

Adolescent Literacy Policy Update

More than eight million children in America in grades four through twelve read at “below basic” levels, according to the most recent National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) test results. Over the past year, the policymaking community has responded to this crisis by making recommendations to provide resources for programs to help struggling older children improve their literacy skills. (Two of these initiatives, the **Pathways for All Students to Succeed (PASS) Act** and the **Graduation for All Act**, are described here, on page 2.)

President Bush has also moved to tackle the problem in America’s high schools. In late 2003, the Alliance for Excellent Education wrote the president a letter urging him to address, in his FY 2005 budget, the needs of older students who read well below grade level. Nearly two hundred organizations and individuals signed the letter. The president’s response—proposing the Striving Readers Program, aimed at improving the literacy of secondary school students—opened the door to a new national priority designed to help older students read.

In January 2005, President Bush highlighted the need to better prepare our high school students for the future. His FY 2006 budget would provide \$1.5 billion for a new High School Initiative to help high schools provide high-quality education to all students. A key element of the initiative is a request to increase funding for Striving Readers to \$200 million. The president has also made other proposals: an incentive fund to reward teachers who improve student achievement and teach in low-income schools; increased spending on math and science education; more funding for AP and IB classes and the State Scholars Initiative; and new funds for high schools to develop individual performance plans for entering students, based on eighth-grade test data.

Legislative Initiatives

Striving Readers Program

The Striving Readers Program, proposed by President Bush and submitted to Congress in February 2004, was funded for 2005 at \$24.8 million. According to the congressional conference report, “Striving Readers will make competitive grants to develop, implement, evaluate, and bring to scale reading interventions for middle or high school students who are reading significantly below grade level.” These grants will be made directly to school districts. With grant applications available in July, awards will be made in the fall of 2005.

The president’s original request of \$100 million for Striving Readers would have supported between fifty and one hundred school districts in implementing demonstration programs. However, Congress appropriated only \$24.8 million for the program when it passed the omnibus spending bill in November 2004 (signed by the president in December).

Striving Readers begins to address the Alliance’s recommendation to the president and Congress to strengthen and expand Reading First through the addition of an Adolescent Literacy Initiative, which meets the needs of the eight million fourth through twelfth graders reading below grade level. With approximately two-thirds of secondary school students reading below grade level and almost one-third never graduating from high school, the need to focus on our older students’ literacy skills is crucial. Together with Reading First, the Adolescent Literacy Initiative could focus the nation’s resources on the entire continuum of learning, enriching the lives of millions of young people and providing them the opportunity to take rigorous courses and graduate from high school prepared for college and success in life.

Pathways for All Students to Succeed (PASS) Act (S. 921)

The Pathways for All Students to Succeed (PASS) Act was reintroduced in the 109th Congress by Senator Patty Murray (D-WA) and cosponsored by Senators Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-NY), Richard Durbin (D-IL), and Edward Kennedy (D-MA). The PASS Act would authorize \$1 billion for literacy coaches to work with middle and high school teachers and help them incorporate proven reading and writing instruction into their teaching. Because reading difficulties affect subjects other than just English and language arts, coaches would work with teachers across the curriculum to help them identify students who struggle with their assignments, whether in a math word problem, a science experiment, or a social studies project.

In addition to the \$1 billion for literacy coaches, the PASS Act also authorizes \$1 billion for math coaches, who would work with teachers in grades six through twelve on research-based mathematics instruction proven to help improve students' mathematical abilities and knowledge. Both math and reading coaches would work closely with teachers at a ratio not to exceed one coach for every twenty teachers.

Lastly, the bill would authorize \$500 million for low-performing schools to help them implement comprehensive reform models or research-based programs that have demonstrated success in raising student achievement. Examples of successful programs include smaller learning communities, adolescent literacy programs, block scheduling, whole school reforms, individualized learning plans, personalized learning environments, and strategies that target students making the transition from middle school to secondary school.

Research shows that coaches can facilitate ongoing professional development with teachers across subject areas (Petersen et al. 2001) and promote improved teaching and learning (Bean and Knaub 2000; Henwood 2000; Quatroche et al. 2001; Bean et al. 2003). In addition to paying for coaches, funds can be used to provide professional development to coaches and teachers. This is crucial, since ongoing professional development for secondary teachers can greatly reduce the incidence of reading failure among adolescents (Moats 2002a; Anders et al. 2000; Lenz 2002; Neufeld and Roper 2003).

Graduation for All Act (H.R. 547)

In an effort to raise the alarming low graduation rates in U.S. high schools, Representative Ruben Hinojosa (D-TX) reintroduced the Graduation for All Act in the 109th Congress. If passed, the bill will provide \$1 billion in federal funding to place literacy coaches in high schools and implement individualized graduation plans for students most at risk of dropping out of high school. The particular initiative that targets improving adolescent literacy is described in the following section. The bill attracted eighty-three cosponsors, with representatives from both political parties.

Improving Adolescent Literacy Initiative

The Improving Adolescent Literacy Initiative in the Graduation for All Act would target secondary schools with the lowest graduation rates and provide funding for at least one literacy coach for every high-need middle and high school. These coaches would help all teachers incorporate research-based reading and writing instruction or English as a Second Language instruction into the teaching of mathematics, science, history, civics, geography, literature, language arts, and other core academic subjects.

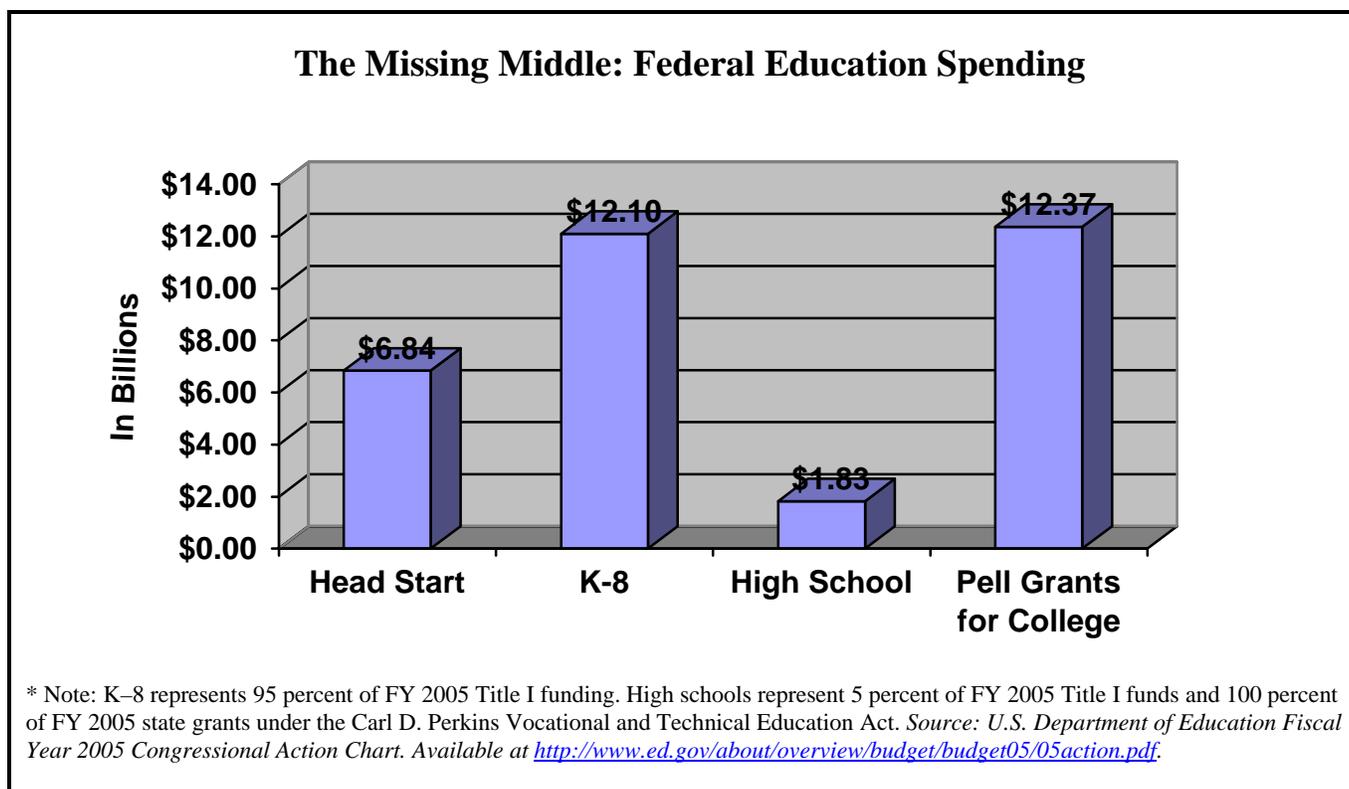
Without a focus on literacy instruction at the secondary school level, many students are left to drift, often faking their way through high school reading assignments. Students whose achievement is in the lowest twenty-fifth percentile are three and a half times more likely to drop out than students in the next highest quarter of academic achievement, and twenty times more likely to drop out than top-performing students (Carnevale 2001). *More than half* of all college students—53 percent—have to take remedial courses (U.S. Dept. of Education 2001).

Helping Secondary Schools Succeed Must Be a National Priority

The president's programs and proposed high school initiative open the door to a new federal policy focus on high schools and the literacy of their students by providing demonstration grants. The Senate PASS Act and the House Graduation for All Act are especially important because they would help close the gap in federal funding for students in secondary schools.

Adolescent literacy initiatives like these demonstrate that the president and members of Congress, like the country as a whole, feel a sense of urgency to improve our nation's middle and high schools. However, at a time when policymakers are tightening the budget to offset a growing deficit, it remains to be seen whether the political will exists to fund literacy programs at levels that will improve academic achievement on a large scale. We should not have to make an either/or choice regarding increased investment in improving the reading, writing, and comprehension skills of our secondary school students—especially when research shows that better literacy skills could raise U.S. GDP by \$463 billion and increase tax revenues by \$162 billion (Carnevale and Desrochers 2002).

In *Investing in Excellence: Making Title I Work for All Students*, the Alliance for Excellent Education reported that even though middle and high schools educate 33 percent of students, high schools only receive 5 percent of Title I funding. As the graph below illustrates, middle and high schools are the “missing middle” when it comes to federal policy and funding for education programs. By adding a new funding stream for these schools, the federal government can become a partner with states and school districts in addressing today's education crisis.



Additional Alliance publications available on the Web (<http://www.all4ed.org>):

Every Child a Graduate (2002)

Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy (2004)

Adolescents and Literacy: Reading for the 21st Century (2003)

The Literacy Coach: A Key to Improving Teaching and Learning in Secondary Schools (2003)

How to Know a Good Adolescent Literacy Program When You See One: Quality Criteria to Consider (2004)

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