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## NCOSEA Voice

### *Pleading the Case for All Students*

As we consider the topic of literacy in this issue of the *Standard*, I'm reminded of its importance to the legal profession. As attorneys, words are our tools. The legal profession originates in ancient Greece and Rome, where individuals were called upon to plead the case of another. Our entire profession is founded on reading, writing, and speaking on behalf of our clients. Attorneys are often criticized for legalese and confusing sentence structure. Although we can always improve our craft, these sometimes confusing words and phrases underscore the notion that words have very specific meanings, both of themselves and in the context in which they are used. Every day, attorneys must reach into their tool belts and select the correct words to advance their clients' interests. Along with my fellow attorneys, I recognize that membership in this profession would not be possible had not strong literacy skills been instilled in me at an early age.

Just as attorneys are called upon to plead cases on behalf of their clients, state boards of education are called upon—now more than ever—to plead the case of literacy for all students. Literacy opens doors of opportunity for students to pursue postsecondary education and training as well as careers that allow them to grow professionally, give back to their communities, and support themselves financially. Whether students wish to be attorneys or pursue countless other worthwhile and rewarding careers, they

should graduate armed with strong reading, writing, and speaking skills to equip them for the next step in life.

State boards of education play an important role in setting policy to ensure that all students—regardless of race, disability, or socioeconomic status—attain strong literacy skills. As an example, the Kentucky Board of Education recently amended state minimum high school graduation requirements in order to further emphasize reading and math skills. Nationally, state boards and educators are paying close attention to literacy skills at the early elementary level to ensure that students are progressing properly, ready for the next stage of challenging instruction in reading and writing. Although it often takes years to assess the outcome of a given state board policy decision, board members should be commended for their intentional focus on raising the bar for student literacy.

Representing the best interest of their clients is a duty that attorneys take seriously. We are called upon to act on behalf of clients in a legal system that can often be confusing and overwhelming. Sometimes attorneys are criticized for their representation of clients. Similarly, state boards of education are hard at work on behalf of students to advance literacy skills, even though stakeholders may, from time to time, criticize the policies they adopted to further that goal. But students across the nation depend on state boards to set challenging learning standards that will one day allow them to transition successfully to life's next step. ■