Evaluations Point the Way: Forty-Six States Ready to Advance Literacy

**Introduction**

Strong literacy skills are essential for a productive career in school and in the workplace. Still, millions of American students struggle to read and write at grade level and many more cannot read and understand complex texts.

Recognizing the importance of systemic, ongoing support for reading and writing, President George W. Bush originally proposed the Striving Readers initiative to combat the reading deficiencies of secondary school students. A multiyear evaluation of the Striving Readers pilot project, including program-based, targeted interventions employing such practices as using specialized instructional software and focusing on a wide array of literacy skills (fluency, comprehension, spelling, etc.), improved literacy skills for students in cities in Kentucky, Massachusetts, Ohio, and Oregon. Other pilot sites demonstrated no impact.

In 2010, Congress significantly improved the program—changing it from a pilot project focused on adolescent literacy to a more robust initiative supporting comprehensive approaches to strengthening literacy from birth to grade twelve. The new Fiscal Year (FY) 2010 comprehensive initiative supports statewide, research-based literacy instruction and interventions—a more effective approach than the previous pilot project. Studies of successful turnaround efforts show that well-designed schoolwide literacy initiatives, such as those that would be supported through the revised Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy program, can transform low-performing schools and dramatically increase the percentage of students on track to graduation and college and career readiness.

Forty-six states are developing comprehensive policies and strategies to strengthen literacy among the nation’s students. Unfortunately, Congress is proposing to eliminate the funding that has been promised to implement these plans. Congress must reverse course, fund Striving Readers, and provide states and school districts with much needed support to ensure that every student can read and write at grade-level proficiency.
The Literacy Challenge

Research clearly documents the challenges America’s students have in English language arts:

- More than two-thirds of the nation’s fourth, eighth, and twelfth graders score below “proficient” on the National Assessment of Educational Progress.\(^3\)
- Approximately half of the nation’s high school graduates are not prepared for college-level reading.\(^4\)
- American fifteen-year-olds rank fourteenth among developed nations in reading, lagging behind such countries as Poland, Estonia, and Iceland.\(^5\)

The Literacy Opportunity

Striving Readers funds would be used for the development and implementation of statewide, comprehensive literacy strategies, including age-appropriate activities for children from birth through grade twelve. Through Striving Readers, teachers would receive high-quality professional development in alignment with college- and career-ready standards. Students would receive literacy instruction across the curriculum, and research-based interventions would be targeted to students below grade level.

With $10 million already distributed by the U.S. Department of Education by formula, state literacy teams have been formed and statewide plans are underway that strengthen state and district efforts to improve teacher effectiveness and turn around low-performing schools. Bureaucratic barriers are being lifted and replaced by interagency partnerships, including higher education, early childhood, health and human services, and K–12 education. This new approach will maximize scarce resources and target them to students most in need.

Kentucky, for example, created a comprehensive set of state actions and implementation indicators to embed literacy learning as part of school improvement planning that will ensure effective implementation of the Kentucky Core Academic Standards. Louisiana developed a comprehensive plan to ensure students meet the literacy expectations that will prepare them to enter college and the workforce ready to succeed. Louisiana also passed legislation, Act 54,\(^6\) to ensure that effective teachers and leaders serve in every classroom and school. The measure calls for monitoring and improving teacher quality and teacher preparation and incorporates research-based practices related to literacy instruction.

A Sad Six Months

Unfortunately, the opportunities presented by the Striving Readers program are in jeopardy. Over the past six months, Striving Readers has gone from striving to struggling. In August 2010, President Obama signed into law an Education Jobs Fund (P. L. 111–226) providing states with $10 billion to create or save education jobs for the 2010–11 school year. In order to help pay for this support, Congress rescinded $50 million from the FY 2010 Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy program. In other words, Peter was robbed to pay Paul.

The bad news for the Striving Readers program has continued since then. In December 2010, congressional appropriators released proposed legislation to fund the federal government for FY 2011 and included a $25 million cut to the Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy program.\(^7\) On February 19, 2011, the House of Representatives passed the Full-Year Continuing Appropriations Act (H.R. 1). This
legislation would fund the federal government for the remaining months of FY 2011, but it would rescind $189 million in funding for Striving Readers that was provided for 2010, and it would also eliminate the program in 2011.

Most recently, Congress passed a short-term continuing resolution (CR) to prevent the federal government from shutting down while the House and Senate negotiate a final funding package for 2011. However, this short-term measure will have a long-term impact. It singles out a handful of education programs for elimination, including the Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy program. The Senate, however, introduced an alternative to H.R. 1 that provides $200 million for this critical program.

**Evaluations Point the Way**

Years of research and evaluation demonstrate what it takes to strengthen reading and writing. The new Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy program would translate this research into practice. The following examples of literacy research and evaluation demonstrate the potential impact of the Comprehensive Striving Readers Literacy program.

**Research-Based Practice Yields Results**

A number of instructional practices have been demonstrated by rigorous research and evaluation to increase student performance on standardized literacy tests. The Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy program would be used to implement research-based practice in the classroom that has been proven to demonstrate results. Such practices include:

- Generating and answering questions: Actively processing text to form questions has been shown to yield a **23 percentile-point gain** on standardized reading tests.

- Summarizing and note taking: Intentionally instructing students in how to differentiate between the main idea of the text and peripheral information has been shown to yield a **34 percentile-point gain** on standardized reading tests.

- Identifying similarities and differences: Students who are taught to compare, classify, and analyze information using metaphors and analogies score **45 percentile points higher** than their peers without this strategy.

**Evaluation Demonstrates that Practice Can Be Brought to Scale**

The Scaffolded Apprenticeship Model (SAM) was implemented in twelve New York City high schools and focused on closing reading or writing skill gaps that impacted students’ performance in all content areas and on the Regents exams. A Stanford University report on SAM implementation over a four-year period in these twelve small high schools offers strong evidence for SAM’s impact on students’ reading and writing achievement. Higher proportions of ninth graders were on track at the end of their first year (37 percent versus 27 percent in non-SAM schools), and the increase in the percentage of students on track between ninth and eleventh grade was substantially larger (31 percent for SAM schools versus 17 percent for non-SAM schools).
Individual High Schools Demonstrate Success

- Hillsboro High School (Hillsboro, Oregon), with 1,493 students, increased the proportion of students achieving reading proficiency on the state assessment from 46.7 percent to 74 percent—a 27.3 percentage-point difference—using a schoolwide literacy initiative. The school increased the number of students who participated in the International Baccalaureate program and graduated prepared for postsecondary education and careers. Teacher leaders designed instructional protocols for literacy instruction within subject areas including developing essential questions, organizing prereading activities, providing reflection and discussion after reading, and incorporating extended writing to demonstrate comprehension of text.

- Brockton High School (Brockton, Massachusetts), with over four thousand students, improved its reading performance on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System from 55 percent proficient to 71 percent proficient through a schoolwide literacy initiative. School leaders and teaching staff identified core literacy skills that became an integral part of the entire curriculum. All teachers implemented the core literacy tasks within their own content areas. The high school provided extensive opportunities for professional learning and collaboration related to these core areas and monitored teachers’ use of literacy strategies. In 2009, standardized test results for all student groups—whether based on race, ethnicity, or other characteristics—met or exceeded improvement goals set under the No Child Left Behind Act.

The Time to Strive Is Now

A student who cannot read and write is a student who cannot succeed. As Congress makes final funding decisions for 2011, it must reject the proposed rescission of Striving Readers funds in the House-passed Full-Year Continuing Appropriations Act (H.R. 1) and restore the 2011 funding that was eliminated in the short-term CR. By funding the Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy program, states will have the resources to carry out a comprehensive and systemic approach to improving literacy and helping all students develop the advanced reading and writing skills needed to thrive in the twenty-first century.

Endnotes

1 For more information on the impact of the Striving Readers pilot, visit http://www2.ed.gov/programs/strivingreaders/performance.html.
6 For more information, visit http://www.act54.org.
7 $225 million was included for Striving Readers in the proposed Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2011.
8 Further Continuing Appropriations Amendments of 2011, H. J. Res. 44.
10 Talbert et al., Leadership Development and School Reform; Talbert, Scharff, and Lin, Leading School Improvement with Data.