

Adolescent Literacy: Opening the Doors to Success

Over the years, educational research has provided important insights into how children learn to read. In the last decade, it also has been influential in helping to create new programs, teaching practices, and policies that support the goal of all children reading well by the end of third grade. Yet, while most researchers would agree that early reading is important, the unfortunate truth remains that millions of middle and high school students are still struggling to read long after their third-grade year is over.

In these cases, students, especially those from low-income families, struggle to read and comprehend text, and are therefore ill-equipped to tackle challenging high school coursework and graduate from high school prepared for college and success in life. Time only exacerbates this problem, creating the “Matthew Effect”, in which students with strong literacy foundations accelerate, while their less fortunate peers fall further behind with each passing year. Researchers describe this as an instance of the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. Eventually, less literate students “find it difficult to obtain rewarding employment and are effectively prevented from drawing on the power of education to improve and enrich their lives.”ⁱ

Students need to develop advanced literacy skills to comprehend, analyze, and synthesize large quantities of information in today’s world. Since research shows that literacy development is a continuum over one’s lifetime,ⁱⁱ improving reading skills in early grades cannot be our only goal. All students need to develop into proficient readers, writers, and critical thinkers in the middle and high school years. The challenge lies in the fact that some students will require more help than their others to do so.

Defining the Challenge

Students with higher literacy levels engage in more rigorous high school coursework, graduate from high school better prepared for college, and eventually earn higher salaries than students with lower literacy levels. However, results from the most recent National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) test indicate that approximately 25 percent of eighth- and twelfth-grade students read at “below basic” levels. In other words, one in four students tested cannot identify the main idea in text, understand informational passages, or extend ideas in text.ⁱⁱⁱ

While low literacy levels can be found at all income levels and backgrounds, poor and minority students are more likely to be affected. Research shows that significant achievement gaps in reading continue to exist between white students and minority students.^{iv} For example,

- in high-poverty, urban schools, more than half of incoming ninth-grade students read two to three grade levels behind,^v and

- on average, African-American and Hispanic twelfth-grade students read at the same level as white eighth-grade students.^{vi}

In addition, the majority of secondary school teachers are not specifically well qualified or trained to teach reading to students. Without effective literacy strategies, well-meaning teachers often focus on delivering subject-matter content without requiring students to read and write. Even teachers who are qualified to teach reading are often overwhelmed by the colossal task of preparing their students for high-stakes tests and high school exit exams.

As a result, approximately six million adolescents continue to be left behind—academically and, eventually, in the workplace. Many struggling adolescent readers grow disillusioned with high school altogether and leave without a diploma.

In fact, every school year nearly 1.3 million students fail to graduate from high school with their peers^{vii}. With the graduation rate hovering at an abysmal 70 percent nationally and nearly 50 percent in urban areas, it is imperative that leaders at all levels of government and education begin to make literacy as much a priority for our older students as it is for our younger ones.^{viii}

Is High School Too Late?

The notion that it is too late to teach students to read well in high school is rapidly losing ground. In fact, research on the literacy development of adolescents reveals the opposite: literacy skills of low-performing adolescent readers can improve significantly with intensive, comprehensive instruction.^{ix} Combined with focused learning time, students also need expert teachers who model effective reading strategies and provide direct instruction to students across all subject areas.^x

Addressing the unique needs of adolescent learners, researchers have developed several promising strategies that have been effective at improving older students' literacy skills. For example, the Strategic Reading course offered through the Talent Development model exposes students to a “double dose” of literacy in 90-minute block periods. At Benjamin Franklin High School, a high-poverty high school in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, a typical student in the course gained nearly a year's worth of reading ability in a four-month period. At Germantown High School in Philadelphia, class attendance increased dramatically, and the ninth-grade suspension rate for the year decreased by approximately 73 percent after the model was implemented.

The Boston Plan for Excellence is working with local school districts to refine professional development for teachers and principals and to improve literacy instruction in all classrooms.^{xi} Their model has received praise from the business and education communities, and the Boston public schools have adopted the methodology for use in all 132 schools in the district. An integral part of this model is the Collaborative Coaching and Learning approach, where classroom teachers work with master teachers on their own skills in order to improve student learning.

These are only two examples of the many promising practices that have been implemented in high schools across the nation in the last five years. Most of these programs have a common thread—they provide literacy “coaches” to facilitate school-based professional development

among teachers. The coaches help ensure that students receive the guidance they need from teachers who incorporate research-based literacy instruction into their mathematics, science, history, language arts, and other core subjects. Research shows that ongoing professional development for secondary teachers can greatly reduce the incidence of reading failure among young people.^{xii}

The Alliance for Excellent Education has produced a report titled *Every Child a Graduate*,^{xiii} which outlines a four-part framework to provide youth with the skills they need to be successful in high school and beyond. Since no student with low literacy skills can succeed at the challenging high school coursework needed to graduate from high school prepared for college or a career, the starting point of the framework is the Adolescent Literacy Initiative. The initiative builds on the nation's Reading First program, which provides grants to states to establish high-quality, scientifically based reading instruction for students in kindergarten through third grade, but which will not help middle or high school students. Together with the Reading First program, an Adolescent Literacy Initiative will focus the nation's resources on the entire continuum of learning, which will enrich the lives of millions of young people and provide many more opportunities for success.

ⁱ "Reading: The First Chapter in Education." As seen at <http://www.margaretkay.com/Matthew%20Effect.htm>, on September 23, 2003.

ⁱⁱ Moore, David W., Thomas W. Bean, Deana Birdyshaw, and James A. Rycik. (March 1999.) *Adolescent Literacy: A Position Statement*. International Reading Association, Commission on Adolescent Literacy.

ⁱⁱⁱ National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2002, as seen at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2003451>, August 28, 2003.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} *High School Reading*. (March 2002.) Key issue brief. Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE), U.S. Department of Education.

^{vii} Swanson, Christopher (2004.) *Projections of 2003-04 High School Graduates*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.

^{viii} Greene, Jay and Greg Foster. (September 2003.) "Public High School and College Readiness Rates in the United States". Manhattan Institute for Policy Research.

^{ix} Snow, C. (2002.) "Reading for Understanding: Toward an R&D Program in Reading Comprehension". RAND Corporation. Prepared for the Office of Education, Research, and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, p. 89.

^x Alvermann, D. E. (2001.) "Effective Literacy Instruction for Adolescents." Executive summary and paper commissioned by the National Reading Conference. Chicago, IL: National Reading Conference.

^{xi} As seen at <http://www.bpe.org>.

^{xii} Moats, L. C. (2002.) "Teachers: A Key to Helping America Read." *The Keys to Literacy*. Council for Basic Education.

^{xiii} As seen at <http://www.all4ed.org/publications/EveryChildAGraduate/index.html>.