

## Federal Support for Adolescent Literacy: A Solid Investment

In 1997, alarmed by low levels of reading achievement in America's schools, Congress funded a blue-ribbon National Reading Panel and directed it to conduct an exhaustive review of more than thirty years of research into the teaching and learning of reading. The resulting report (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) is now widely viewed as an exemplar of the sort of useful, trustworthy guidance that the education research community can and should provide to federal policymakers. Indeed, its recommendations laid the groundwork for the Reading First program (included in Title I of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002), which has, to date, provided \$5 billion in funding to the states to support research-based reading instruction in the first few years of school.

It is important to note, though, that while Reading First focuses only on grades K–3, the National Reading Panel report was not limited to research on early literacy. Actually, it surveyed the research on reading instruction *throughout* grades K–12, and it can provide a solid foundation for the federal Striving Readers program—which supports literacy instruction in the middle and high school grades—just as it did for Reading First.

Today, fewer than a third of America's adolescents meet grade-level expectations for reading; among low-income students, the number is closer to one in seven (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). Given that advanced literacy skills are fast becoming the prerequisite for succeeding in college, technical training programs, and entry-level jobs of all kinds, these numbers suggest an extremely pressing social and economic crisis that cannot be solved by investing in early reading programs alone. In past decades, the nation's secondary school students might have been able to settle for just the basics of literacy, but now they must reach for higher levels of proficiency.

It is imperative that federal policymakers invest in high-quality reading and writing instruction for students in grades 4–12. Fortunately, the research base in this area is strong and growing, and it offers a solid foundation for effective policymaking.

### Among researchers, a strong consensus

When Reading First was launched five years ago, many policymakers believed that if students could master the basics of literacy in the first few years of school, that would be sufficient to carry them successfully through the middle and high school years. Increasingly, though, research has made it clear that students need ongoing support in order to handle the more difficult kinds of

### What helps middle and high school students to become better readers?

#### 15 program elements known to make a difference:

1. Direct, explicit instruction in reading comprehension
2. Reading instruction focused on academic content
3. Attention to student motivation and self-directed learning
4. Collaborative learning
5. Strategic tutoring
6. Opportunities for students to read diverse, high-level texts
7. Intensive instruction and practice in writing
8. A technology component
9. Ongoing assessment of students' skills and needs
10. Periodic assessment of students' mastery of standards
11. Extensive time reserved for literacy learning
12. Professional development opportunities for teachers
13. Opportunities for teachers to work in teams
14. Strong leadership
15. Comprehensive and coordinated planning

from: Biancarosa, G., and Snow, C. (2004). *Reading next: A vision for action and research in middle and high school literacy. (A report to Carnegie Corporation of New York.)* Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education.

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reading and writing they must do in the upper grades. For example, teachers must continue to work with students to help them read fluently, to expand their vocabularies, and to make sense of the complex and increasingly specialized materials they encounter in the academic content areas.

Unless they receive ongoing support, students who enter the fourth grade behind in reading will never catch up to their peers. And many of those who do read well going into the fourth grade will lose momentum, becoming eighth or twelfth graders who struggle to interpret a novel, follow instructions in the chemistry lab, understand important historical documents, or even get through the daily newspaper.

In 2004, the Alliance for Excellent Education 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* (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004), called attention to many of the National Reading Panel's findings that had been overlooked due to the earlier policy focus on grades K–3. Specifically, *Reading Next* described fifteen teaching strategies and schoolwide reforms that rigorous scientific research has shown to have positive effects on adolescent literacy achievement. (See box on preceding page.)

Over the three years since *Reading Next* was published, the nation's adolescent literacy crisis finally 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 (e.g., ACT, 2006), fleshed out what is known about effective instruction in this area (Graham & Perin, 2007; Bacevich & Salinger, 2006; International Reading Association, 2006), and offered a wide range of practical recommendations directed to specific audiences, such as governors (National Governors Association, 2005), state and local school boards (Haynes, 2005; National School Boards Association, 2006), and school administrators and teachers (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2005; National Council of Teachers of English, 2006).

Furthermore, the most recent review of the research on secondary literacy instruction—commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education—strongly reiterates and expands upon the findings of *Reading Next* and the subsequent reports (Torgesen et al., 2007). It concludes that in grades four through twelve, 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.

## In the experts' own words

The Alliance for Excellent Education asked several of the nation's foremost experts in literacy instruction, "Is the existing research base sufficient to justify a major federal investment in adolescent literacy?" Here's what they said:

"During the past decade, researchers and practitioners have made remarkable progress in finding ways to address the needs of struggling adolescent readers. While much is yet to be learned, we have a solid base from which to close the achievement gap for older learners. The challenge before us is to effectively use all that we know!"

—Donald D. Deshler, Director, University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning

"There is a large body of research that can be brought to bear on adolescent literacy problems. While we need to know more, we can help struggling and striving adolescent readers right now if we apply what we already know."

—Michael Kamil, Professor of Education, Stanford University, and member of the National Reading Panel

"Education has finally moved to evidence-based practice for the elementary grades. Why should our teens be taught with any less rigor?! There is a sufficiently rich evidence base to guide instructional practice and improve the literacy skills of our middle and high school students. We need to systemically implement it. We don't know all we need to know, but we certainly know enough to make a difference for these young people right now."

—Peggy McCardle, Chief, Child Development and Behavior Branch, National Institute for Child Health and Human Development (NICHD)



## A clear, comprehensive policy agenda

Across the country, many efforts are underway to translate the recent reports and recommendations into real improvements in reading and writing instruction. These include countless small-scale reforms now in progress in schools, districts, and teacher education programs, as well as larger efforts such as Just Read, Florida!, the Alabama Reading Initiative, and many other state-wide reform plans currently being designed and implemented with the support of the National Governors Association, the National Association of State Boards of Education, and other organizations.

Additionally, the federal Striving Readers initiative, created in 2004, awarded its first round of grants in 2006, funding eight multischool sites to implement literacy plans that include professional development programs and targeted interventions designed to help “struggling readers” (a term commonly used to denote middle and high school students who read two or more years behind grade level). In early 2007, bills were introduced in the U.S. House and Senate to authorize the Striving Readers program and expand it to serve students in every state.

Remarkably, even though adolescent literacy has become an “extremely hot” topic (as the International Reading Association, 2007, found in a recent survey), the country has seen none of the scholarly divisiveness or rancor that have characterized debates about reading instruction in the early grades.

In adolescent literacy, there are no “reading wars.” In fact, researchers today share a powerful consensus as to the nature of the adolescent literacy crisis and about the kinds of investments that are most likely to improve student achievement in reading and writing. Among the recent research studies and policy reports, several recommendations are repeated time and again, and they come through loud and clear:

- Policymakers should encourage schools, districts, and states to articulate clear, comprehensive, and actionable plans for improving adolescent literacy instruction.
- Policymakers should invest in assessment tools that schools can use to identify struggling readers in grades 4–12, assign them to appropriate classes, keep track of their progress, and adjust instruction to meet their needs.
- Policymakers should invest in targeted interventions that will enable students who read far below grade level to make rapid progress in reading, helping them catch up to their peers as quickly as possible.
- Policymakers should invest in ongoing professional development programs designed to help all middle and high school teachers provide effective literacy instruction.
- Policymakers should support and invest in accountability systems that give teachers strong incentives to provide effective reading and writing instruction in the upper grades.
- Policymakers should invest in ongoing research on and evaluation of strategies to improve adolescent literacy.

### In the experts’ own words

“There is a substantial body of high quality research evidence that provides useful directions for how to improve reading achievement for older students. This evidence is particularly rich with regard to what needs to be done to teach vocabulary and reading comprehension to striving readers.”

—Timothy Shanahan, President of the International Reading Association, 2006–07, and member of the National Reading Panel

“If we could effectively apply the instructional knowledge we currently have in schools and classrooms across the country, I have no doubts that we would begin to see improvements in adolescent literacy almost immediately.”

—Joseph Torgesen, Director, Florida Center for Reading Research



## Time for action

These strategies may sound like common sense, but the country has not yet pursued them in any sort of concerted, systematic way. If widely implemented, they would help millions of students to improve their literacy skills, greatly increasing their chances to succeed in their middle and high school classes, earn a diploma, and continue on to college or to job training programs.

Moreover, these strategies are grounded in a solid research base, and they have already drawn powerful statements of support from educators, literacy experts, professional associations, and policy leaders alike.

In order to build upon recent progress in early reading instruction, policymakers must extend their support for the middle and high school grades. It is time for the nation to make a serious investment in improving adolescent literacy.

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