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**STATEMENT ON THE NATION'S REPORT CARD:  
*NAEP 2011 Mathematics and Reading***

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You often hear very common and pithy catchphrases about reading. Reading is basic. Reading is fundamental. Reading is a cornerstone of learning. Reading is one of the so-called three “r’s.” Well, I’m here to tell you there’s something else we all need to realize about reading. It is about having more than one skill. Reading is about a balance of skills and students making connections to what they read.

Understanding this truth about reading is a key to improving the performance of the nation’s students. When I first saw the results of the 2011 NAEP assessment in reading, I was pleased to see that our eighth graders’ scores improved compared to the 2009 results, and it was gratifying to see the scores for Black, Hispanic and White eighth graders improved over the two years as well. But when you look at the scores at fourth grade, performance has been flat since 2007. That rang an alarm bell with me. Even though it wasn’t a decline, I saw it as losing ground.

I’ve been the principal of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Charter School in New Orleans for more than 16 years. But before my current position and in addition to my previous roles as superintendent and teacher, I was a reading specialist for the New Orleans Public Schools and served as president of the New Orleans Council International Reading Association. So perhaps you can understand this subject is near and dear to my heart.

At Dr. King Charter School, we have what we call a literacy block, which usually is the first hour of the school day before the students’ other classes. During this time, our students receive direct instruction in reading, and it covers the gamut of skills—phonics,

fluency, comprehension and vocabulary. We also test our children to get an accurate assessment of their reading levels and to place them where it's appropriate. So we may have a situation where a fourth grader who is a little behind in reading skills is placed in a literacy block with mostly third graders because that student must brush up on some skills not fully grasped. Likewise, we might have a fourth grader who is advanced, and so he or she is placed in a literacy block with mostly fifth graders because that student can start learning higher-level reading skills.

Even though Dr. King Charter School now includes grades pre-K through 12 and enrolls 782 students, this literacy block is reserved for students from kindergarten to grade 8. The larger community, including our parents, is aware of this block and the importance my staff and I place on this dedicated time. Over the years, we've been able to move a lot of students up academically in terms of reading and English language arts in general. The block's concentration on core reading skills is giving many of our students a leg up in their other classes. Students are excited about getting the help they need.

A couple of passages on the NAEP reading assessment were illuminating to me. For instance, some fourth graders who took the reading NAEP had to read and answer questions based on a passage about the famed African-American opera singer Marian Anderson, who fought racism and segregation in the 20th century. One challenging question from the passage required students to evaluate the author's craft. Only 12 percent of the student responses were classified as "full comprehension," while 36 percent were scored as "partial comprehension" and 51 percent as "little or no comprehension."

I also read through a few eighth-grade questions on a passage about the recycling of computers and the environment. One multiple-choice item required the students to recognize the author's persuasive technique. Eighty-nine percent of test-takers got the correct answer—a much better result.

So that made me think even more: How can we improve student achievement in reading, especially in the early grades? First, we need to emphasize higher-order thinking skills when it comes to reading. As I said before, it's about ensuring that students can make connections to what they read—truly comprehending meaning; not just regurgitating facts. But another key is taking a holistic approach.

For Dr. King Charter School's literary blocks, we consider the efforts comprehensively. We constantly assess and benchmark student performance to better see the weaknesses we need to address with deliberate instruction. Teachers collaborate with each other and talk about strategies, issues and trends in the classrooms that give them ideas on ways to reach students. They also share ideas picked up at the workshops some of them attend.

We try very hard to get kids motivated and excited about reading. There is a special activity that we do at the beginning of each new school year called “Jazz Up Reading,” where an actual jazz band comes to perform and the kids commit to increase their reading level. Also, at the end of each quarter, we award Jazz Up Reading certificates to the students who have made significant increases. In addition, on the last Friday of each month, we have a “Reader’s Chair” activity. The three best readers in a particular class are selected to go to the library, under the supervision of the librarian, and select a book to read to another class. Students are highly motivated because they want to be chosen.

We encourage parents to be a model in the home by reading themselves and reading with their children. We also understand the realities of serving a high-poverty student population. Some 98 percent of our students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, so not very many homes have resources like computers or a lot of reading materials. Consequently, our literacy block initiative becomes the model for reading, and we ask parents to continue the efforts as they can, even if it’s through simple encouragement.

Through our efforts, we like to say we’re “catching things early,” and perhaps this should be a motto for educators nationwide. But we still have further to go. We need to constantly evaluate, assess and identify what students need to be better readers from day one. Then as they get older, those burgeoning skills in reading comprehension will translate to other subjects.

My goal is to see fourth graders perform better on the 2013 NAEP assessment in reading and see performance improve even more across the board. Then we can add another pithy phrase of our own to reading education: “Students excel on NAEP reading.” Thank you.