



# Every Young American a Strong Reader

Issue Papers The High School Leadership Summit

Too many young people cannot read well enough to get a job with a career path, participate in civic responsibilities, or simply enjoy a good book. Theirs is a world diminished by the inability to translate written words into meaningful thoughts and ideas. This low level of *practical literacy* threatens to leave behind millions of America's youth at a time when workplace and society require higher levels of reading, writing, and oral communication skills than ever before.

The *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB) will cause American schools to face the issue of high school reading levels directly. Under the Act, all states have established standards, tests, and accountability systems, with the goal of helping every high school student reach "proficiency" in reading/language arts and mathematics by the end of the 2013-2014 school year.

The Act emphasizes raising overall proficiency levels and also closing persistent achievement gaps among students of different races, ethnicities, and family incomes. Under NCLB, every high school in every state, regardless of whether it receives federal funds, must establish yearly progress measures and publicly report its progress in meeting them.

Much remains to be learned about adolescent literacy. Toward this end, through the Partnership for Reading, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development and the Office of Vocational and Adult Education, the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, and the Institute of Education Sciences within the U.S. Department of Education are supporting research projects that will develop new knowledge in the area of adolescent literacy. The specific focus is on the discovery of cognitive, perceptual, behavioral, genetic, and neurobiological mechanisms that are influential in the continuing development of reading and writing abilities during the adolescent years, and on methods for the identification, prevention, and remediation of reading and writing disabilities in adolescents. The Partnership expects to fund at least three five-year studies of specific secondary reading interventions beginning Fall 2003 ([www.nifl.gov/partnershipforreading/adolescent/default.html](http://www.nifl.gov/partnershipforreading/adolescent/default.html)).

## Facts on Literacy

The state of literacy among American youth is alarming and not getting better:

- An estimated one-third of students enter ninth grade with reading skills that are two or more years below grade level.<sup>1</sup>
- Twenty-eight percent of 12<sup>th</sup>-grade public school students – an estimated 800,000 students – scored below the "basic" level on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) 2002 reading assessment, meaning they could not demonstrate an overall understanding and make some interpretation of texts they were asked to read.<sup>2</sup> Excluded from this count, of course, are the many students who drop out of high school prior to 12<sup>th</sup> grade and who also may have limited reading skills.
- While the reading skills of elementary and middle school students have improved modestly over the past three decades, the reading skills of 17-year olds have not. The average scores of 9- and 13-year-olds on the 1999 NAEP long-term reading assessment were significantly higher than they were in 1971. The average score of 17-year olds, however, was no higher in 1999 than it was in 1971.<sup>3</sup>

- Thirty-five percent of undergraduates participate in a remedial education course during their first two years of postsecondary enrollment. Forty-five percent of the undergraduates enrolled in remedial education during the 1999-2000 school year took a remedial writing course, and thirty-five percent took a remedial reading course.<sup>4</sup>
- Seventy-three percent of employers rate the writing skills of recent high school graduates as fair or poor.<sup>5</sup>

These young people enter a workforce in which there are already too many adults who lack the literacy skills they need to win and succeed in the high-skill jobs that increasingly characterize our economy. The most recent national survey of adult literacy estimated that 40 million adults had low-level literacy skills—capable, for example, of reading a Social Security card and signing on the line marked “signature,” but unable to determine from a pay stub the amount of gross pay they earned.<sup>6</sup> While some of these adults are immigrants who did not attend school in this country, a large number of these men and women attended and exited American high schools without the skills they need to succeed.

## Rising to the Challenge

It is clear that something must be done to improve literacy among high school students. The following provides some examples of strategies that have been developed to do so:

- **Literacy in the high school context.** The National Reading Panel (NRP) identified five basic components of literacy instruction for elementary school students: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Building on NRP’s research, many educators are incorporating additional elements into their efforts to help high school students master reading skills and comprehension.<sup>7</sup> These include:
  - Extended learning time
  - Teacher modeling of reading and thinking strategies
  - Cooperative learning and text-based discussion
  - Self-selected reading at students’ ability-levels
  - On-going progress monitoring.
- **Strategic Reading.** The Center for the Social Organization of Schools at Johns Hopkins University has developed the Strategic Reading program to help high schools address the literacy issue. Under this program, all 9th grade students take a daily 90-minute reading class designed to develop reading and fluency skills. By using daily mini-lessons on reading strategies; verbal modeling of reading and thinking skills; cooperative learning teams for text discussion; and extensive independent reading, this course assists students in gaining on average 2 years in reading ability for each year spent of instruction.<sup>8</sup>
- **Strategic Instruction.** (Deshler, University of Kansas). The Strategic Instruction Model (SIM) was developed over a 20-year period and involved \$45 million of research. This comprehensive instructional system encompasses revised curriculum materials that take into account different learning styles, routines teachers can use to address the needs of learners in their classrooms, and specific steps at-risk individuals can follow to improve their chances of academic success. (<http://www.ku-crl.org/htmlfiles/sim.html>)
- **Corrective Reading.** (Grossen, McGraw Hill) is designed to help students who have fallen behind in their reading skills and for whom other methods have not been successful. It allows students to use a decoding program, a comprehension program, or both. Corrective Reading includes a point system based on realistic goals to motivate students who often expect to fail. ([http://www.sra4kids.com/product\\_info/direct/standard.phtml?CoreProductID=16&navid=6](http://www.sra4kids.com/product_info/direct/standard.phtml?CoreProductID=16&navid=6))
- **Language!** (Greene, Sopris West) is a comprehensive literacy intervention curriculum for grades 1-12. Language! includes instruction in reading, writing, spelling, grammar, language, and vocabulary. (<http://www.language-usa.net/>)

- **Read 180** (Scholastic, Inc.) offers specially designed instructions for students at the elementary, intermediate, and high school levels – levels A, B and C. The sponsor claims Stage C ensures that high school students and adults, at all reading levels, have access to high-interest and age appropriate content. The nine topic CDs and over 50 paperback and audio books, ranging in topics from history to sports, provide older students with materials intended to be engaging for a variety of interests. (<http://teacher.scholastic.com/read180/about/index.htm#highs>)
- **PLATO software.** This six-part, computer-based series includes reading content that emphasizes learner outcomes, including word recognition and vocabulary enrichment, development of essential reading skills, and support of strategies used by fluent readers. Audio support and coaching in the PLATO software build skills and encourage student achievement. ([http://www.plato.com/reading\\_secondary.asp](http://www.plato.com/reading_secondary.asp))

## Writing Skills

Writing and reading are equally critical to achieving true literacy. Unfortunately, many students who can read with proficiency cannot communicate their ideas in writing. In April 2003, The College Board released *The Neglected “R”*: *The Need for a Writing Revolution*, a report produced by the National Commission on Writing, a blue-ribbon group composed of university leaders, public school superintendents and teachers, and an advisory panel of writing experts. The Commission stressed that writing is essential to educational and career success, and recommended a wide range of policy and program steps that can be taken to raise the level of writing in high schools and colleges.<sup>9</sup>

## Conclusion

Reading (decoding, fluency and comprehension) is a gateway skill that allows students to access the knowledge and skills they need to acquire through their high school education. We cannot allow today's group of high school students to leave high school with inadequate reading skills, and hope that the next generation of students will arrive at high school with higher levels of proficiency in reading. Nor should we focus exclusively on students who enter high school with lower level reading and writing skills. To prepare young people for the many challenges that await them as adults, high schools must enhance and strengthen the reading and writing skills of all students throughout their high school careers.

Thus, every American high school—from the affluent suburban school to the chronically struggling urban school to the newest charter school—will need to organize itself in a way that ensures literacy is a key priority for every student. Through the Secretary’s High School Initiative, federal, state, and local policymakers will work closely with America's high schools to help reach this important goal.

### The Strategic Literacy Initiative

Teaching reading to high school students has more to do with unpacking than decoding. This philosophy is at the core of a highly touted initiative, developed by Oakland-based WestEd, that focuses on training secondary teachers of all subjects to help students hone their reading skills.

Most adolescents who struggle with reading are able to sound out and pronounce, or “decode” words, says Cynthia Greenleaf, associate director of the seven-year-old Strategic Literacy Initiative (SLI). What they need more help with is “unpacking” a word to learn its meaning and relevance within the context of other words.

SLI’s Reading Apprenticeship framework is an attempt to change that mind-set. It is built around the notion that all high school teachers, regardless of the subject they teach, ought to treat reading instruction as an essential component of their curriculum. Through various SLI professional development programs, including a summer institute, teachers learn how to serve as “master” readers of subject-area texts to their student apprentices. It is not an additional course but a change in teacher mind-set that SLI advocates.

More information regarding the Strategic Literacy Initiative is available on the WestEd website ([www.wested.org](http://www.wested.org)).

## **Five Levels of Literacy Support**

Because of the broad array and varying complexity of student needs and circumstances, literacy programs must be customized to fit the needs of different students. The University of Kansas Center for Research in Learning developed one way of thinking about the challenges facing high school, called The Content Literacy Continuum. The Continuum categorizes literacy support into five levels.

### **Level 1: Ensuring mastery of critical content in all subject area classes.**

All teachers, not just those who specialize in serving students with learning disabilities, can use tools that will help students better understand and remember the content presented in class. These include graphic organizers, prompted outlines, structured reviews, guided discussions, and other instructional tactics that will modify and enhance the curriculum content in ways that promote its understanding and mastery.

### **Level 2: Weaving learning strategies within rigorous general education classes.**

Level 2 goes beyond the use of organizational aids and class discussions to instruction on selected learning strategies, such as how students can ask questions of themselves to check their understanding of what is being taught or how to use memory strategies to remember critical information for a test.

### **Level 3: Supporting mastery of learning strategies for targeted students.**

At Level 3, students with more severe literacy problems receive specialized, intensive instruction from someone other than the subject teacher (such as a special education, study-skills, or resource room teacher).

### **Level 4: Developing intensive instructional options for students who lack foundational skills.**

These students may have severe learning disabilities, such as a specific underlying language disorder, or they may be students whose first language is not English. Students assigned to Level 4 interventions learn content literacy skills and strategies through specialized, direct, and intensive instruction in listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Reading specialists and special education teachers work together at this level to develop intensive and coordinated instructional experiences designed to address severe literacy deficits.

### **Level 5: Developing intensive clinical options for language intervention.**

Level 5 students, who are those with underlying language disorders, need specialized linguistic and cognitive underpinnings to acquire content skills and strategies. At this level, speech pathologists generally deliver one-on-one or small-group language therapy that is relevant to the high school curriculum. They typically collaborate with other support personnel who teach literacy skills and with core subject matter teachers.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Balfanz, R., McPartland, J. and Shaw, A. *Re-Conceptualizing Extra Help for High School Students in a High Standards Era*. (Baltimore, Maryland: Center for Social Organization of Schools, Johns Hopkins University. 2002).
- <sup>2</sup> US Department of Education, NCES. *2002 NAEP Reading Report Card*. Downloaded from <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/main2002/2003524.pdf> Student estimate based on U.S. Department of Education, NCES. 2002. *Projections of Education Statistics to 2012 (NCES 2002-030)*. Washington, DC.
- <sup>3</sup> US Department of Education, NCES. *NAEP 1999 Trends in Academic Progress: Three Decades of Student Performance*. Downloaded from <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard>.
- <sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Education, NCES. 2001 *1999-2000 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study*.
- <sup>5</sup> Public Agenda. 2002. *Reality Check 2002*. New York, NY.
- <sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of Education, NCES. 1993. *Adult Literacy in America*. Washington, DC.
- <sup>7</sup> National Institute for Literacy. 2003. *Putting Reading First: The Research Building Blocks for Teaching Children to Read, Kindergarten through Grade 3*. Downloaded from <http://www.nifl.gov>. Washington, DC.
- <sup>8</sup> Johns Hopkins University. 2001. *Strategic Reading*. Presentation at the November 2001 Improving America's Schools Conference, Reno, NV.
- <sup>9</sup> College Board. 2003. *Process Writing and Writing Across the Curriculum*. ([http://www.writingcommission.org/prod\\_downloads/writingcom/neglectedr.pdf](http://www.writingcommission.org/prod_downloads/writingcom/neglectedr.pdf)).

This paper is one of a series produced in conjunction with the U.S. Secretary of Education's ***High School Leadership Summit***. For more information about the U.S. Department of Education's work on high schools, visit <http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/hsinit/index.html>.