# Preface

A quarter century ago, the knowledge needed to power literacy programs that ensured that all youngsters learned to read well was in short supply. Theories and hunches were abundant. Research-based evidence was limited. As a consequence, teachers often pursued a course of action based on what they hoped might work, on local traditions, or on the most current initiatives afoot in the profession. Comprehensive school-based attacks on the literacy challenge were few and far between. The results were not surprising. Many youngsters did not learn to read well. We did not possess much confidence that we could address the problem. In addition, once children fell behind, we were unable on a consistent basis to help them right themselves on the path toward literacy success.

Over the last twenty years, we have progressed a long way in our ability to address the literacy challenge. Many hunches and philosophies of reading have proven to have fairly shallow roots. A significant body of empirical evidence has accumulated. And we are learning more and more about how to help youngsters that either come to school with language and reading deficits or fall behind once formal instruction begins.

Twenty years ago, there was also a firewall between school administration and teaching and learning. Leaders tended to know a good deal about the complex task of managing organizations, but they were poorly informed about the core technology of schooling. Surprisingly, they were also not well attuned to the task of leading school improvement, of ensuring that the systems at the school level (or district level) directed activities to promote the success of all students.

Over the last two decades, we have witnessed considerable progress in breaking down this barrier and in re-centering the field of school administration on our best understandings of learning, teaching, and school improvement. Beginning with the research on
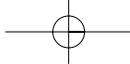
effective schools and instructional leadership, we have accumulated considerable knowledge about the role of school leadership in powering educational excellence for all students.

This book fuses knowledge from both of these areas, hence the title *Leadership for Literacy*. In so doing, I compile and integrate a considerable amount of research from four broad domains of scholarship: studies on school effectiveness, research on instructional leadership, investigations of teacher effects, and explorations of effective reading programs. It is this comprehensive strategy that permits me to capture and link findings that have rarely traveled together in the past. The end result is the crafting of a research-based platform that helps readers inform themselves about what is important and act to make literacy mastery a reality in schools and school districts throughout the United States.

The spotlight in this volume is directed toward literacy in the early years of schooling. I focus here because a consensus has emerged over the last twenty years about the critical nature of the primary grades (preK–3) in terms of literacy development. Much of this consensus emanates from data revealing that many youngsters arrive in kindergarten with literacy backgrounds that place them at significant risk of school failure. This knowledge, coupled with our inability until now to develop successful post-primary interventions for students with low literacy achievement and the growing recognition that students who remain behind after the second or third grade face very long odds in the race for school success, forcefully directs our attention to the literacy of young children.

While I cover the spectrum of students defined by ability and family background, I also provide space to investigating ways to ensure high levels of literacy for youngsters who historically have not fared well in our schools, that is, those children on the wrong side of the achievement gap. Given the moral imperative of addressing the underachievement of these children, as well as the shifting economic and political landscape that both heightens the problem and the demand for its resolution, it seems especially appropriate to target strategies that promise to strengthen literacy outcomes for students at risk. In understanding this endeavor, the featured mechanism is prevention of problems rather than their remediation, as recommended by a host of reading analysts. Throughout, however, the focus is on reading and writing for purpose, not as ends in themselves. In addition, I am concerned with explaining success as well as describing it.

It is my aim to influence political actions that shape the nature of literacy in our nation's school districts, schools, and classrooms.
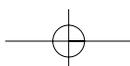
Consequently, policymakers at the state (e.g., legislative staff, Department of Education personnel), district, and school levels form one audience for the insights ribboned throughout this book. At the same time, I am very much interested in directing the behaviors of leaders at the district and school levels into channels that will result in high levels of literacy achievement for all students. While the prime audience here is the principal, the work is also designed to inform teacher leadership at the school level and administration at the district office.