Today’s literacy professionals face many new demands: heightened pressure to raise students’ scores on standardized assessments, the need to accommodate an increasingly diverse student body, and the emergence of new technologies that are constantly expanding our notion of literacy.

With all we know about teaching and learning in the 21st century, how can we ensure that the next generation of literacy professionals will drive literacy achievement for all students?

Every five years, ILA convenes a committee to revisit and revise our professional preparation standards. In July 2015, a group of literacy scholars, educators, professionals, researchers, principals, and union representatives from across the United States met in St. Louis, MO, at the ILA 2015 Conference to collectively examine how we can better prepare future educators for the challenges and opportunities of 21st-century education.

Countless conference calls, virtual work sessions, and iterations later, Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals 2017 (Standards 2017) will be published in May. We talked to Rita Bean and Diane Kern, cochairs of the Standards Revision Committee 2017, about the implications of these new standards.

Incorporating all facets of literacy

One of the most significant changes starts with the title, which changed from Standards for Reading Professionals (Standards 2010) to Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals. Bean says this change mirrors the organization’s transition from the International Reading Association to the International Literacy Association in 2015, reflecting ILA’s expanded mission. By focusing on literacy rather than reading, Standards 2017 emphasizes skills and competencies needed to succeed in our increasingly technology-driven and globalized world.

“A major change was from emphasis on reading only to a broader emphasis on literacy,” says Bean. “We had to look at how people could prepare reading coaches to effectively provide experiences so that candidates would be able to teach in ways that encompass all aspects of literacy.”

Kern says that Standard 1, which outlines “foundational knowledge,” highlights the positive relationship between reading and other communications; when students improve in reading, other communications will improve in turn.

“There’s a recursive process between reading and writing and language acquisition,” she says. “Standards 2017 and its own organizational shift toward literacy really honors that reciprocity between these aspects of gaining literacy.”

Encouraging literacy leadership

Currently, very few universities and states offer separate credentials for reading/literacy specialists and literacy coaches. By delineating three distinct roles of specialized literacy professionals—reading/literacy specialists, literacy coaches, and literacy coordinators/supervisors—Standards 2017 will enable preparation programs to meet more specific goals and may create opportunities for new
and refined advanced credentialing programs.

For the first time, Standards 2017 will also introduce standards for classroom teachers at the pre-K/primary, elementary/intermediate, and middle/high school levels. In doing so, ILA hopes to facilitate literacy learning across all subjects and grade levels.

“We want to have those standards in place so that other professional associations can steer their candidates toward our standards to better understand literacy, how it interacts in the content areas, and why it’s necessary for all pre-K–12,” says Kern.

Clarifying practicum experiences

A new standard, Practicum/Clinical Experiences, addresses the practicum experiences necessary for specialized literacy professionals to be successful.

Standards 2017 requires candidates to engage with individual and groups of students across grade levels, serve as “novice coaches” to support adult peers, work in at least one school-based setting, and receive observation and ongoing feedback by qualified supervisors.

Kern believes this new standard will increase the rigor of practicum work and deliver authentic learning experiences that prepare candidates for future challenges.

“There needs to be experiences where the candidate goes into a school and understands more at the system level, interacts in a team or department, and shadows professionals,” says Kern. “We have to get them out in the field so they can get hands-on experience.”

Greater focus on advocacy

According to ILA and the National Council of Teachers of English’s (NCTE) recent joint research advisory on literacy teacher preparation, today’s literacy professionals are underprepared to address the needs of learners with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds across all grades and in all disciplines.

When compared with Standards 2010, which focuses on differences in physical and cognitive abilities, the new standards incorporate more aspects of diversity—recognizing a wide variety of cultural, linguistic, racial, religious, and gender identities. Kern believes educators have a responsibility to create learning environments that engage and motivate all students.

“Teachers really need to teach each individual learner, to find ways to differentiate and to highlight that learner’s talents and strengths. It’s a more personalized approach to instruction and intervention,” she says. “We don’t take a deficit approach.”

Kern says the addition of “equity” to “diversity” in Standard 4 reflects a heightened focus on advocacy; candidates are expected to advocate both for inclusive and affirming classroom and school environments, and for equity at school, district, and community levels.

Stronger partnerships

Although schools are critical in the fight for educational equity, they can’t do it alone. Whether related to funding, resources, or policies, all school districts and communities face different challenges in achieving equity. It’s the educator’s responsibility to learn about individual students, as well as their families and surrounding communities, to understand these challenges and to advocate for students’ needs.

Kern says Standards 2017 emphasizes “service learning” projects and practicum experiences with a strong community engagement component. These focused field experiences are intended to help candidates develop the skills and sensitivities needed to establish trust, identify family concerns, and work with parents.

Emphasis on digital learning

The last seven years have seen huge changes in the way technology is used in the classroom. As research has indicated,
technology is beneficial only when used mindfully. Bean says Standards 2017 seeks to prepare candidates to effectively infuse digital tools into their lessons, bridge the gap between students’ social and academic uses of technology and, in many cases, provide access to technology for their students.

“You want students who can not only use technology, but use it critically and creatively. They need to know its strengths and challenges,” she says. “We’re addressing it as another tool, but an important one.”

Bean says candidates will be expected to work alongside school personnel to implement a variety of print and digital materials in “appropriate, safe, and effective” ways. They may see an increased focus on the use of digital technology in preparation program coursework, instruction, and assessment.

More collaboration
Too often, teacher preparation programs operate in silos, with candidates honing their skills in schools or districts that are vastly different from the contexts in which they are ultimately hired to teach.

The word collaboration can be found in nearly every section of Standards 2017. The standards encourage collaborative decision making between literacy professionals and their teaching colleagues, administrators, and families. Candidates are expected to work closely with colleagues to “design, align, and assess instructional practices and interventions.”

Bean says this “sets the tone” that literacy professionals don’t work alone—and may increase the need for preparation programs to support candidates engaging in and leading collaborative learning.

The new standards also encourage collaboration between professional associations like ILA and institutions of higher education and state departments.

Looking ahead, the cochairs hope this collaborative approach will be embraced by the wider educational community. They believe that states, universities, and professional organizations should exchange expertise and work together toward their shared goals.

“[Standards 2017] is an iterative process that has allowed us to get the best thinking from a variety of folks and achieve the best standards,” says Kern. “It was not done by two people; it’s really a representative, long-term literacy effort in the U.S.”

ILA 2018
Rita Bean and Diane Kern, along with Jill Castek and Jacy Ippolito, will present a session titled “ILA 2017 Standards: Preparing Effective Classroom Literacy Teachers,” on Saturday, July 21. For more information, visit ilaconference.org.

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