

THE NATIONAL READING PANEL REPORT SUPPORTS CRISS®

Teachers who use CRISS know that its principles and strategies work well in the classroom. Carol Santa, past president of International Reading Association (IRA) and a developer of the CRISS project, explains how the National Reading Panel Report, a current "hot" political document, reinforces through research what teachers have found through practice in the classroom -- that is, CRISS is an effective tool for teaching reading comprehension.

THE NATIONAL READING PANEL REPORT

The report of the National Reading Panel (NRP) has important things to say relating to Project CRISS. As CRISS leaders, we need to know how this report adds credibility to our work. In fact, we can use it as a political weapon to convince administrators and policy makers that CRISS is critical for reading and learning. Many of you may not even know about the existence of the National Reading Panel Report. I wouldn't have, except for my IRA connection. So, let's start with a little background knowledge.

In 1997, the U. S. Congress requested the formation of the National Reading Panel to assess the status of research-based knowledge of various approaches to teaching children how to read. In response to political pressures, congressional members wanted some definitive answers to the reading wars. Therefore, the government charged the National Reading Panel, a group of fourteen scientists, to review research and consolidate their findings into the National Reading Panel Report. Their report was released late this spring.

Since the 1960's, over 100,000 research studies have been published on reading. Therefore, the panel began with some limitations, restricting their review to just a few areas: phonemic awareness, phonics instruction, guided oral reading, vocabulary, comprehension strategy instruction, independent reading, and the effects of teacher education. They also limited their search to traditional studies incorporating experimental and control groups. With these parameters, they completely eliminated any qualitative classroom research and such important topical areas as early intervention, family literacy, writing, and second language learning.

The panel didn't apologize for taking such a narrow perspective--it was simply all these volunteers could manage within their time and funding constraints. When considering the conclusions, we must take their perspectives into account. The report, based on such a narrow band of research and topics, cannot be considered definitive. However, many have overlooked these constraints and treat the panel's conclusions as the final answer, and this is where the danger lies.

As expected, the panel found evidence for phonemic awareness and phonics instruction. These conclusions, of course, delight certain political constituencies and advocates of strong phonics programs. What troubles me, though, is not the support for phonemic awareness and phonics, but that the majority of the report is being ignored. Many readers have gravitated to the phonics sections of the report without reading further. These data are all they need to make phonics the only answer to helping children become readers. Few have shown interest in other aspects of the report, which show strong research support for vocabulary and comprehension instruction and the support for staff development. These areas don't have much political clout.

As CRISS leaders, we must educate the public about taking a broader view about reading. Just as the phonics folks have done, we, too, can become more political and sway public opinion.

The NRP report provides CRISS with wonderful support. The sections on comprehension, vocabulary instruction, and staff development fit us like a wetsuit. Briefly, here are some of the findings:

Vocabulary instruction leads to gains in comprehension and should be taught indirectly through extensive reading and directly through the use of strategies. Learning in rich contexts, rather than memorizing word lists, is as important as multiple instructional methods. So much of what we do with vocabulary development in Project CRISS fits these conclusions.

The most enticing section of the report is the one on comprehension. Here are the main conclusions:

1. The report strongly supports strategies that help students become more metacognitive. This is particularly true in studies where teachers begin by showing students how to learn specific strategies and when they provide students with opportunities for examining how these strategies work for them as individuals.
2. Cooperative learning is an effective classroom practice. Having peers instruct or interact over the use of strategies leads to an increase in the learning of the strategies and to increases in comprehension.
3. Teaching students about story structure is important, particularly with poor and below average readers. It is less effective with good readers.
4. Evidence strongly supports that students benefit from generating questions from written text. Asking students to develop questions as they read not only helps them comprehend a specific reading selection, but also increases standardized test performance.

5. Graphic and semantic organizers lead to achievement in content areas, particularly when the material is challenging.
6. Students who learn the skill of summarization show improved comprehension and learning.
7. The teaching of multiple reading comprehension strategies is most effective. When students use them appropriately, they assist in recall, question answering, question generation, and summarization of text. When used in combination, these techniques can improve results on standardized comprehension tests.

So, there you have it--great support for CRISS, and it comes straight from a "hot" political document. The report also contains strong support for our teaching strategies. I love this quote:

"Explicit formal instruction in the application of comprehension strategies has been shown to be highly effective in enhancing understanding. The teacher generally demonstrates such strategies for students until they are able to carry them out independently." Sound familiar?!

The report also provides all sorts of rationale for CRISS inservice. It says teachers can no longer be only content experts, they also need substantial knowledge of learning strategies and how to best teach and model strategy use. What's more, strategy knowledge is complicated and takes considerable staff development. Data indicate clearly that in order for teachers to use strategies effectively, they need extensive formal instruction in reading comprehension. Teachers require instruction in explaining what they are teaching, in modeling their thinking processes, and in keeping students engaged. Not only is the content of CRISS supported by this report, but so is our delivery system.

Our work is political. We must help parents, students, and policy representatives understand that the teaching of reading can't stop once children can read individual words. We all know that teaching children to read words is the easy part compared to teaching comprehension.

You can view, print out, or order a hard copy of the report at the web site <www.nationalreadingpanel.org>. I use the summary of the report to hand to superintendents and curriculum directors. I highlight the comprehension section as a way to keep people from getting stuck on the phonics section. You will probably also want the entire report, along with the accompanying video--all free for the asking. Let's use this report as part of our "sell job".