance for score interpretation and use.

The Mankato faculty stated:
- "By contrast, National Assessment of Educational Program (NAEP) results are comparable from year-to-year and from state-to-state (NCES, 2023). Minnesota reading scores have always been above the national average."

NAEP, which is actually the National Assessment of Educational <u>Progress</u>, reports scaled scores and four performance levels for every state to help us interpret performance relative to what students know and can do. Although as a state, we typically perform higher than national average, the NAEP average scores reported by the Mankato faculty were incorrect. In 2022, MN was below the national average (although the one point difference is not meaningful).

NAEP Average 4th Grade Reading Scores
[https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/ndecore/landing]

NAEP	From the Mankato Faculty Statement			From the NAEP Data Explorer		
	1998	**2019**	**2022**	**1998**	**2019**	**2022**
Minnesota	222	222	216	219	222	215
National	215	219	215	213	219	216

It is possible that the Mankato faculty used the 1998 scores excluding students with disabilities who received accommodations—in 1998 two scores were reported, one including all students and one excluding students with accommodations. The averages from the NAEP Data Explorer reported above include all students in 1998 to be comparable with later averages.

The percentages of students achieving NAEP proficiency or advanced performance are reported in the following table.

NAEP 4th Grade Reading Proficiency Rates
[https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/ndecore/landing]

NAEP	1998	2019	2022
Minnesota	35%	38%	32%
National	28%	34%	32%

NAEP is also an important tool to monitor racial equity in achievement, where we see very different levels in each racial/ethnic group at or above proficiency in 2022 (the number of MN American Indian students participating in NAEP was too small to estimate performance).

2022 NAEP 4th Grade Reading Proficiency Rates by Race/Ethnicity
[https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/ndecore/landing]

NAEP	American Indian	Asian	Black	Latino	White
Minnesota	na	22%	13%	16%	41%
National	18%	55%	16%	20%	41%

A similar table can be reported for the Minnesota MCAs from the MN Report Card.

MCA 4th Grade Reading Meeting or Exceeding State Standards by Race/Ethnicity
[https://rc.education.mn.gov]

MCA	American Indian	Asian	Black	Latino	White
2022	25.4%	39.0%	27.1%	28.9%	59.8%
2019	31.0%	49.4%	30.6%	32.8%	65.4%

The performance standards for NAEP (given the NAEP reading framework) are more rigorous than those we have defined in MN with the MCAs. This is generally true nationally. NAEP set a high bar for performance expectations, beyond grade-level goals. MCA results indicate far too many students are not reading at grade level. More than twice the percent of White students are reading at grade level than Black, Latino, or American Indian students.

Do these results indicate a crisis? As a parent, educator, and employer, these numbers concern me greatly. No Minnesotan should feel comfortable with these outcomes—and I worry that my Mankato colleagues are missing this point. Whether using MCA or NAEP results, too few of our students are performing at acceptable levels—we cannot abandon students of color to poor outcomes.

As a scholar, these numbers push me to do more. Every student deserves the support they need to be successful. State educators and subject matter experts determined (through standard setting) that MN students should be able to *meet standards*. MN reading standards declare what we expect students to know and be able to do—these are important for later academic success. Minnesota needs every student to read at grade level. We know our reading standards are attainable because there are students meeting them in all racial/ethnic groups. We can do better, and we must do better. Our students, families, and communities deserve better. And that is on us.

The Mankato faculty stated:
- "SOR's [science of reading's] recommended curriculum consists of prescribed approaches that focus on scripted, direct instruction of low-level skills."

In part, this is correct—the science of reading research base is consistent with what we know from learning cognition research across subject areas, including science, mathematics, and reading: <u>direct instruction is effective</u>. However, the science of reading is not a curriculum. It encompasses a series of principles based on findings from a large body of scientifically rigorous research. MN teachers are required to teach the curriculum adopted by their schools, and that curriculum must be aligned to MN academic standards. These standards include the grade-specific knowledge and skills we expect our students to achieve. Science of reading approaches to teaching developing readers will enable them to achieve those high academic standards. Some students will learn to read regardless of what we do—and many students need direct instruction.

I expect MN teachers to be skilled at differentiating instruction and adopting culturally and linguistically relevant pedagogical approaches, while supporting multilingual learners and students with limited or interrupted education experiences. These practices are consistent with—not at odds with—scientific evidence for reading instruction. We prepare teachers to be professionals, content experts, and responsive to the needs of individual students, with deep understanding of the range of contexts, experiences, histories, and backgrounds of students. We also prepare school leaders to be professional instructional leaders. These are essential contexts for teaching reading, and perhaps even more, an imperative to teaching reading effectively.

Does the science of reading exclude all other evidence-based practices? No. With respect to the remainder of the Mankato faculty's concerns, they unfortunately put current efforts to improve outcomes with students who could learn from science of reading approaches into a box that the authors claimed excludes all other teaching and learning knowledge and practices. I do not see this exclusionary approach coming from the MN Department of Education or lawmakers hoping to change outcomes. State academic standards, curricula, reading resources, the books and reading materials we choose to use in our classrooms, and the rigorous PELSB-based standards for teacher preparation and licensure, all require teachers to engage in a professional manner to meet the needs of their students, with content expertise and wide-ranging pedagogical knowledge and skills. The way to do this is to employ the best that research on teaching and learning has provided us. The science of reading provides critical tools in our practice toolbox.

We face indefensibly low achievement success, especially with our students of color and Indigenous students, including tragically low graduation rates – and that is on us. At the same time, I see the best of teaching and learning on a regular basis in MN schools. We have a lot to celebrate. I look forward to the day when we can celebrate the success of all MN readers, regardless of race, ethnicity, or zip code—the fact that race, ethnicity, and zip code predict academic performance in MN requires all of us to do more.

Sincerely,

Michael C. Rodriguez
Dean and Campbell Leadership Chair