

Seize the Moment: The Need for a Comprehensive Federal Investment in Adolescent Literacy

By M Miller

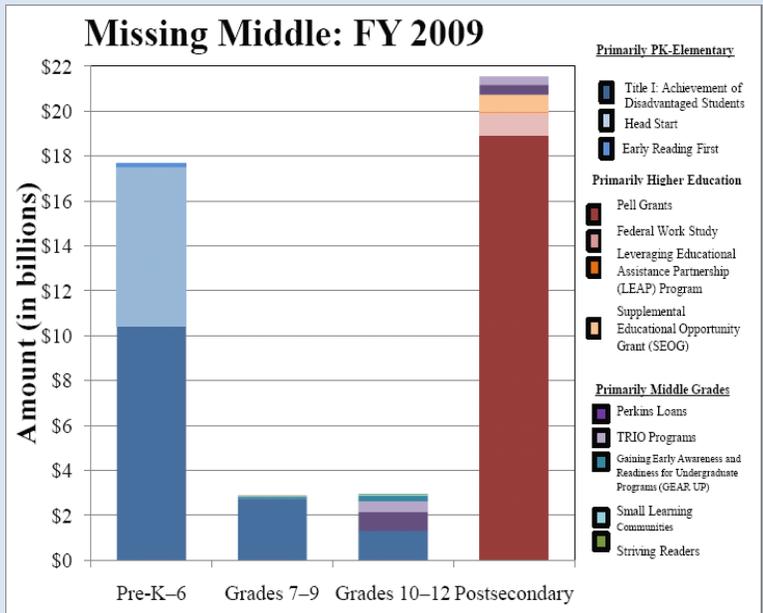
If students are to leave high school ready for college, career, and life, it seems self-evident that they need to be able to read and write. Yet far too many of our nation's young people are woefully underprepared. For low-income and minority students, the outcomes are even worse. Not only do these students deserve better; given recent economic realities, the nation cannot afford for them to struggle.

Fortunately, the federal government has begun to recognize that improving students' literacy skills—their ability to read, write, speak, and think critically—is an important investment. Over the past decade, Congress has dedicated substantial funds to improve reading skills for struggling students in kindergarten through grade three. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), fourth-grade reading scores have risen significantly in recent years; the strongest gains were made by low-income and minority students, certainly a step in the right direction.²

Unfortunately, this targeted investment has not resulted in the final goal of ensuring that all students leave high school prepared for college and the workforce. In fact, six million out of twenty-two million of America's middle and high school students are struggling readers. Educators are now beginning to recognize that the teaching of reading and writing cannot end at third grade; children need intensive, high-quality literacy instruction from before they enter kindergarten until the time they graduate, in twelfth grade. Unless the nation devotes attention and resources to a comprehensive literacy plan that supports children through all stages of learning, it will squander the considerable resources it has spent on grades K–3 and leave millions of students without a meaningful opportunity to succeed in high school and beyond.³

The Need to Invest in Secondary School Students

Historically, the federal government has chosen to allocate most funds to the elementary grades, believing that investments in the early years would ensure students' success in their middle and high school years. International studies show that after fourth grade, our young adults are falling behind their international peers.¹ It is time for the federal government to support middle and high school students with the same commitment it has shown to younger students so their investment is not lost as students progress through the grades.



The Adolescent Literacy Crisis

Imagine sitting in a high school classroom every day unable to understand the text or write a coherent response to a question posed by the teacher. Far too many of our secondary school students face this reality. According to the NAEP, 70 percent of middle and high school students read “below proficiency”—in other words, fewer than a third of our adolescents have the literacy skills they need. Even worse, too many of them—26 percent of eighth-grade students and 27 percent of twelfth-grade students—score below the “basic” level, which means they do not even have partial mastery of the appropriate grade-level knowledge and skills.⁴ It should not be surprising, then, that approximately seven thousand students drop out of high school every day,⁵ a large proportion of whom lack the literacy skills needed to keep up with the curriculum.⁶

While these figures are disconcerting enough, closer examination reveals an even more disturbing picture. Less than one fifth of Latino, African American, and American Indian eighth graders score at NAEP’s proficient level compared with 40 percent of white and 41 percent of Asian eighth graders. Additionally, only 16 percent of eighth-grade students on free and reduced-price lunch reach the proficient level compared with 40 percent of their white peers.⁷ This trend continues with dropout rates: poor and minority students comprise a significantly large percentage of students who drop out of school every year. In fact, more than half of our nation’s dropouts are from minority groups.⁸ This is unacceptable.

Why literacy matters

Too often, insufficient literacy attainment negatively impacts students’ opportunities for success, leading to a higher likelihood of dropping out of school and being incarcerated as well as suffering from reduced earnings and poorer health.⁹ For those looking to attend some sort of postsecondary education, roughly one third of high school graduates do not have the necessary skills to succeed in an introductory-level college writing course, and 11 percent of students need some remediation in reading.¹⁰ But at this late point in students’ education, a remediation class is often not enough of a solution. Not only does remediation often come at a high cost to the student, who must pay for and attend additional classes, disturbingly, 70 percent of students who do get to take a remedial class do not attain a college degree or certificate within eight years of enrollment.¹¹

Clearly, these students suffer; but the economy is also adversely affected, which has negative implications at the local, state, and national levels.¹² Adults with lower literacy skills are less likely to hold full-time jobs, vote in national elections, volunteer in their communities, and help their children with homework. They are also more likely to wind up in prison.¹³ Additionally, there is no longer the same call for low-skill, high-wage jobs that there was in the past. In fact, the twenty-five fastest-growing professions have far-greater-than-average literacy demands, while the fastest-declining professions have lower-than-average literacy demands;¹⁴ about 46 percent of all job growth between 2004 and 2014 will require high-level literacy skills.¹⁵ What is more, employers have reported that more than half of recent high school graduates are weak in such skills as oral and written communications, problem solving, and critical thinking.¹⁶ As many of the high school students with average reading ability are currently unprepared for the literacy demands of many workplace and postsecondary education settings,¹⁷ it is apparent that investing in improved literacy skills for all students will not just help the individuals, it will also help the nation.



Adolescent Literacy Instruction: Something for Every Student

There has been recent attention paid to the fact that third-grade literacy skills are not enough to support the full weight of a middle and high school education. Beginning in the middle grades, teachers start to assign longer, more difficult, and more content-rich reading materials. This requires students to move beyond merely decoding text to gathering information. In the best and most challenging classrooms, students also need to analyze, interpret, and respond critically to what they have read, write sophisticated text of their own, and discuss, debate, and defend their ideas. This should occur not just in English language arts class, but in science, social studies, and math classes as well. Unfortunately, just when most students need support to reach higher literacy levels, most schools stop providing literacy instruction altogether.¹⁸

In many cases, there is a lack of both interest and capacity to teach adolescent literacy skills to our secondary students. Most middle and high school teachers, including English teachers, see themselves as content specialists and have not received training—either in teacher-preparation courses or in professional development offerings—to teach literacy skills within their subject area.¹⁹ To further compound the problem, there is a wide variation with regard to how well, if at all, states are incorporating literacy standards—especially comprehension skills—throughout the content areas, and if these specific standards are being assessed. Therefore, students’ chances of benefiting from these skills are totally dependent on their state of residence. All students, no matter which state in the nation they live in, deserve to benefit from high-quality adolescent literacy supports. While it is necessary to continue to build the research base on effective practices in adolescent literacy, enough is known now to implement strong and effective programs. In fact, research in adolescent literacy and comprehension has been an area of focus within a number of federal agencies, including the Institute for Educational Sciences (IES) and the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development (NICHD). No matter where in the nation they are implemented, these programs need to meet the varied needs of secondary school students, including providing support with the basics, assistance with intermediate literacy skills, and instruction in advanced literacy skills.

Some students need help with the basics

There is a small percentage of students who need significant literacy support. Researchers estimate that one million out of 33 million students in grades 4–12 struggle with the basic skill of sounding out words on the page.²⁰ Even students who can decode words often do so with too little accuracy or speed to permit them to grasp the meaning of what they read. These students need and should receive high-quality instruction in phonics and reading fluency so they can finally master the basic mechanics that they should have been taught in early elementary school. They also need intensive, supplemental reading instruction designed to help them catch up to grade level as quickly as possible, so they do not fall further behind in their content-area courses.²¹

Some students are close but not on grade level

There is a greater percentage of students who can read words accurately but do not comprehend what they have read.²² Many of these students can and do read sophisticated materials outside of school, such as magazines or instruction manuals related to a particular hobby or personal interest, and many spend hours each day surfing the Internet or sending and receiving text messages.



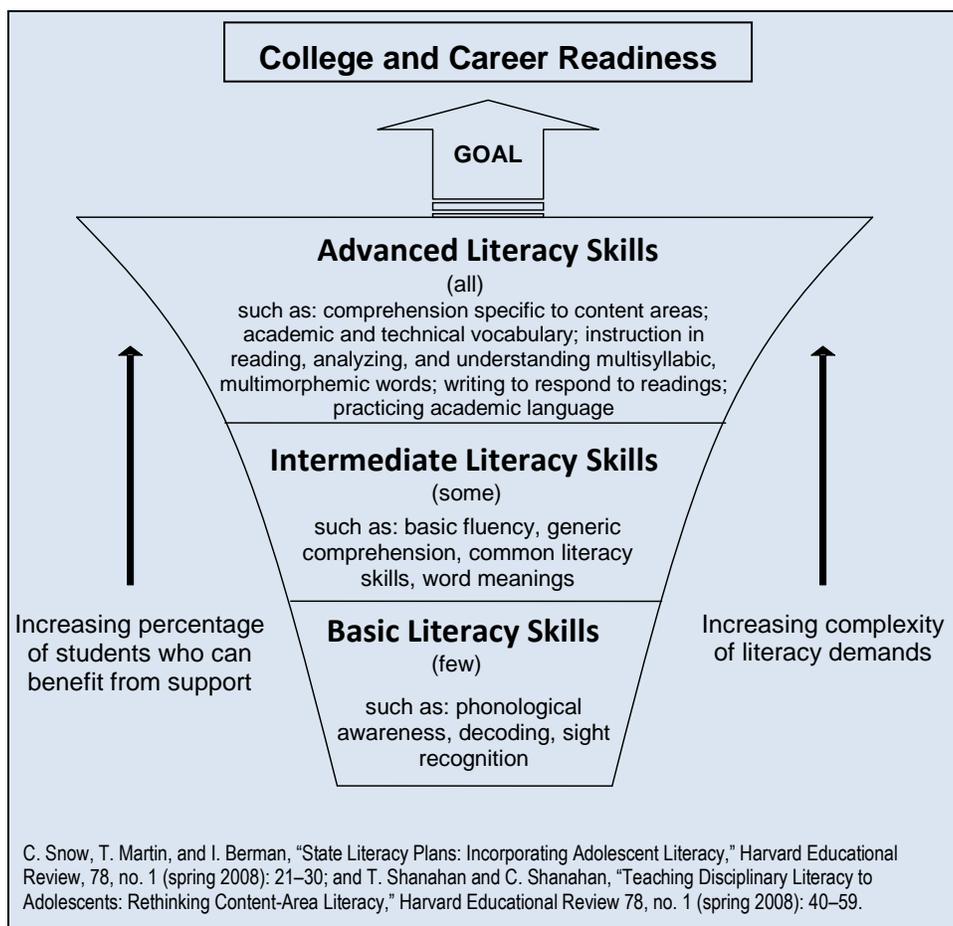
However, these students may have trouble figuring out the correct meaning of a word, be unable to make inferences from the text or link ideas in the text to their prior knowledge, and fail to ask themselves if they understand what they just read.²³ They need explicit comprehension strategies demonstrated in all content areas. Teachers need to show them strategies for understanding what they have read in class, along with instruction in writing, public speaking, and other forms of communication.

This kind of instruction does not require content-area teachers to become reading specialists. Rather, research identifies and recommends a set of relatively simple

teaching strategies that educators can employ. These include helping students review vocabulary they will encounter as they read; teaching students to draw a visual representation of an argument as it unfolds in a text; encouraging them to check a dictionary or encyclopedia when they get stuck; and asking them to summarize the text's main points or to compare notes with other students. In short, there are fairly simple reading comprehension strategies that any teacher, in any content area, can and should use when students are having trouble making sense of particular reading materials.²⁴ These strategies are not new and have been utilized by effective readers long before they were ever dubbed and defined as specific literacy techniques. What is new is the understanding that teachers need to explicitly teach these approaches and embed them in their instruction.

All students need advanced adolescent literacy skills

Finally, all students, even those performing at or above grade level, need to be taught advanced literacy strategies. The teaching of these skills cannot be left to reading specialists alone. In every classroom in which students are asked to read and write, they should be assigned high-level academic texts and receive explicit support when they encounter vocabulary, text formats, stylistic conventions, and other features that are specific to a given subject area. In history class, for instance, students should know how to read historical documents and texts, whereas in biology class, students should learn how to write a lab report.²⁵



Support for Adolescent Literacy

In order to truly improve the literacy instruction of all secondary students, advocates at the classroom, school, district, state, and federal levels must continue to champion the need for improved policies, increased research, and school and instructional change. While in the past there had been some momentum, there had not been a widespread acknowledgment of the literacy crisis and what to do about it. A position statement issued by the International Reading Association (IRA) in 1999²⁶ described the lack of attention older students' reading skills had received. Shortly after, the RAND Corporation published a report, *Reading for Understanding*,²⁷ proposing a research agenda to address the problem of adolescent literacy and students' inability to meet pressing literacy demands.²⁸ In 2004, the Alliance for Excellent Education, in partnership with Carnegie Corporation of New York, brought together several of the nation's leading experts in the teaching of reading to review what was known about effective literacy instruction in grades 4–12. The resulting document, *Reading Next*,²⁹ described fifteen teaching strategies and school wide reforms that rigorous scientific research has shown to have positive effects on literacy achievement (see chart on next page). To date, more than a million and a half copies of this document have been ordered or viewed on the Alliance's and Carnegie Corporation of New York's Web sites (www.all4ed.org and www.carnegie.org/literacy).

Over the five years since this report was issued, the nation's adolescent literacy crisis has begun to receive the attention it deserves. A number of prominent organizations have released additional reports that have clarified the full extent of the adolescent literacy crisis,³⁰ fleshed out what is known about effective instruction in this area³¹ and in specific contexts like urban settings,³² and offered a wide range of practical recommendations directed to specific audiences such as governors,³³ state and local school boards,³⁴ and school administrators and teachers.³⁵ Furthermore, the most recent review of the research on secondary literacy instruction reiterates and expands upon the recommendations in *Reading Next* and the subsequent reports.³⁶ It concludes that in grades 4–12, literacy instruction should address at least six key areas of concern: reading fluency; vocabulary knowledge; content knowledge; higher-level reasoning and thinking skills; reading comprehension strategies; and student motivation and engagement.³⁷

Does This Make Sense to You?

Find a transformer rated at 9,000 volts or better and 30 milliamps. Many people opt for neon sign transformers, which are relatively easy to find. Others use oil furnace ignition transformers or automotive coil transformers, which produce much more subtle effects. Make a capacitor by layering the five sheets of polystyrene alternating with the four metal plates. The plates can be copper or aluminum foil or just very thin aluminum plates. Make the spark gaps with the four L brackets and the bolts. Put the round end caps on the ends of the bolts. Wrap a heavy-gauge bare wire six or seven times around a cylinder form at least eight inches in diameter. Poke holes in four pieces of PVC pipe and thread the wire through to form your primary coil. The holes in the PVC should be about 1/8 inch apart. Wind the enameled wire tightly around the three-inch PVC form for your secondary coil. This one should have about 500 turns. Varnish the coil with several heavy coats and make sure it dries evenly. Wrap 20 turns of enameled wire on two separate 1½ inch diameter PVC pipes for your radio-frequency chokes (RFCs).

http://www.chow.com/how_2059585_make-tesla-coil.html

Chances are, unless you are familiar with electronics, you will find this text baffling. You can make out the words just fine and understand that some mechanical device instructions are being described, but most of the passage may go over your head. That is how many struggling high school students feel. In order to succeed in high school, college, and beyond, students not only need to master the mechanics of reading, but they also must develop more advanced reading comprehension, writing, and other communication skills. While there has been an increased effort to encourage all content-area teachers to help their students learn a core set of generic literacy strategies, it has been less common to help teachers address the literacy demands that are specific to their course area.* Yet, the literacy skills used in one domain area, like literature, which may require students to analyze word choice and write in iambic pentameter, will look significantly different than the skills needed to translate word problems into an algebraic equation.

* R. Heller and C. Greenleaf, *Literacy Instruction in the Content Areas: Getting to the Core of Middle and High School Literacy* (Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007).



Fifteen Elements of an Effective Adolescent Literacy Program from *Reading Next*

There are many components to be considered in designing an effective adolescent literacy program. However, in general, research and practice support the inclusion of these fifteen key elements. The first nine elements deal with classroom instruction, while the remaining six outline the school infrastructure needed to promote effective classroom instruction.

Instructional Improvements	Infrastructure Improvements
1. Direct, explicit comprehension instruction	10. Extended time for literacy
2. Effective instructional principles embedded in content	11. Professional development
3. Motivation and self-directed learning	12. Ongoing summative assessment of students and programs
4. Text-based collaborative learning	13. Teacher teams
5. Strategic tutoring	14. Leadership
6. Diverse texts	15. A comprehensive and coordinated literacy program
7. Intensive writing	
8. A technology component	
9. Ongoing formative assessment of students	

Source: G. Biancarosa and C. Snow, *Reading Next—A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy*, a report to Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education, 2006).

Across the country, there is an increased effort to translate the recent research and recommendations into real improvements in literacy instruction. Several states have developed comprehensive literacy reform plans, and others have begun to move in this direction, many of them bringing together literacy experts as well as advocates from the community to serve on task forces. Small-scale reforms abound in schools, districts, and teacher education programs across the nation. Even the federal government has begun to recognize the importance of adolescent literacy. In 2006, through the Striving Readers program, the federal government invested in eight multi school sites to implement literacy plans including professional development programs, targeted interventions designed for struggling readers, and whole-school literacy interventions.³⁸

This is a good start. But a great challenge still remains. There is a danger, especially in the world of education reform, that some momentum and a few pockets of excellence across the nation will lead people to assume that the problem has been solved. But the adolescent literacy crisis is far from resolved. Now—more than ever—is the time to build upon the good work that has begun. Until we can ensure that all of our students are graduating from high school with the literacy skills they need, champions at all levels, including the federal government, must advocate for a comprehensive, national, school wide focus on adolescent literacy.³⁹



Federal Policy Recommendations

It is time for the federal government to fully invest in all students so they leave high school prepared with the literacy skills necessary for success in college, career, and life. Federal policymakers should:

- **Invest in a comprehensive literacy program and encourage states to develop comprehensive literacy plans.** The federal government should strengthen literacy skills for all students by investing in a comprehensive program that provides funding for children from birth to grade twelve. While historically there has been a discontinuity in funding across the age span, the federal government should ensure there is an equitable investment for middle and high school students, targeted toward those students who are several years behind grade level, as well as whole-school initiatives to support explicit literacy instruction across the content areas. Additionally, the federal government should encourage states to articulate clear, comprehensive, and actionable plans for improving adolescent literacy instruction that is at the cornerstone of any school reform effort.
- **Support and invest in highly effective professional development in literacy instruction for current and aspiring teachers and encourage states to revise teacher certification and licensure.** Policymakers should invest in ongoing, highly effective professional development designed to help all middle and high school educators provide literacy instruction. This includes building the capacity of reading specialists who teach basic literacy skills to students below grade level, assisting content-area teachers to increase their ability to provide explicit literacy instruction for their subject area, and ensuring that school leaders have the adequate training necessary to employ schoolwide adolescent literacy interventions. Policymakers should support teacher education programs to infuse adolescent literacy instruction in their coursework and support partnerships between colleges of education and school districts to provide seamless professional development focused on adolescent literacy pedagogy, starting with teacher preparation, continuing through induction, and sustained and differentiated as appropriate for veteran teachers. Additionally, policymakers should encourage states to revise teacher certification and licensure to ensure that educators have the necessary skills to teach adolescent literacy.
- **Support the development, adoption, and use of common standards, including embedding literacy standards throughout the content areas.** Educators, policymakers, and researchers need to be on the same page regarding what students need to know and be able to do. At the core, this should not vary from state to state. Instead, one high bar should be set to ensure that students, no matter which state they live in, receive the necessary literacy skills to graduate from high school ready for college and the modern workplace. As part of this process, federal policymakers should provide incentives for the state-led effort to adopt, develop, and implement common standards and assessments aligned to college and career readiness. As part of this effort, literacy standards, including specific comprehension skills throughout all of the domains, should be embedded throughout the content areas.⁴⁰
- **Invest in ongoing research and evaluation.** While great strides have been made in the last decade to build the knowledge base about effective practices in adolescent literacy, more work can and should be done. Federal policymakers should invest in ongoing research to improve adolescent literacy, especially as it relates to specific implementation strategies and effective professional development. While large-scale evaluations are important, the federal government should ensure that all programs receiving federal funds should conduct local, small-scale evaluations when applicable.



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The mission of the Alliance for Excellent Education is to promote high school transformation to make it possible for every child to graduate prepared for postsecondary learning and success in life.

The Alliance for Excellent Education is a national policy and advocacy organization, based in Washington, DC, working to improve national and federal policy so that all students can achieve at high academic levels and graduate high school ready for success in college, work, and citizenship in the twenty-first century.

The Alliance has developed a "Framework for Action to Improve Secondary Schools," that informs a set of federal policy recommendations based on the growing consensus of researchers, practitioners, and advocates about the challenges and solutions for improving secondary student learning.

The framework, shown graphically here, encompasses seven policy areas that represent key leverage points in ensuring a comprehensive, systematic approach to improving secondary education. The framework also captures three guiding principles that apply to all of the policy areas. Although the appropriate federal role varies from one issue area to another, they are all critically important to reducing dropouts and increasing college and work readiness.

