

A Framework for Improving Adolescent Literacy

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Administrators and teachers in secondary schools throughout the United States have come to realize the impact that insufficient reading, writing, and math skills have on the ability of adolescents to acquire the information included in the core curriculum. This attention is largely the result of state initiatives to set standards and measure the attainment of these standards through standards-based tests. Whole schools are the focus of accountability, and principals are being held directly accountable for the leadership they provide in helping change curriculum and instruction to increase test scores. Test scores are more public than ever, and administrators are evaluated and rewarded (or punished) based on how well their school performs compared to other schools and how much progress they are making on tests given to measure achievement towards meeting standards.

This is a new journey for high schools, junior high schools, and many middle schools that historically have focused on content acquisition rather than the foundational skills and strategies required to enable content acquisition. Almost no efforts have been made to help faculty develop school-wide approaches to attacking the literacy problem at the secondary level. However, for the past 15 years, a major research emphasis of the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning (KU-CRL) has been to design and test was to effectively implement effective school-wide literacy instruction in secondary schools. The resultant outcome of this work has been the development of a framework, the *Content Literacy Continuum (CLC)*, for thinking about ways to effectively leverage the talents of secondary school faculty to improve outcomes for adolescents (including those with disabilities) and to organize instruction in a way that the intensity of instruction will increase as the deficits that certain subgroups of students demonstrate become evident.

The Content Literacy Continuum has been a very useful mechanism for incorporating the various interventions embodied within the Strategic Instruction Model (SIM) that have been developed

by the KU-CRL over the past 25 years. However, as a framework, the CLC is sufficiently comprehensive in scope to accommodate any research-validated intervention that has been validated with adolescent populations. In short, the CLC is a tool for enabling teachers and administrators (from both general and special education) to evaluate the literacy instruction and/or services that are currently being offered within a school and to formulate an action plan for improving the quality of services provided that will result in dramatically improved literacy outcomes for all students, especially those at risk, in a school.

The CLC is grounded in five basic notions about adolescent literacy:

1. **The purpose of literacy is to increase the learning of critical content.** Literacy cannot be developed separately from the core secondary curriculum. Students learn skills because they need them to meet the demands that they face; the skills become relevant because they enable students to do authentic tasks. Simultaneously, direct and regular application of skills in critical content provides the practice and exploration that plant literacy skills permanently in learner knowledge banks.

2. **Content literacy requires fluent decoding.** Students can be expected to use basic skills to learn critical content only after they have begun to read words fluently. Although some strategies provide a bridge between decoding and comprehension (for example, the Word Identification Strategy), provisions must be put in place to ensure that all secondary students are fluent word readers. For many students, this must begin with work on decoding words. Students reading below a fourth-grade reading level need to be placed in intensive research-based reading programs, such as The Corrective Reading Program (Decoding), published by SRA, to profit from the secondary core curriculum.

3. **Common strategies should be taught and reinforced across all teachers.** The steps of strategies such as Paraphrasing, Self-Questioning, Word Identification, and Visual Imagery validated through KU-CRL research should be learned by

all secondary teachers. The steps of the strategies are then taught in different ways, at different times, by different teachers. The key, however, is that all teachers create a culture within a building where a common set of strategies are valued, discussed, and nurtured, albeit differently, across all teachers. Therefore, when a teacher asks a student to paraphrase, the expectations and criteria for satisfactory performance is consistently applied across courses.

4. Responsive and systematic instruction is provided on a continuum of intensity. The tasks associated with successfully teaching strategies and then ensuring successful content applications require planning and negotiation. The responsibilities of the general education teacher, support teachers, paraeducators, parents, peers, etc., must be carefully defined to ensure that instruction is provided along a continuum of intensity. When students are provided with instruction in a strategy during large group instruction in the core curriculum, that instruction must be consistent with the goals of the subject area. Provisions must be made for when group instruction is insufficient. Instruction that is more sensitive to student needs or more systematic in the process of applying the strategy may be required. Other, more intense learning experiences may be needed to provide more support and to lead the student to mastery.

5. Students master critical content regardless of literary competence. Finally, and most importantly, secondary teachers must make a major shift in their thinking about curriculum design and delivery. This shift requires that teachers move away from simply covering the available content. Curriculum design should focus on organizing curriculum experiences around the socially compelling critical content and then developing plans and teaching routines that ensure that all students (for whom the core general education curriculum has been judged to be appropriate) master that content regardless of skill levels. This is an important requirement for improving content literacy because it ensures that students acquire the background knowledge required if the curriculum is truly a core curriculum that has high social costs if it is not acquired.

Students should not be further handicapped by not ensuring access to the critical content by requiring that they use the very skills we know they

do not have to acquire that content. In essence, this outcome should be the standard by which core-curriculum teachers and their methods should be evaluated.

There are five levels of services associated with the CLC (See Figure 1 below). These five levels are based on keeping content as a central focus in literacy efforts, defining roles and responsibilities, providing a continuum of instructional intensity for ensuring success for a wide range of students, and providing a framework for integrating a variety of literacy improvement efforts. Each of these levels are described below and represent a framework for organizing secondary reform around the goals of improved literacy.

Level 1: Enhanced Content Instruction

What students do: All students learn *critical* content required in the core curriculum regardless of literacy levels.

What teachers do: Teachers ensure mastery of *critical core content* for all students regardless of literacy levels by leveraging the principles of universal design to use explicit teaching routines. Teachers ensure that all students acquire the vocabulary and background knowledge required for basic literacy associated with comprehension and communication through class-wide accommodations, individual accommodations, or technology. Further, they respond to complex content literacy demands that require strategic manipulation and use of content information such as categorizing, developing analogies, comparing, questioning, or evaluating.

What it looks like: The history teacher introduces a unit on “Causes of the Civil War” by co-constructing with students a Unit Organizer, a graphic organizer used to depict the critical content demands of the unit. The organizer is used throughout the unit to link student prior knowledge to the new unit and to prompt basic learning strategies such as paraphrasing and self-questioning. The Concept Mastery Routine is used to help students explore important concepts such as “sectionalism.” Other routines provide the foundations for students to learn how to respond to more

complex literacy demands that often require inquiry into critical questions and construction of explanations.

Professional competence: Teachers responsible for ensuring content mastery must *select the critical content*, learn how to enhance that content for mastery, and then implement these enhancements through the use of explicit and sustained teaching routines. Special service providers must help core curriculum teachers provide this type of instruction. This facilitates a mindset in which instruction is delivered in ways that students acquire content information as well as active approaches to learning and responding.

Level 2: Embedded Strategy Instruction

What students do: Students are introduced to and learn to use a set of powerful learning strategies for increasing literacy across their core curriculum classes and apply them to learn the *critical content*.

What teachers do: Teachers directly teach and then embed the use of selected learning strategies that match the specific demands required to learn *critical content* in core curriculum courses. For students receiving more intensive strategy instruction (Level 3), teachers assist them in generalizing strategy use to core curriculum courses. Teachers use direct explanation, modeling, and group practice to teach the strategy and then prompt student application and practice in content-area assignments throughout the school year. Instruction in strategies is embedded across a number of instructional settings, including settings where tutoring is provided.

What it looks like: For example, at the beginning of the year, the history teacher explains that being able to paraphrase the history text is important because paraphrasing is required to write reports, answer questions, and discuss ideas. The teacher shares the steps of the *The Paraphrasing Strategy* (e.g., RAP) with students and models how to paraphrase history text to complete different types of learning tasks. Class activities and assign-

ments are designed to require students to paraphrase text and use information. Both oral and written information is paraphrased. Paraphrased responses may take an oral or written format. Graphic organizers (e.g., The Unit Organizer) that have been introduced as part of Level 1 (see above) are used to model and prompt paraphrasing of critical chunks of content. The teacher continually evaluates and provides feedback to encourage high quality paraphrasing throughout the year. The teacher explains that all teachers in the school will be using, modeling, and prompting RAP.

Professional competence: Teachers adopt a mindset that is important to embed instruction in learning strategies within content-area instruction. Content teachers learn a shortened form of an instructional sequence for selected learning strategies (e.g., *Paraphrasing*, *Self-Questioning*, etc.) that they can use to provide class-wide instruction. Teachers assist in the generalization of strategies that may *emerge* from Level 1 instructional routines; these emerging strategies may guide students in strategic approaches to content literacy demands such as making comparisons, categorizing, or questioning.

Level 3: Intensive Strategy Instruction

What students do: Students who need more intensive instruction to ensure that they master the strategies presented across the courses offered by core curriculum teachers receive more support to learn them through specialized, more direct, more intense instruction delivered by support personnel.

What teachers do: Special education teachers and support personnel provide more intensive instruction via supplemental instruction sessions delivered in the general education classroom, in a pullout program, through the offering of a separate course, or through beyond-school programs.

What it looks like: For example, the history teacher notices that some students in the class are struggling with paraphrasing. Support personnel develop a plan to reintroduce the

steps of *The Paraphrasing Strategy* (RAP) to this group of students. The special education teacher provides additional models and practice in paraphrasing text. The support personnel may guide the student through paraphrasing paragraph-by paragraph, gradually encouraging students to paraphrase more independently. Explicit feedback and additional practice are provided. Support personnel may work daily for 15-20 minutes a day for three or four weeks until the student gains the confidence and masters applying the strategy. As the strategy is learned, the student sees the strategy being required in his history class and other classes and gets the message that this is a valued skill that is worth learning.

Professional competence: Special education and other support personnel learn how to provide intensive and explicit instruction, practice, and feedback in specific learning strategies and the process of strategic tutoring that shows students how to apply strategies as they complete assignments.

Level 4: Basic Skill Instruction

What students do: Students develop the foundational decoding, fluency, and comprehension skills through specialized, direct, and intensive instruction in reading. Intensive instruction in listening, speaking, and writing can also be part of these services. Services may be delivered in a pullout program, through the offering of a separate course, or through beyond-school programs.

What teachers do: Special education teachers, reading specialists, and speech-language pathologists team to develop intensive and coordinated instructional experiences designed to address severe literacy deficits. Special education teachers and reading specialists will most likely deliver these services. They also assist content teachers in making appropriate modifications in content instruction to accommodate severe literacy deficits.

What it looks like: For example, some students appear to have significant difficulty comprehending because they do not have suf-

ficient decoding skills or they have language problems. Some times, these problems are identified before strategy instruction begins and sometimes the problems emerge during strategy instruction. The staff as a team develops options for courses and support services that directly address deficits that cannot be addressed through less intensive efforts. However, the students can still participated in the history class because the teacher is presenting content in ways that take into consideration poor reading strategies. Intensive research-based programs such as *The Corrective Reading Program* are typically chosen as the curriculum to develop these types of services.

Professional competence: Special education teachers and reading specialists learn research-based approaches to implementing programs that develop foundational literacy skills and strategies to students with disabilities

Level 5: Therapeutic Intervention

What students do: Students with underlying disorders learn the linguistic, related cognitive, metalinguistic, and metacongnive underpinnings they need to acquire content literacy skills and strategies.

What teachers do: Speech-language pathologists deliver curriculum-relevant language therapy in collaboration with special education and other support personnel who are teaching literacy. Speech-language pathologists collaborate with special education teachers to assist content teachers in making appropriate modifications or accommodations in content instruction to address the needs of students with language disorders. Speech-language pathologists work with special education teachers to assist students with language disorders to acquire learning strategies.

What it looks like: For example, students identified as language impaired may have difficulty learning *The Paraphrasing Strategy* even when it is taught by learning strategists in a language-sensitive fashion. They may need clinical intervention delivered by indi-

viduals who can address the linguistic and metalinguistic underpinnings of the *Paraphrasing Strategy* (RAP) and the academic content.

Professional competence: Speech-language pathologists learn curriculum-relevant approaches to language therapy that interface

with other intensive intervention provided to students. Speech-language pathologist and special education teachers learn to collaborate to provide coordinated and integrated services.

*Adapted from: Lenz, K. & Ehren (1999) The strategic content literacy initiative: Focusing on reading in secondary schools. *Stratenotes*, 8.1. (Published by the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning. www.kucrl.org)

A Continuum of Literacy Instruction (Figure 1)

- Level 1:** **Enhance content instruction** (mastery of critical content for *all* regardless of literacy levels)
- Level 2:** **Embedded strategy instruction** (routinely weave strategies within *and* across classes using large group instructional methods)
- Level 3:** **Intensive strategy instruction** (mastery of specific strategies using intensive-explicit instructional sequences)
- Level 4:** **Intensive basic skill instruction** (mastery of entry level literacy skills at the 4th grade level)
- Level 5:** **Therapeutic intervention** (mastery of language underpinnings of curriculum content and learning strategies)
- Tutoring:** **Strategic Tutoring** (extending instructional time through before or after school tutoring)