

## *IRA Launches Major Initiative: New Literacy Research Panel Begins Work Chaired by P. David Pearson*

**T**hese are trying and difficult times for literacy professionals. The robust funding opportunities created by Reading First and No Child Left Behind have waned, due partly to the bubble-driven market crash and the ensuing budgetary constrictions at all levels. Moreover, the promise of reinvigorated classroom instruction lost some of its luster, tarnished by the experience of mandated assessments that inflicted too much collateral damage on school syllabi and teacher morale. And the feeling has been fermenting in certain political quarters that, given the recent investment in professional development and teacher coaches, the teaching profession should have achieved better results.

From this conflict-laden background, new uncertainties have arisen. Funding for education will figure contentiously in the upcoming US presidential race, and education budgets at federal and state levels are not likely to see any ultimate resolution until that contest is decided, not to mention the many state contests that will shape state and local policy and funding. Meanwhile, the education sector's tectonic plates have shifted along two major fault lines: inducements for structural change and expectations for student achievement.

Race to the Top, RTI, and the NCLB waivers have wrought new administrative and pedagogical approaches that are still evolving. In addition, the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts have been adopted in 46 states, posing a host of implementation challenges. Add to this the education system's inbuilt challenges of language learners, new media, and declining student motivation,



I'm thrilled that President Risko and the Board of Directors have taken this bold step to reassert IRA's role in informing policy and practice at all levels—international, national, state, and local. I'm honored that they have selected me to chair such a distinguished panel of scholars. Given the expertise and commitment we've assembled, I'm confident that we can mount an effective campaign that will accomplish our goals. Basically what we want to do is to make sure that that our most trusted research is used to improve professional development and classroom practice on the way to more equitable achievement for every group of students—anywhere and everywhere.

*- P. David Pearson,  
Panel Chair*

and the prospects for raising student literacy levels seem ever more daunting.

In sum, the need for professional leadership has now become acute. What are the viable paths forward? What issues lie just over the horizon that literacy professionals need to start preparing for today? How can leadership bring critical research findings to the general media so that we can exert a stronger influence on the ongoing policy discussions? Most importantly, how can that research be effectively applied in classrooms to produce tangible benefits for literacy learners?

### **IRA's Strategic Directive**

These questions are not new to IRA. Indeed, they were given special focus in the Association's current strategic plan, which calls for enhanced and strong issue leadership, supported by the retention of outside public relations expertise. The spearhead of this initiative involves the formation of a new Literacy Research Panel that will identify critical literacy issues and respond to them with core research findings expressed in plain language and tailored to specific audiences. These audiences include, among others, policy makers, government officials, school administrators, teacher educators, classroom teachers, parents, and the general public.

As Mark Mullen, acting Executive Director, stated in his May 2011 board report: "To cement IRA's authority on topics of reading and literacy in media, social media, government, and education circles, it is imperative to have a formalized group of IRA sanctioned expert researchers who can engage and lead the public dialogue about reading and

## IRA Literacy Research Panel



*P. David Pearson,  
Chair, Berkeley*



*Victoria Risko,  
IRA President, Vanderbilt*



*Virginia Goatley,  
IRA Research Director*



*Timothy Shanahan,  
University of Illinois, Chicago*



*Kris Gutierrez,  
Colorado*



*Kenji Hakuta,  
Stanford*



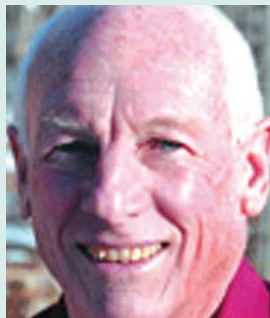
*Nonie Lesaux,  
Harvard*



*Elizabeth Moje,  
Michigan*



*Annemarie Palincsar,  
Michigan*



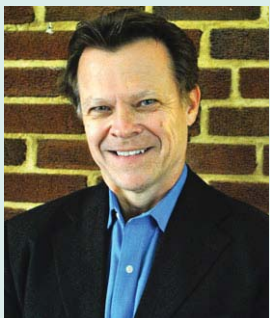
*John Guthrie,  
Maryland*



*Catherine Snow,  
Harvard*



*Karen Wixson,  
UNC Greensboro*



*Peter Aflerbach,  
Maryland*



*Nell Duke,  
Michigan State*



*Peter Johnston,  
SUNY Albany*



*Gloria Ladson-  
Billings, Wisconsin*

literacy issues.” The report goes on to explain that the Panel will also serve as a resource for the editors of *Reading Research Quarterly*, as well as for IRA’s director of research, and it will support the Association’s advocacy mission.

## Pearson Invited to Chair

To commence this critical initiative, Mullen contacted the preeminent researcher and prolific literacy author P. David Pearson, and invited him to recruit, charge, and chair such a panel along the lines specified in the strategic plan. Pearson, a longtime IRA member who joined in 1967, accepted enthusiastically. Over the summer months he consulted with various colleagues and deliberated on the optimal composition of the inaugural panel, focusing on the substantive depth and diversity it would need to establish strong credibility as a leadership source.

Pearson produced a tentative roster which was finalized in the early fall after he reviewed and discussed it with Mullen, members of the IRA senior staff, and IRA President Victoria Risko, who was designated an *ex officio* member of the new Panel. Thereafter, invitations were



forwarded under both Risko’s and Pearson’s names to the individuals so selected.

The invitation read, in part: “The Panel will be expected to collaborate with the IRA Board and staff to establish informed positions on research and policy issues of urgent importance to the literacy community and the public at large. By driving attention to this type of core messaging, the Association hopes to better expand its reach and influence, to become a key player in policy deliberations, and to attract more members into our ranks.” The invitation explained that this initiative would include “planned exposure to national media” in coordination with efforts undertaken by IRA’s retained PR firm, RF Binder of New York City.

The panel membership now stands as follows: P. David Pearson, Chair; Victoria Risko, *ex officio*; Virginia Goatley, *ex officio*; Peter Afflerbach; Nell Duke; John Guthrie; Kris Gutierrez; Kenji Hakuta; Peter Johnston; Gloria Ladson-Billings; Nonie Lesaux; Elizabeth Moje; Annemarie Palincsar; Tim Shanahan; Catherine Snow; and Karen Wixson. IRA is in the process of expanding the panel to include a teacher and an international member.

## Media Preparation

The next step for the newly struck panel involved working with RF Binder to develop an outreach plan. Binder staff interviewed each panelist to learn more about the expertise each member brought to the panel—looking ahead to a time when IRA might match panelist expertise with media requests to address particular issues. The goal was to equip

the PR firm with the information necessary to develop specific media exposure opportunities. This step has largely been completed.

## Convention Research Strand

As these efforts were taking place, IRA staff and members were planning the research sessions to be held at IRA’s 2012 Convention in Chicago. After consulting with Pearson, IRA Research Director Virginia Goatley scheduled the Literacy Research Panel to make a 75-minute presentation on Monday morning, April 30. This session will shed the typical “talking heads” panel format in favor of an issue-focused forum to encourage diverse views and debates on critical policy and practice matters. More information on the event will be forthcoming as the Panel proceeds to identify the issues it will engage and sets specific goals for its convention appearance.

## First Panel Meetings

The IRA Literacy Research Panel held two meetings in November 2011. Pearson held the focus to two critical agenda items, namely the Panel’s sense of current and impending issues that warrant informed response and comment, and the nature of the actions that the Panel, as the representative IRA entity, might consider taking to address them. The ensuing discussions were both detailed and lively.

## Targeting Issues for Engagement

With respect to critical issues across two meetings, four concerns keep bubbling up to the top of the Panel’s list:

- **The Achievement Gap.** The racial gap has been narrowed (a little), but the SES gap has actually increased. Moreover, the gap between the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile and the 10<sup>th</sup> percentile is continually widening.
- **Motivation and Engagement.** The drop out problem is worsening. Graduating high school is on everyone’s outcomes list, yet the origins of dropping out

Motivation and engagement in literacy is a serious predicament across the spectrum from K-12. Beyond skills, effective readers and writers have developed interests, commitments and beliefs that energize their literacy. Yet, many students lack the motivation to read widely and deeply enough to meet the rising expectations for gaining deep disciplinary knowledge from text. Although motivation and engagement are vital for all students, they are not picked up automatically. Teachers should be given professional development that empowers them to support students’ engagement more effectively.

- John Guthrie,  
Panel Member

get little visibility. Student motivation currently appears devastatingly low.

- **Standards and Assessments.** Many challenges are posed by the ELA Common Core State Standards, and strong guidance will be needed for effective implementation that benefits students. Text difficulty is a concern, especially for beginning readers. And the associated assessment issues are likely to be complex and consequential.
- **Teacher Education.** The ability to assess student literacy progress toward curricular goals and to lead effective classroom conversations are vital skills in need of systematic development. We need better methods of teacher evaluation and a way to counter the implicit assumption in policy circles that there's no payoff for teacher education or professional development.

Other issues were covered as well, including the limitations of textbooks and the need to impart a more complex view of literacy that goes far beyond test scores. But these four are likely to figure heavily in the Panel's opening efforts.

## Responsive Action

Of course, settling on target issues is only half of the challenge. To fulfill its mission, the Panel also needs to decide upon the precise nature of its responsive action. Here the discussion ranged widely. Some suggested Q & A type pieces focused on questions that teachers are faced with daily. Others championed short papers on specific topics and making them available as downloads from the IRA website. Some panelists pushed for a two tier approach in which content would be prepared proactively to respond to targeted issues, while a capacity building effort was launched simultaneously to prepare for pulling together quick responses when new or novel questions arise or are put to the Panel—the “SWAT team” project, as some described it.

## Image and Perception

Beyond these and other specific suggestions, the panelists also chimed

in on matters of general image, public perception, and desired tone. Some panelists expressed concern that the Panel not be perceived as something dedicated primarily to criticism of governmental enactments and regulation. Instead, the general feeling was that that Panel's mission should center on enhancing effective practice, and that there should be a value added component to the Panel's work taking it beyond a regurgitation of extant research and “what we already know,” to constructive initiatives to change policy and practice where it matters—in districts and schools. The consensus was that the Panel's work should be perceived as a research-based source for change, using the knowledge base to create frames without being either elitist or hegemonic.

## Audiences

Audiences figure heavily in the Panel's opening strategy. Several panelists thought that the group's policymaker audience will key heavily on numbers, while teacher audiences are more likely interested in practical guidance and examples from real classrooms, particularly with respect to the Common Core. There was also strong sentiment for advising publishers about what research really says about materials, texts, and everyday pedagogy.



Of course, approaches to legislators will require specialized guidance. In addition to input from RF Binder, panelists felt that Rich Long, IRA's Director of Government Relations, could be especially helpful getting engaged with the policy circles in Washington

The newly-formed IRA Literacy Research Panel offers opportunities for initiatives that advance knowledge about literacy development and instruction, and help the field bridge what we know with what we do. At this point in time, given the increasingly diverse population of readers currently in our schools, a worthwhile panel effort would address comprehensive systems that carefully link assessment and instruction, capturing these vulnerable student populations' strengths and challenges and directly informing daily practice. Such a tailored approach would improve the skills of the diverse groups within classrooms, while bolstering the core literacy instruction for all students.

- Nonie Lesaux,  
Panel Member

and, ultimately, in state capitals. As Long points out, “different styles work better for different messages. What you aim at a home district would be very different from what is desirable for a Washington briefing.” The Panel also intends to study other organizations that have done this kind of work effectively, and learn from their example.

## Next Steps

Additional Panel meetings are in the works for the winter months. At these sessions, panelists will refine the list of initiatives and decide on action steps to move the initiative ahead, including, of course, the all-important communications agenda—how do we engage different audiences in ways that create the expectation that IRA will be their “go to” information source for policy issues? Beyond this, Pearson has indicated that additional recommendations pertaining to the Panel may be made to the IRA Board. As these developments unfold, full coverage of the Panel's work will be provided in future issues of *Reading Today*. ■