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## Some Observations From The Michigan Department Of Education

by Robert L. Trezise, State of Michigan Department of Education

Several years ago when Ken Carlson was MRA president, he and I were talking about the state of affairs in reading, and he said, "You know, Bob, we should stop referring to 'the reading problem' and refer instead to 'the reading comprehension problem'".

It seems to me that what Ken said makes a lot of sense.

To most people who talk about "the reading problem," the problem is that students can't say the words. Yet the evidence is that by the time youngsters reach their junior high school years, the vast majority of them can say the words — but what all too many of them can't do very well is deal with the words when they're put together in a selection, interpret what they read, make inferences on the basis of what they've read, distinguish between the main ideas and subordinate ideas, or say something defensible about the author's purpose and theme. In short, comprehend what they read. And if we're thinking about comprehension skills in relation to more difficult reading materials, perhaps we might say that the great majority of our students and citizens in general are very poor readers indeed — even though they may be able to say the words.

The idea that reading comprehension is the problem is borne out again and again in the literature. Just the other day, for example, I was reading a report on the Oregon assessment program; and it stated that while the students in that state do respectably well in the area of word attack skills, on comprehension the scores go way down.

A couple of observations in regard to this phenomenon. First, I think the fact that students do much better in

the area of word attack and specific decoding skills indicates that on the whole they do learn rather well what we teach them — for I think that in our reading programs we do tend to focus much more on the enabling or decoding skills, less on the comprehension skills. And I do say comprehension *skills*, because comprehension is, like anything else, a skill — and a skill that can be taught.

If this says anything to us, it seems to me it suggests that in our reading efforts, even at the earliest grade levels, we should not neglect teaching to comprehension. After all, even very young children should get the idea that the major — in fact, only — purpose for reading is to carry *meaning* (not sound) away from all those visual symbols. Further, comprehension skills are of great value in acquiring decoding skills. If we understand the context of the words, we can more easily decode those words.

Along this same line, there's been a lot of talk the past several years about the fact that fourth and seventh graders tend to do better on the mathematics sections of state assessment than the reading. Every phenomenon has multiple causes, and the fact the children seem to do better on math than reading is no exception. But it seems to me that one explanation of this fact has to do with this concept of comprehension. The mathematics items on state assessment tend to focus on specific enabling skills rather than on the application of those skills. The reading items, on the other hand, tend to focus not so much on the enabling skills, but on comprehension. Quite naturally, then, youngsters tend to do better on the one set of items than the



other. If for some reason the mathematics portion of the test were to begin stressing the application of math skills (for example, through story problems), I wouldn't be surprised if we would see a sudden plummeting of state-wide math scores.

By the way, we are now at work on the revision of the Communication Skills objectives. That means that all three parts of these objectives (the reading, the speaking/listening, and the writing) will be included in the revision process. At this point we have two groups involved: an objectives review group and a writing group. Each of these groups has representatives from the MRA, the Michigan Council of Teachers of English, and the Michigan Speech Association. The writing group — the larger group of the two — is scheduled to meet for three two-day sessions during the spring.

I might add that if anyone would like to react to initial drafts of the objectives (when we get them to the first-draft stage), let me know, and I'd be more than happy to send you a copy for your comments and suggestions.

One thing about the state reading objectives. It seems to me it's important that they do not suggest or seem to favor a particular reading approach or program. The more specific, enabling objectives, which reflect particular approaches to reading, should, I think, be the purview of local reading specialists and teachers.

Speaking of reading, one of my concerns is related to what so many people were saying at MRA a few weeks ago. It seems to me that one of our major problems is not that kids can't read, but that they don't read; i.e., are not motivated to read. Maybe in this McLuhan Age (but whatever happened to Marshall McLuhan?) there's not a lot we can do about a general unwillingness to read. But since we live in a virtual golden age of Children's Literature, if we could only

do more to get those wonderful books into the hands of children *within the context of our reading programs*, maybe we could get children more motivated to read.

Along the lines of motivating students to read, the state's Paperback Book Program does try to focus attention to this phase of the reading effort. This program asks the question: If you absolutely saturate a building with high-interest paperback books, will reluctant readers begin to pick up and read these books? The saturation concept is why under this year's program, each reading room funded by this section must be stocked with at least \$2,000 worth of books (minus the number that may have to be shared with the non-public schools). This year 358 districts applied for these funds; and given the total appropriation (\$7 2,348), we were able to fund 175 districts.

You might be interested to know, too, that according to the national RIF office (Reading is Fundamental), Michigan has some of the most outstanding RIF programs in the country. As a matter of fact, this spring the directors of the national RIF program are going to visit with me in the Department of Education to discuss the possibilities of preparing a packet of materials for people who would like to get into a RIF program. RIF, as you may know, involves motivating youngsters to read by giving them paperback books to keep. But there's a lot more to it than that. There are a lot of motivational activities that lead up to the book giveaways.

Perhaps you already know about the recent Right to Read publication called *Effective Reading Programs: Summaries of 222 Selected Programs*. The booklet is an excellent one with one page being devoted to each program. Of the programs described, seven are located in Michigan: Ann Arbor, Farmington Hills, Lansing, Niles, Pontiac, River Rouge, and Roseville. The



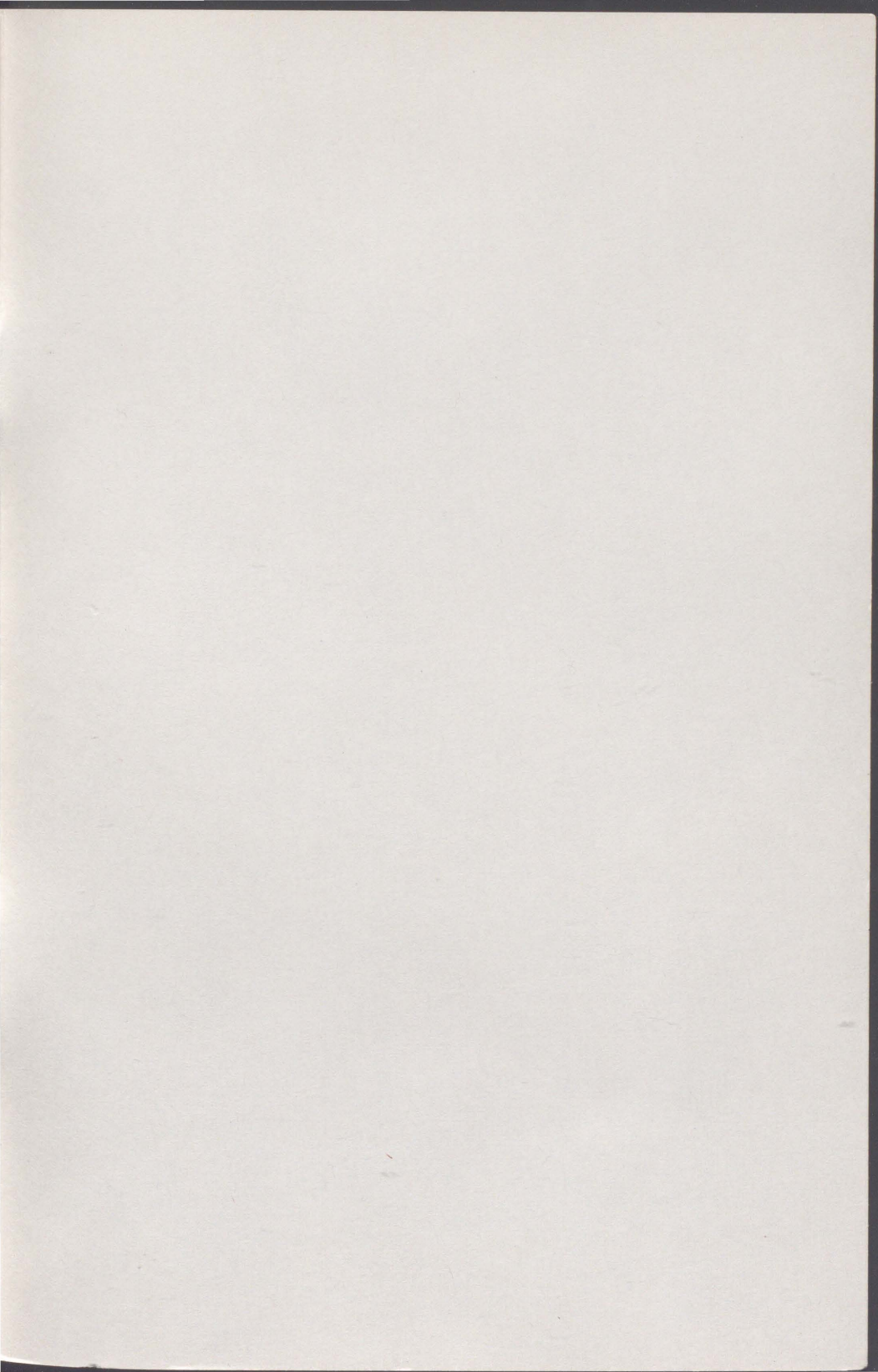
publication may be obtained from the National Council of Teachers of English, 1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois 61801. It's \$5.50.

Well, Section 43 (Reading Support Services) is again going through the Scylla of reduction and the Charybdis of deletion. Those who are involved in this program continually lament the fact that a program that does so much to give general and fundamental support to all phases of the reading programs at the local and intermediate district levels always seems to be in a state of jeopardy. Reading support stresses the need to enhance the quality of all phases of a district's reading

program, and it's the only state reading program that makes any reference to the qualifications of the instructional personnel, which in itself, it seems to a lot of people, makes it a valuable state program.

One last thing — we have a new reading specialist here in the Department: Teresa Staten. Mrs. Staten has had a great deal of experience in reading programs around the country, and most recently in the Lansing schools.

Since this is the last *Journal* for the year, thanks to the many of you who have responded so kindly to my various notes and comments in this publication this year.





# The Michigan Reading Journal

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