



NATIONAL SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION

# THE NEXT CHAPTER

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**A SCHOOL BOARD GUIDE TO IMPROVING  
ADOLESCENT LITERACY**







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ADOLESCENT LITERACY**

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# Foreword

The job of educating every student to compete in our increasingly competitive world is as exciting as it is challenging. Armed with new technologies and visions of schools without walls that engage students in learning across traditional boundaries of geography and time, educators are poised to transform our middle schools and high schools into institutions of educational excellence. At the same time, the challenge of closing the achievement gap for millions of older students who do not have the advanced reading, writing, and critical thinking skills needed to succeed in this highly competitive environment is a daunting one.

Literacy is the foundation for learning, and yet 70 percent of our middle and high school students cannot read proficiently. Our national investment in teaching reading well in the early grades is beginning to pay off. From 1999 to 2005, our nation's fourth-grade reading level has significantly improved, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress. At the same time our eighth-grade scores remained flat, and 12th-graders have shown no progress over the past 30 years.

Educators are getting a wake-up call as they examine the data from their state and district reading assessments. Struggling readers exist in every school. In our inner cities and poor rural areas, it is not uncommon to find 30 to 50 percent of entering ninth-graders reading at what NAEP defines as the “below basic” level. If the school or school district has no plan in place to accelerate the learning of these students, most will fail to earn enough credits to graduate from high school.

Literacy is the key to high school graduation. We know that an eighth-grader's reading level is the strongest predictor of whether he or she will succeed in high school. Students reading in the bottom quartile are 20 times more likely to drop out of high school than students reading in the top quartile.

Literacy is the driver of academic improvement across all subjects. In its recent report, *Reading Between the Lines*, ACT found that student readiness for college-level reading appears to substantially affect readiness for college-level work in other areas, specifically English, mathematics, and science. Yet, few middle and high school content-area teachers today know how to reinforce literacy skills while teaching in their own subject areas.

*The Next Chapter: A School Board Guide to Improving Adolescent Literacy* gives school board leaders a set of research-based strategies that will allow them to work effectively with schools and communities to raise the literacy level of all students. Although every school district focuses on reading, few have adopted a comprehensive and coordinated K-12 literacy strategy that supports students not only in “learning to read” but going the next steps in making sure they “read to learn.” The good news is that we know it is never too late to teach reading. By asking the right questions and supporting data-driven policies for adolescent literacy, school boards can help districts put the strategies in place to meet this challenge.

*Susan Frost*  
*President*  
*Education Priorities*





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Finally, we are tremendously grateful to Rebecca Jones, the guidebook writer, for her thorough and meticulous research and the countless hours of interviews she conducted with adolescent literacy researchers and school district representatives.





# Preface

In today's rapidly changing global society, we know all too well that being able to read and write are critical prerequisites for success. But what is your role as a school board leader in ensuring that young people graduate from high school equipped with those essential skills?

To help focus your thinking about your leadership role, the National School Boards Association has created *The Next Chapter: A School Board Guide to Improving Adolescent Literacy*. This guidebook has two primary purposes:

- To inform school board leaders—including local school board members and state school boards association staff—about the importance of the adolescent literacy issue, and
- To assist school board leaders in informing and supporting district efforts to increase literacy levels among students in grades four through 12.

*The Next Chapter* presents eight strategies that are based on what we know about adolescent literacy as well as best practices in school governance. Each strategy includes examples from districts around the country and poses a set of guiding questions for school boards to consider. The guidebook concludes with a discussion of the role of policy and recommendations for school board action. Finally, the appendices contain a wealth of additional tools and resources for you to use and share with colleagues.

NSBA is proud of the growing momentum among school board leaders to focus on student achievement, and we hope that *The Next Chapter* aids you in that critical work. We look forward to learning of your successes in helping students make the vital move from “learning to read” to “reading to learn.”

*Anne L. Bryant*  
*Executive Director*  
*National School Boards Association*

*Elizabeth Partoyan*  
*Director, Research, Training, and Member Services*  
*National School Boards Association*



# Introduction

Once upon a time Americans considered poor reading ability among high school graduates a national crisis. The solution, almost everyone agreed, was to teach every child to read by the end of third grade. If a child could read well in third grade, the reasoning went, he or she would read even better in all the grades that followed.

Susan Frost, former adviser to Secretary of Education Richard Riley in the Clinton Administration and founder of Education Priorities, Inc., remembers those optimistic days. “We thought teaching every child to read well by the end of third grade would take care of the problem,” she says, “but we were wrong.”

The 2005 results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)—the nation’s report card—show just how wrong we were. Although fourth-graders continued to show slight improvement in their reading scores, the scores for eighth-graders continued to lag behind expectations. According to the NAEP results, 71 percent of U.S. eighth-graders scored below proficiency—or grade level—on reading. That includes 29 percent who scored “below basic.” These students had trouble even understanding the words on the page in front of them.

The numbers are surely better in some school districts, but they’re even worse in others. In the end, no district escapes problems with literacy in grades four through 12, the grade span commonly covered by the term *adolescent literacy*. “School boards should know there is [an adolescent literacy] problem within their districts, and it is a significant problem,” says Don Deshler, a University of Kansas researcher and literacy expert. “Our data shows us there are struggling adolescent readers in *every* district.”

## What is the problem?

Adolescent literacy involves more than the ability to read and write; it also refers to the entire set of skills and abilities that students need to read, write, think, and communicate about text, including electronic and multimedia materials. Even college-bound students have trouble with these skills: According to *Reading Between the Lines*, a 2005 study of ACT-tested students, only half were ready for college-level reading.

As the NAEP figures above indicate, literacy is a problem for two sets of students in grades four through 12. Those in the first—and largest—group might meet state proficiency standards in literacy, but still have problems with comprehension and fluency. They can read simple texts such as newspapers or instruction manuals, but often can’t understand specialized or academic materials. Researchers say these students desperately need help comprehending academic language and often benefit dramatically from having literacy instruction embedded in courses ranging from physical education to calculus.

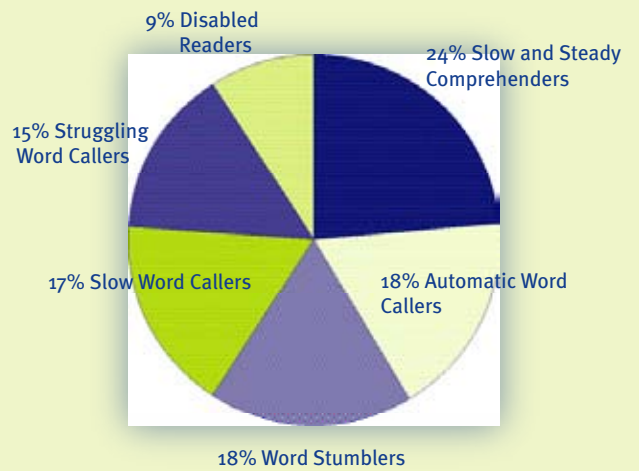
The second group of students cannot read a simple news story or user’s manual. These “struggling readers,” researchers say, need intense intervention to help them. (See box on next page.)



## WHAT'S THE STRUGGLE?

Why is reading so difficult for some kids? To find out, researchers Mary Riddle Buly of Western Washington University and Sheila Valencia of the University of Washington studied 108 fourth-graders who had failed the reading portion of the Washington Assessment of Student Learning.

Buly and Valencia used diagnostic assessments to measure students' skills in word identification, phonemic awareness, comprehension, reading speed, and fluency. In a 2003 report for the University of Washington's Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, they divided struggling readers into six types:



1. “Slow and steady comprehenders” (24 percent), who can identify words and comprehend relatively well, but read slowly.
2. “Automatic word callers” (18 percent), who can read words quickly and accurately but fail to understand the meaning of the words. Most of these students are English-language learners.
3. “Word stumblers” (18 percent), who usually understand the meaning of words but have difficulty with word identification.
4. “Slow word callers” (17 percent), who identify words accurately but slowly, and struggle with meaning.
5. “Struggling word callers” (15 percent), who have problems with both comprehension and word identification.
6. “Disabled readers” (9 percent), who are poor at word identification, fluency, and meaning. Most of these students read at the first-grade level or below.

For the complete text of Buly and Valencia's report, *Meeting the Needs of Failing Readers: Cautions and Considerations for State Policy*, see <http://depts.washington.edu/ctpmail/PDFs/Reading-MRBSV-04-2003.pdf>.

Researchers say the distinct needs of these two sets of students require a two-pronged approach to adolescent literacy: First, *all* teachers—not just language arts or English teachers—should be using literacy-based strategies to teach their course content. Second, schools should provide intense literacy intervention for students who need it.

### Looking to research for answers

Ten years ago, researchers knew very little about improving literacy among older students, but studies across the country over the past few years have produced a significant body of evidence that shows what schools need to do to help older students who struggle with the written word. In *Reading Next—A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy*, a 2004 report to Carnegie Corporation, researchers laid out 15 evidence-based recommendations for changes in both teaching strategies and the infrastructure of schools (See Appendix A for the list of recommendations from *Reading Next*.)

*The Next Chapter*, drawing on recommendations from *Reading Next* and the National School Boards Association’s *The Key Work of School Boards*, looks at what school board members need to know and do to improve reading, writing, and communication beyond grade three.

### The school board’s role

While most school board members will never personally teach an older child to read or write better, it’s still important for board members to understand the issues surrounding adolescent literacy. As the Iowa Association of School Boards found in its landmark *Lighthouse Study*, school boards in high-achieving districts are “far more knowledgeable about teaching and learning issues” than boards in low-achieving districts. Boards in high-achieving districts, according to the study, are also much more likely to use “data and other information on student needs and results to make decisions.”

With that in mind, board members need to learn about the issues involved in improving adolescent literacy. *The Next Chapter* presents eight strategies, aligned with *Reading Next* and *The Key Work of School Boards*, for helping students at the district level:

- Identifying students’ literacy needs.
- Making adolescent literacy a district-wide priority.
- Extending time for literacy.
- Providing effective professional development to help teachers deliver literacy instruction across the curriculum.
- Finding and supporting literacy leaders.
- Aligning the district’s resources to support scientifically proven literacy programs for both high achievers and low achievers.
- Evaluating programs and assessing performance continuously.
- Developing community support for literacy from pre-K through 12th grade.

It’s a good idea to begin by identifying students’ literacy needs, but after that, the strategies can be used in any order or even at the same time. Board members need not become experts in these strategies. “The board doesn’t go in and say, ‘Okay, here’s a great program we ought to do,’” says Richard Frerichs, a board member in a Lancaster County, Penn-

sylvania, district that has established a successful literacy program in its high school. “That’s not our business. We’re not intrusive. The English teachers, the math teachers, know better about what has to be done than we do, and we listen to what they have to say. But, of course, we ask a lot of questions.”

### **Board members want to know ...**

As experienced board members know, asking questions is an extremely important part of being a school board member.

“Board members bring a wide variety of knowledge, skills, and expertise to the board table,” says Angela Peifer, senior director of board development at the Illinois Association of School Boards, “but for most board members, that expertise doesn’t include teaching and learning—the primary work of schools. Fortunately, being effective leaders for public schools doesn’t require board members to have all the answers, but it does require that they ask the right and, sometimes, hard questions.”

Each section of this guidebook ends with a list of such questions. These questions—suggested by researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and board members in districts with successful literacy programs—are aimed at helping board members explore the state of literacy in their own districts.

For starters, here are a couple of questions to consider as you begin to use this guidebook:

- Do we have literacy goals for our district? What are they?
- How do problems in literacy limit our middle and high school students’ success?







# *Eight Strategies for Improving Adolescent Literacy*

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How can a school district improve the literacy skills of adolescents? Many researchers recommend identifying students' literacy needs at the outset of a literacy program. Then, with that data in hand, the school staff can pursue the strategies identified in this report. There is no particular order for pursuing these strategies, and many can be pursued at the same time.

## ■■■ STRATEGY ONE

### IDENTIFY STUDENTS' LITERACY NEEDS

In the 1990s, teachers at Muskegon High School in Michigan “kept noticing that each year’s [freshman class] seemed less capable of reading than the group that had preceded them, particularly in the area of comprehension,” says former principal Arlyn Zack. “We also had some kids who really had never had any success in unlocking the phonetic codes.”

Standardized tests revealed how serious the problems were. “These kids were coming in two, two and a half years below where they should have been” in reading, Zack says.

He knew the school had to do something, but what?

Meanwhile in North Carolina, Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools officials were understandably proud of the 10,000-student district’s reading scores, which were the highest in the state. But in 1997, well before the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) required it, district officials began teasing out the reading scores for minority students. They found, as others have, that while comprehension and fluency are problematic among students of all backgrounds, the problems are exacerbated by race and poverty. In Chapel Hill-Carrboro, only 58 percent of African-American ninth-graders were reading at grade level, compared with 91 percent of white ninth-graders.

“The board was really upset when they realized how bad it was,” remembers Mary Clayton, the district’s English and language arts coordinator. “They said, ‘Do something.’”

In today’s NCLB world, many school boards are imploring district officials to “do something” about the struggling readers in their middle and high schools. Not everything being tried works. What sets apart Muskegon, Chapel Hill-Carrboro, and the other districts in this guidebook is that their efforts have paid off with significantly higher reading scores and improved literacy for all students.



Each of these districts started by collecting information about the literacy skills of their students, and they continue to collect information today. As the head of a successful middle-school literacy program in Texas says, “We’ve got data. Data is our life.”

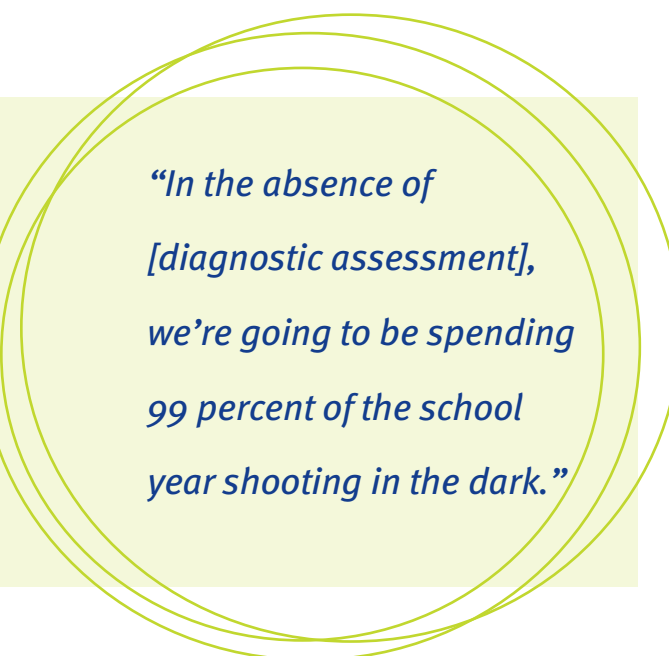
### Using data effectively

State tests and NCLB requirements have left some school districts with more data than they know what to do with, but researchers advise them to study it carefully—and then to collect even more.

State tests identify students who are reading below proficiency, but don’t reveal *why* they’re such poor readers. Is their problem with decoding? Fluency? Comprehension? Vocabulary? To find out, diagnostic assessments are needed.

Many researchers consider diagnostic assessment the most important part of any literacy program. Some districts train teachers to evaluate students as they attempt to read passages aloud. Others rely on published diagnostic assessment

tools that identify the specific skills—such as comprehension, word identification, or phonemic awareness—that are eluding students. (See Appendix D for a list of diagnostic assessments that are commercially available.)



*“In the absence of [diagnostic assessment], we’re going to be spending 99 percent of the school year shooting in the dark.”*

Whether diagnostic assessments are designed by a district’s research department or purchased from a publisher, they require investments of both time and money. “In the absence of [diagnostic assessment],” researcher Deshler says, “we’re going to be spending 99 percent of the school year shooting in the dark.”

Researchers know reading comprehension is the most common literacy problem in grades four through 12, but it’s by no means the only problem—and isn’t necessarily the major problem in any given district. English-language learners, for instance, might well have trouble sounding out *bat* and *cat*. Then again, they might not. As

Deborah Short of the Center for Applied Linguistics points out, not all English-language learners have the same needs, and much depends on the level of students’ proficiency in their first language—which illustrates, again, the importance of diagnostic assessment.

### The transforming power of data

When studied carefully, diagnostic assessments and data collection produce insights that can lead to changes in the entire culture of a school district. School board members in Iowa’s Sioux Center Community School admit they hadn’t paid much attention to the details of data and assessments before the 1,000-student district became one of the Iowa Association of School Boards’ Lighthouse districts in a pilot program that, among other things, teaches board members how to make data-based decisions.

“As with most boards, we thought things were going okay,” Sioux Center board member Bruce Roetman says. But when Lighthouse project leaders showed the board how to study and analyze students’ scores on state tests, Sioux Cen-

ter board members were surprised to realize almost half of their students were reading below grade level. “We couldn’t live with that,” Roetman says. “It was unacceptable. ... It was time to put our money where our mouth was”—and put a district-wide emphasis on literacy.

### Guiding Questions

- ⦿ What do our district’s scores on state assessments tell us about our students’ literacy skills?
- ⦿ How are all of our students doing, including those identified as NCLB subgroups?
- ⦿ How are our students doing over time? How do our fourth-grade reading scores compare with our eighth-grade scores? How do our ninth-grade reading scores correlate, over time, with our graduation rates?
- ⦿ If all students aren’t improving in reading and writing, what is our district doing to improve that situation?

## ■■■■ STRATEGY TWO

### MAKE ADOLESCENT LITERACY A PRIORITY IN YOUR DISTRICT

Visitors to a Sioux Center school today know almost immediately where the district’s priorities lie. A community volunteer listens to a fourth-grader read aloud, middle school teachers discuss strategies for increasing students’ reading comprehension at their weekly after-school study sessions, and even high school hallways are filled with pictures of Sioux Center students and staff members who were “caught reading.”

“If you walked in here and said, ‘What is your district focused on?’ everyone could articulate it,” says Matt Ludwig, principal of Sioux Center Middle School. “They would say, ‘We need to improve reading comprehension for all kids.’”

The focus is so absolute that when guidance counselors returned from a conference with ideas for implementing a new program, Superintendent Pat O’Donnell said, “Show me how this increases reading comprehension. ... If it doesn’t, we’re not going to detour from our current goal in getting all students to read at grade level.”

The school board has made increasing all students’ reading comprehension the district’s one and only strategic goal for the past four years. Every month, board members hold their own two-hour study sessions devoted to literacy.

“They’re not telling us *how* to do anything,” principal Ludwig says, “but they want to know *what* we’re doing.”

### Reading and learning in Oregon

Another district that puts a clear priority on literacy is South Lane School District, 20 miles south of Eugene, Oregon. Studying the 3,000-student district’s reading scores convinced Superintendent Krista Parent to put adolescent literacy

*“If you walked in here and said, ‘What is your district focused on?’ everyone could articulate it.”*

on the district's front burner. "We had 90 or 95 percent of our kids meeting or exceeding the [state reading] standards in elementary school," she said. "In eighth grade or 10th grade, those numbers dropped into the 40s or sometimes the 35th percentile."


Nationwide, the drop in reading performance—and student achievement—after third grade is so common in schools that researchers have a name for it: "the fourth-grade slump." Stanford University literacy researcher Michael Kamil attributes the slump, which continues well into middle school, to the way reading instruction is organized.

"Reading instruction in the primary grades, one through three, is largely story-based," he says. "It's about reading stories, not about reading information. Suddenly in fourth grade, kids are thrown into departmental organization," where they have to read history, science, mathematics, and other subjects. "We haven't taught kids how to read that stuff."

With that slump on her mind and in her district, Parent pored over *Reading Next*. She was so compelled by the report that, over the next 18 months, she made sure South Lane followed up on every one of its 15 recommendations for teaching and supporting adolescent literacy in schools. This meant changes in everything from school schedules to professional development.

The South Lane school board supported a new district slogan, *Learning to Read, Reading to Learn*. Other districts and literacy advocates also have adopted this slogan, which Parent says makes a point: "We work hard at teaching reading at the elementary level, and by fourth or fifth grade, kids are expected to know how to read. All of a sudden they're no longer learning to read but reading to learn, and that's a whole different set of skills."

Under the new slogan, district and school administrators developed personal literacy plans as well as literacy plans for their schools. Teachers and administrators joined school-based reading groups, for which many earned continuing-education credits.



***"We have to have every fiber of every person in the district involved with this."***

The biweekly principals' meetings stopped dwelling on procedural issues—which could be handled by e-mail—and started exploring literacy. At one meeting, elementary school principals explained how their schools were implementing research on teaching reading at the elementary level; then secondary school principals took the floor and explained how they were using *Reading Next* as the basis for improving adolescent literacy.

"We wanted them both understanding what each other was doing with learning to read and reading to learn," Parent explains.

The school board picked up the reading habit, too. Board members read *The Five Habits of High-Impact School Boards* by Doug Eadie (ScarecrowEducation, 2004), then held a workshop to discuss its implications for South Lane. More than a year later, board members still cite the book as they talk about the district's core literacy mission.



“We’re wanting our school board to think more about our core mission—which is teaching and learning,” says Parent. “It’s easy for school boards to fall into ‘let’s talk about facilities, let’s talk about the budget,’ and not make the connection between those issues and what our core mission is really about. So it was really important to bring the school board into this conversation.”

The South Lane board heartily endorses the district’s all-out attempt to focus on literacy. “We have to have every *fiber* of every person in the district involved with this,” says board chair Leslie Rubinstein.

Of course, slogans, reading groups, and board support can’t raise literacy scores by themselves. For that, you need major changes in the classroom.

### Guiding Questions

- ⊙ What is our district’s core mission?
- ⊙ How does our core mission support student literacy across grades K-12?
- ⊙ Are our district goals aligned with our core mission? Is adolescent literacy included among our district goals?

## ■■■■ STRATEGY THREE

### MAKE TIME FOR LITERACY

One of *Reading Next*’s recommendations is to provide every student in grades four through 12 with two to four hours of literacy instruction every day. For most students in literacy-minded schools, this means receiving literacy instruction and support throughout the day, not just in language arts but embedded in math, art, science, and other courses. “Even the woodshop teacher needs to be doing this,” says South Lane school board member Rubinstein. “There’s vocabulary in woodshop.”

When done properly, embedded literacy instruction benefits both “the advanced kid who’s ready to take Advanced Placement courses and the kid who’s just learned to decode and is lost in science class,” says Rafael Heller, senior policy associate at the Alliance for Excellent Education. But those who are reading two or more grades below grade level also need something more.

#### Time for purposeful intervention

Many middle and high school students need more concentrated literacy instruction than can be embedded in an English or history class. These kids are so far behind that they need intensive—and, yes, expensive—intervention.

*“We’ve ignored this broken bone a long time. We’re probably going to have to re-break it and put an expensive cast on it.”*

Whether districts design these interventions in their research departments or buy intervention programs off the shelf, there's no quick, easy, or cheap solution for an eighth-grader who can't read. "We've ignored this broken bone a long time," says the University of Kansas' Deshler. "We're probably going to have to re-break it and put an expensive cast on it."

In districts with successful literacy programs, struggling readers are grouped to form small intervention classes, or sometimes one-on-one tutoring sessions, where they concentrate on their identified problems. Some schools make a practice of training and then releasing teachers from other duties so they can work one-on-one with the neediest kids.

Developing a master schedule around these small and private sessions can be daunting, "but what are we there for?" asks Zack, former principal of Muskegon High School. "It doesn't do any good to assess needs unless you're ready to do something about them."

### **Making time in a master schedule**

Researchers say students with the most serious reading problems need at least 90 minutes of intense reading instruction every day. School leaders have learned a few tricks to make time for this intervention:

- Schools following a block schedule often put struggling readers in a 90-minute block of daily literacy intervention. Schools not on the block have to be a little more creative. In the Los Angeles Unified School District, for instance, the Developing Readers and Writers Course (DRC) for students with low reading proficiency does not fit into the district's normal 45- or 50-minute class periods. Ron Klemp, the district's secondary literacy coordinator, says the district solved the problem by turning DRC into two back-to-back 45-minute classes to satisfy the computers that run the district's crediting system.
- Some schools limit the number of electives that struggling readers can take. At the 1,900-student Penn Manor High School in Pennsylvania, for instance, students who need reading intervention are not permitted to take as many electives as other students. "We started realizing," says principal Jan Mindish, "maybe these kids who need help shouldn't have the choice of filling their schedule with classes that may be interesting and fun. If they can't read, we need to address that first."
- Other districts have managed to add minutes to the school day—a complicated process that usually involves negotiating with teachers unions, rearranging bus schedules, changing lunch periods, and convincing parents. South Lane district leaders did all that and something else, too: They decided to eliminate the 12 minutes of Channel One programming, even though it meant returning the TV monitors provided by Channel One.

### **A new twist on the summer reading list**

In addition to intervention programs during the school year, some districts offer extra literacy instruction in after-school and summer programs. Penn Manor offers a two-week summer reading tutorial program for incoming ninth-graders who've been identified as struggling readers. William S. Hart Union High School District, serving 21,000 students in Santa Clarita, California, offers a 120-hour Intensive Literacy Program (ILP), delivered in five or six weeks to struggling readers in the sixth through 11th grade every summer.

ILP started in 2001 under a state grant for English-language learners. But it was so effective that the school board decided to open it to all students whose diagnostic assessments showed they needed it.

The program has had a big payoff. “Generally, if students come every day, they’re going to see one to two grade levels of growth” in reading, says Terry Deloria, Hart’s director of special programs. “For a lot of students, that means when they enter junior high, they’ll be able to read their textbooks.”

Both Penn Manor and Hart offer intensive professional development for teachers working in their summer intervention programs. Teachers naturally carry back the strategies they’ve learned to their regular classrooms in the fall. “You’ll go into classrooms and still see those strategies in use,” Deloria says.

### **One more shot at reading**

Researchers tell educators that teaching and encouraging literacy among secondary school students is a completely different task from teaching and encouraging reading among younger students. But many middle and high schools with successful literacy programs have borrowed at least one idea from elementary schools: setting aside time in the school day—or, more often, the school week—for reading.

Starting at 10 a.m. every day, everyone at Sioux Center High School spends 12 to 15 minutes on sustained silent reading. “Our teachers read, our principal reads, our secretaries read,” says Superintendent O’Donnell. Students can read anything during that time, within limitations, he says: No magazines, newspapers, homework, or textbooks are allowed. “They have to be reading books for pleasure.”

### **Guiding Questions**

- ⊙ How can we create more time for literacy instruction and intervention? What might need to change in order to do so?
- ⊙ How can we make sure that we identify the students who need intensive intervention and work with the master schedule to make sure they get the help they need?
- ⊙ What evidence do we have that students are developing habits of reading? If there is no such evidence, what kind of evidence do we need to see?

## ■■■ STRATEGY FOUR

# SUPPORT STRONG PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Researchers say the most effective way to raise literacy among most students is to teach reading, writing, and other communication strategies in courses ranging from photography to biology. Because most secondary school teachers have not been trained in these strategies, school districts face a big job in providing professional development.

As in all areas, researchers say quality should be a district's top priority in planning professional development. "We need to be very selective in what is taught to teachers," says researcher Deshler, noting that selectivity has not been an earmark of most schools' professional development programs.

"We flush millions and millions of dollars down the toilet in the way professional development is run," he says. "We herd teachers into a cafeteria, we cram them full of facts, we discount what's going on in their classrooms, we send them out to do good stuff, and we do no follow-up. When you do these things in professional development, it's sort of spray and pray."

*"We have these one-day professional development sessions that don't relate to each other, and we've known for years that that doesn't work."*

Stanford's Kamil cautions against two ideas "that are just death and endemic" to any attempt at professional development: "One is that professional development is entertainment. Even if you look at the way professional development gets evaluated, it's 'How did you like this?'—not 'Are your students doing better?'"

Another problem, he says, is that teachers' professional development is usually "scattershot. We have these one-day professional development sessions that don't relate to each other, and we've known for years that that doesn't work."

The best professional development for teaching literacy is like the best professional development for teaching anything else: It arises from the needs of teachers, has a sound research base, and provides continuous support and instruction, with follow-up in the classroom.

### **Job one: Convincing teachers**

Teachers know when their students can't read or write well. What they don't know, researchers say, is what to do about it. Another problem is that many aren't sure they *want* to do anything about it.

Most middle and high school teachers resist teaching reading at first, according to Josephine Marsh, an Arizona State University literacy researcher who works with school districts in the Southwest. "That's not what [secondary school teachers] went to school for, to be a reading teacher," she says.

In Kentucky's Jessamine County Schools, with close to 7,100 students, Superintendent Lu Young remembers "that middle school and high school teachers were tending toward abdicating their responsibilities for literacy at the same time they were bemoaning the fact that these kids can't read." At first Young did a little resisting herself: "I was saying, 'Wait a minute, our kids *can* read; what do these teachers mean?'"



When further exploration revealed students were having trouble with reading comprehension, not decoding, Young asked teachers what they were doing about it. “Teachers said, ‘I don’t have time in my content to spend on reading,’” she remembers.

Researchers have heard this before. “There’s an attitude among middle and high school teachers that somebody else should have taught these kids to read,” says Kamil. When teachers *do* recognize the need for literacy instruction in middle or high school, they want English teachers to take care of it.

“The first problem is that the English teachers can’t do it because English teachers are content people themselves,” says Kamil. “They know about literature; they don’t know about teaching reading. Worse than that, reading literature isn’t the same as reading science.”

Once science teachers and those in other subjects understand how to teach reading comprehension along with the content of their subjects, Kamil says, “they realize that not only is [reading instruction] part of their job, but it makes their job a lot easier” because students understand and retain material better.

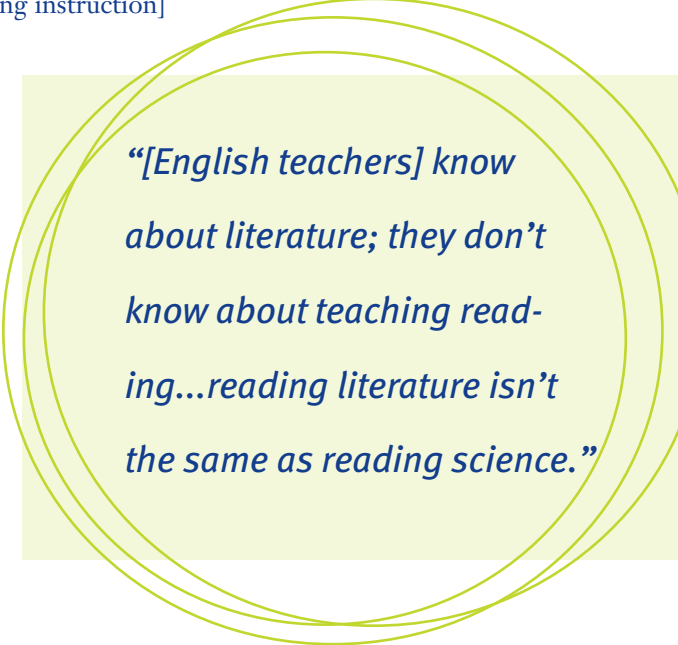
Nothing convinces teachers like the success of their students. So when Jessamine County teachers saw the research-based reading strategies they learned in professional development helped their students understand course content better, Young says, teachers began to understand “that they, too, were responsible for helping their students read science, history, math, etc.”

The district’s professional development began by emphasizing pre- and post-reading strategies, along with strategies for teaching content vocabulary. The district got more help when it joined a teaching and learning collaborative in Louisville, Kentucky.

Rising test scores and teacher satisfaction attest to the district’s success. “We’re ... getting more bang for our professional-development buck by concentrating on what we know is a specific needs area that will, frankly, impact all of the content areas as far as achievement is concerned,” says Young. “We really felt that the buckshot approach, with all kinds of different initiatives going on at the middle and high school level, [was not as good as] focusing on our students’ abilities to read and to write.”

### **Getting teachers’ input on professional development**

When Mary Ravita took the newly created position of assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction at Pennsylvania’s South Fayette Township School District in 2000, she had a clear charge from the school board to emphasize academics for the district’s 2,000 students. After studying the district’s data and becoming familiar with research showing the strong link between literacy and academic achievement, Ravita worked with teachers to discover what literacy strategies worked best in their classrooms.



*“[English teachers] know about literature; they don’t know about teaching reading...reading literature isn’t the same as reading science.”*

Professional development sessions provided all teachers—even those who teach art and physical education—with “an overview of adolescent literacy and best practices to use in *all* subject areas, because we firmly believe all teachers are teachers of reading and writing,” says Ravita. Teachers try out different literacy-based strategies in their classrooms and come together again to discuss what worked, what didn’t work, and what needed tweaking.

In addition to encouraging teachers to learn from each other, some districts also make sure teachers have access to advice from an experienced pro.

### **Standards for Literacy Coaches**

*Standards for Middle and High School Literacy Coaches* was published in 2005 by the International Reading Association in collaboration with the National Council of Teachers of English, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, the National Science Teachers Association, and the National Council for the Social Studies. The standards are available online at [www.reading.org/resources/issues/reports/coaching.html](http://www.reading.org/resources/issues/reports/coaching.html).

### **Literacy coaches and mentors**

In some districts, literacy coaches are the centerpiece of schools’ literacy efforts. The coaches—who help teachers, often one-on-one, design and teach literacy-based strategies—have had such a positive impact in some schools that their districts are working toward placing a literacy coach in every secondary school.

“One of the promising [strategies] is literacy coaches,” says Stanford’s Kamil. “This is one of those ideas that *in theory* is great, but we have ... no evidence that it works.” He acknowledges, though, that the new standards for literacy coaches set by a consortium of literacy and content-area specialists “look promising.” (See box.)

Researchers are also cautiously optimistic about the role teacher mentors can play in helping new teachers cope with the literacy needs of their students. The problem is that many teacher mentors have not been trained in literacy instruction themselves, yet they are expected to guide new teachers, who often have the highest percentage of struggling readers, English-language learners, and special education students in their classes.

“Mentors need to be trained also,” says Susan Frost of Education Priorities.

“It’s not just a matter of taking veteran teachers and assigning them to the new teachers. It’s also a matter of making sure those mentors are up to speed on research-based practice and that they have the skills to coach teachers on how to integrate those strategies into their teaching.”

### **Guiding Questions**

- ⊙ How do we ensure our district provides effective training in literacy strategies for all content areas?
- ⊙ Is our district using proven professional development strategies? What evidence do we have that our district’s professional development is having an impact on student achievement?
- ⊙ How can we support and encourage high-quality professional development aligned with our literacy goals?
- ⊙ How does our district ensure the quality of teacher mentors and literacy coaches?

## ■■■■ STRATEGY FIVE

### LOOK FOR AND NURTURE LITERACY LEADERS

Once teachers learn, through professional development, strategies for embedding literacy instruction across the curriculum, many become champions for using the strategies to teach content, and vice versa. At many schools, these enthusiastic teachers become part of a school literacy council or school writing committee.

“In every institution,” says Richard Sterling, executive director of the National Writing Project, “you need a group of teachers who are willing to play leadership roles, as well as be teachers, in helping the school face the issues that confront them on a regular basis. ... If you have a cadre of good, thinking professionals who are intellectual about their profession, ... you’ve got a group of people who can address issues and not wait for mandates from on high to discover that teachers haven’t been doing something they should have been doing.”

But even the best teacher-leaders can’t sustain a lasting literacy effort by themselves.

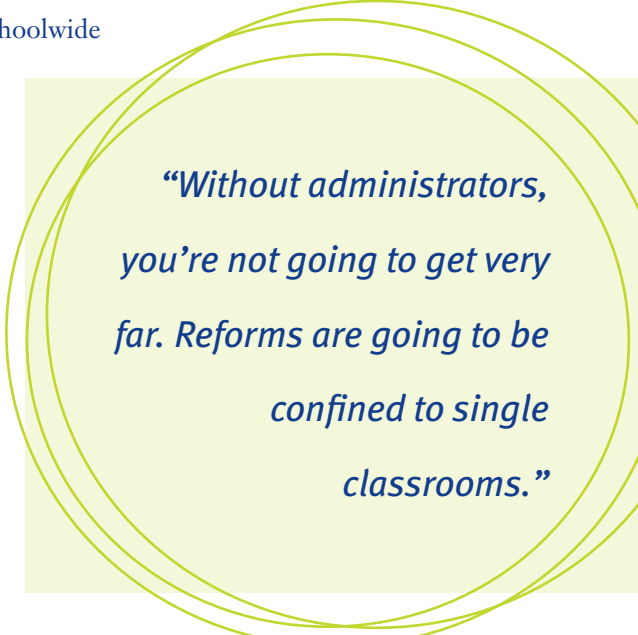
#### The importance of literacy-minded principals

Most researchers and policymakers agree the most important person in a schoolwide literacy effort is the principal. “Without administrators, you’re not going to get very far,” says Sterling. “Reforms are going to be confined to single classrooms.” To help principals lead their schools toward improving the literacy of their students, the National Association of Secondary School Principals published *Creating a Culture of Literacy: A Guide for Middle and High School Principals* in 2005.

So what can school boards do to find, develop, and support good principals who can lead and maintain literacy efforts in their buildings?

The search begins in the superintendent’s office. Some boards make a purposeful effort to hire a superintendent who will hire and lead principals dedicated to full literacy for their students. The Sioux Center board had already decided to focus on reading comprehension when it began its search for a new superintendent, and board member Roetman remembers telling then-candidate O’Donnell, “If we hire you, just realize that reading comprehension will be your number one focus, and we’ll hold you to that.”

Another district that has made literacy a priority in hiring administrators is Chapel Hill-Carrboro. On the recommendation of the superintendent, the district hired two new middle school principals with strong backgrounds in literacy who collaborated with other middle school principals in developing a district-wide “writing prompt” program.



*“Without administrators, you’re not going to get very far. Reforms are going to be confined to single classrooms.”*

One fall day in 2005, every sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grader in the district answered an essay question. The district trained all middle-school teachers, even physical education and math teachers, to evaluate the essays. The district also provided No Excuses cards that remind middle school teachers of grammar conventions and common misspellings (such as *there* and *their*) to watch for in students' written work.

Language arts coordinator Clayton says the middle school collaboration and writing prompt program probably never would have happened if the idea had originated in the district's central office. "If [the central office] had said to do that, everybody would have said, 'Boo, we're not doing that. You can't tell us what to do,'" she says. "But the principals decided to do it," which ensured that every middle school was on board.

### **Grow-your-own literacy leaders**

School boards often develop literacy leaders, sometimes unknowingly, by supporting professional development guided by the needs of their schools. Melvina Pritchett Phillips was an instructional administrator at the new Discovery Middle School in Madison City, Alabama, when she and principal Jackie Pedigo began analyzing the school's scores on state assessments. They noticed that, although Discovery had some of the highest-achieving students in the state, its students peaked at the 64th percentile on a norm-referenced achievement test. "I didn't see any reason why they shouldn't be doing a lot better," Phillips says.

After Phillips led the school in aligning its curriculum with the state standards, Discovery students rose to the 82nd percentile in most subjects, but their reading scores still lagged behind, in the mid-70s. Between 25 and 30 percent of Discovery's students were not reading at grade level.

The school applied for a slot in a pilot program at the then-new Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI). Discovery was accepted, and in an intense two weeks, ARI trained all of its teachers and administrators in strategies that used literacy skills across the curriculum. Phillips and 31 teachers returned to ARI for more training on intervention models.

At the end of the first year of using the methods learned from ARI, Discovery's reading scores were beginning their upward trend, and the percentage of students reading below grade level had dropped radically from 30 percent to eight percent. By then, Phillips had become the principal and realized the school needed to continue its literacy initiative because new students continued to enter Discovery reading below grade level.

Madison City school board member Sue Helms credits school administrators and the professional development provided by ARI with Discovery's progress. When the school board saw Discovery's early results, Helms says, "we immediately made plans for the next summer to bring on other schools. It took us two years, maybe three, to start putting this into every school."



## Leaders need professional development, too

Many districts are conscientious about providing professional development for teachers, but sometimes forget that principals and other administrators need to keep learning, too. Some researchers say most principals especially need training in choosing and using diagnostic and summative assessments.

Others just want principals to keep up with the teachers in their buildings. Teachers joke about the way some principals disappear from professional development sessions shortly after introducing the speaker, but the message sent by such disappearing acts is no laughing matter. As one Chicago teacher says, “All of this professional development would seem much more important if my principal were learning it, too.”

### Guiding Questions

- ⦿ What are our criteria in selecting district leaders? Do our criteria reflect our literacy goals?
- ⦿ Have we clearly communicated our expectations regarding literacy goals to candidates for leadership positions?
- ⦿ What are we doing to develop literacy leaders? Should we be doing more?
- ⦿ What kind of literacy training do our school leaders need? How can we make such training more accessible to our school leaders?

## ■■■■ STRATEGY SIX

### ALIGN YOUR DISTRICT’S RESOURCES TO SUPPORT WHAT WORKS

Because average and above-average students benefit so much from having literacy embedded in the curriculum, researchers say a school district can make a big impact on the literacy of its students by simply redirecting professional development funds toward helping teachers use literacy-based strategies.

“If students are being taught literacy skills across the curriculum in every class, your average students’ reading scores will improve,” says Susan Frost. “Reading proficiency for your higher-achieving students will also go up. The only ones who will still be left behind are the bottom third. These are the students who often need the more expensive intervention.”

Some districts design their own literacy-intervention programs and train teachers to implement them, but most districts buy programs, which usually cost between a few hundred dollars and several thousand dollars per student per year. Researchers advise districts to invest very carefully in programs and materials. (See *How To Know a Good Adolescent Literacy Program When You See One* in Appendix C for help in selecting programs.)

When purchasing intervention programs, most district administrators are careful to buy those backed by research. The question is, what kind of research?

## State and Federal Literacy Grants

In early 2006, eight states—Arizona, Delaware, Florida, Idaho, Massachusetts, Mississippi, New Jersey, and North Carolina—received grants through the National Governors Association to help develop plans and policies to improve adolescent literacy. For recommendations on what states can do, see *Reading to Achieve: A Governor’s Guide to Adolescent Literacy* in Appendix C.

Also in early 2006, seven school districts and one statewide agency received the first round of Striving Readers grants from the United States Department of Education. The recipients were Chicago; Springfield, Massachusetts; Danville, Kentucky; Memphis, Tennessee; San Diego; Portland, Oregon; Newark, New Jersey; and the Ohio Department of Youth Services.

Striving Readers is a new federal Title I discretionary grant program designed to raise reading levels among middle and high school students. The program supports comprehensive reading initiatives that improve the quality of literacy instruction across the curriculum, provide intensive interventions to struggling readers, and help to build a strong scientific research base for strategies that improve adolescent literacy skills. For more information on the Striving Readers grants, see “U.S. Department of Education” in Appendix C.

## Researching the research

“Almost everything has research backing,” says Sam Howe, director of educational partnerships at Scholastic, Inc. “In other words, somebody builds a program and says, ‘Well, it aligns with this, this, this, and this piece of research.’ That’s not adequate, that’s not scientific effectiveness. What you’re looking for is true scientific-effectiveness studies.”

A scientific-effectiveness study is one that uses systematic, empirical methods to produce reliable data that is reviewed by independent experts. (See the U.S. Department of Education’s What Works Clearinghouse and other resources in Appendix C for more on what constitutes scientifically based research in education.)

For the best results, district officials should concentrate on products that have been proven effective with students similar to those served by the district’s reading intervention program. If a district intends to serve special education students or English-language learners, for instance, it needs to see scientific-effectiveness studies performed with those groups.

Researchers also advise district officials to look closely at how those studies were done. How often were the intervention classes held? How long did each class last? What kind of training did the teachers receive? Ultimately, districts will need to consider their financial and staffing capacity for this kind of analysis and implementation.

## Targeting funds for literacy intervention

“Most of the reading intervention programs I see around the country that are in trouble started out in trouble from day one because they were under-resourced from day one,” says Howe. “... The truth of the matter is, there’s a direct relationship between how far you want to raise literacy achievement and how many students you must convert [from passing to failing the state reading test]. ... This, in turn, impacts the number of students that must be placed in a reading-intervention treatment program.”

It’s worth noting that some of the strongest literacy programs have been developed in school districts with limited budgets. Muskegon High School, for instance, began its program—which included as-

signing some fully certified teachers to one-on-one tutoring sessions—at a time when the district was forced to lay off employees in other areas.

Then-principal Arlyn Zack says the district used state funds, designated for high-risk students, to pay for the literacy intervention. Until that time, the high-risk funds had been spent on other programs, but Zack argued that “the kids who were most at risk were the kids who can’t read.”

Other districts have won grants or reallocated funds to pay for literacy intervention. For several years, the South Lane district has relied on parent fundraising “to support whatever music instruction we have in our elementary schools,” says school board chair Rubinstein, but the district pays for literacy efforts out of the general fund. “I know that music is so important for young children,” Rubinstein says, “... but given the current testing mandates, we must put the priority on providing the best reading instruction for each student in our district.”

Meanwhile, South Lane continues to save money in other ways, such as postponing textbook adoptions—with the state’s permission—and cutting back on custodial staff. “Here in the district office,” says Superintendent Parent, “we used to have a custodian cleaning our bathrooms every day, and now we have somebody who comes in twice a week for half a day. In the meantime, the 10 or 12 of us who live in this building help out and clean up where we can ... because we want to use that money to hire a literacy coach at the high school.”

Ilene Berman, program director in the education division at the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, suggests school boards check with their state education offices for additional financial help. Several states have developed statewide initiatives on adolescent literacy that provide information and resources to school districts. Funds may also be available from the U.S. Department of Education, which has awarded “Striving Readers” grants to support literacy programs in eight initial school districts beginning with the 2006-07 school year. (See box on page 20.)

### Guiding Questions

- ⦿ How do our district’s financial allocations and practices align with our literacy goals?
- ⦿ What is the evidence of effectiveness in the literacy strategies our district is using or considering?
- ⦿ What do we need to know before approving expenditures on literacy strategies?
- ⦿ How can our district tap into state and federal literacy resources?

## ■■■■ STRATEGY SEVEN

### KEEP TRACK OF WHAT’S HAPPENING

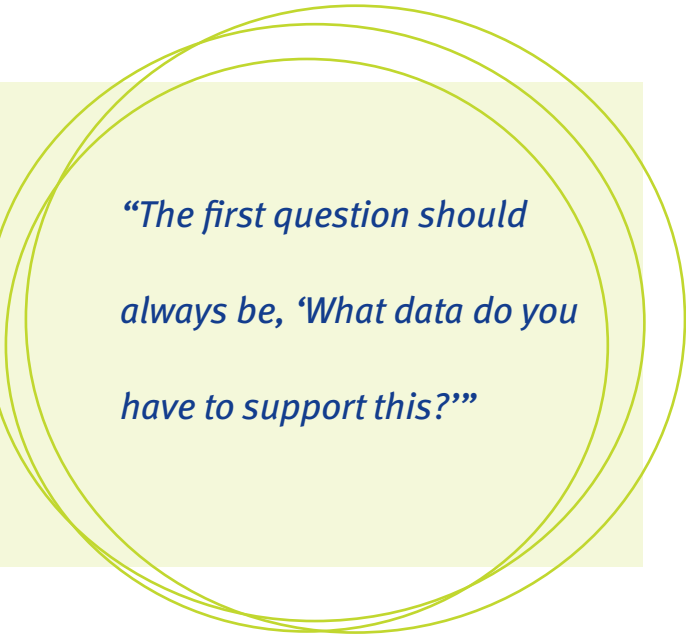
Once a literacy program is up and running, researchers say it’s important to keep collecting data. This time the information should focus on how faithfully a program is being implemented and how much progress students are making. Almost always, the two are connected.

Research studies are based on core assumptions in an implementation model, and deviating from that implementation model means a district is less likely to see the gains that were reported in the research studies. Knowing this, districts with strong literacy programs are careful to make sure their teachers and principals follow a proven implementation model faithfully.

## Tracking implementation in Texas

Peggy Gordon, associate superintendent of middle schools in Austin, Texas, admits she’s “a bit of a czarina” when it comes to enforcing the implementation of the literacy-intervention program in the 80,000-student district. It costs \$40,000 per classroom, she says, “so if [a school’s] not going to implement the model the way it was designed, I’ll take it somewhere else.”

It’s not just the cost that makes some literacy experts so passionate about following research models faithfully. By the time students with reading and writing problems reach middle school, researcher Deshler says, “they’ve been told about a dozen times in their schooling career, ‘Hey, we’ve got this magical widget that’s going to help you,’ and it’s not helped them. So they’re quite hopeless, they’ve given up. Now we’ve got to come in and deliver—and deliver very efficiently and very intensively.”



*“The first question should always be, ‘What data do you have to support this?’”*

The trouble is, Gordon says, that some teachers and principals “want to be a little more creative than they need to be,” tweaking a proven program or modifying the time allotted to it. She says she knows what’s going on because she and her staff visit classrooms regularly, sometimes sitting through the full 90 minutes of a lesson.

Gordon also checks printouts to see how long students have been on the computer portion of the program. “If you see they’ve been on there half the [recommended] time,” she says, “that’s a big red flag.” And the district tracks individual students’ progress in literacy on district-designed assessments every six weeks. Even that’s not often enough for some conscientious teachers who, according to Gordon, perform their own assessments every two weeks.

Gordon says she offers the program to schools as a choice. “I don’t *make* them do it,” she says, “but if their data implies that’s what they should be doing, how can they say no when they have struggling readers and we have a program that works?”

She’s generally pleased with the progress students have been making, especially in classrooms that strictly follow the implementation model. “Everybody always wants to say, ‘Oh, it’s the kids. They can’t speak English, blah, blah, blah,’” she says. “But in the hundreds of classrooms I’ve been in this year, it’s not the kids. It’s good teaching—or bad teaching.”

## Using data for instruction ...

NCLB requirements and accountability pressures have created so much data that some school districts are simply overwhelmed. But in districts with strong literacy programs, school officials are collecting even more data, studying it carefully, then passing it along to teachers who’ve learned how to design instruction to fit their students’ identified needs.

Teachers often resist the idea of data-driven instruction because they're used to making decisions "based on gut instinct, what they like and what they want," says Sue Woodruff, a former Michigan teacher who now works on literacy issues with school districts across the country. "It is really hard to switch and make decisions based on hard data," but school boards can lead the way by asking for data "instead of always making decisions based on recommendations. ... The first question should always be, 'What data do you have to support this?'"

Many districts with strong literacy programs pride themselves on the "data culture" they've created. In Pennsylvania's South Fayette Township, for instance, assistant superintendent Ravita sees her mission as sharing data "in user-friendly models so teachers can look at it" and understand what they need to do.

In New Jersey, the 6,600-student Montclair Public Schools hired consultants to assess students on 23 aspects of writing skills, such as transitioning between ideas and varying sentence structure. "Teachers can now take that information and ... design instruction around it," says curriculum director Terry Trigg-Scales. "Before, we were just teaching everybody" every aspect of writing.

"We've always had a lot of data," Trigg-Scales says, "but now we're actually using it for instruction."

### **... and for inspiration**

Some districts make a point of sharing data with students and their families. At Sioux Center Middle School, students are expected to know their scores and establish goals to raise them. "I feel it's really important for them to self-monitor," says principal Ludwig, who says every fall students "sit down and make goals for themselves of where they're going to be by spring."

Ludwig remembers one special education student who was reading four years below grade level when he was in sixth grade. Teachers decided, on the basis of diagnostic assessments, to concentrate on his reading, and he became fascinated with tracking his progress. "He was one of those kids who would come up to me in the hall and say, 'Hey, let's go to your office and look at my [test] scores,'" Ludwig says.

The boy is now in ninth grade, out of special education and reading at a 10th-grade level.

### **Guiding Questions**

- ⊙ How can we ensure our district's literacy programs are well chosen and well implemented?
- ⊙ How are our schools using data to improve literacy instruction?
- ⊙ What evidence do we have that all our students are improving? If they're not, what is our district doing to improve the situation?
- ⊙ Are there any obstacles in our policies, resource allocations, or other areas that we need to overcome?



## ■ ■ ■ STRATEGY EIGHT

### BRING IN THE COMMUNITY


Researchers generally agree that parent involvement is even more important than socioeconomic status in determining the academic success of children in elementary school, but they have surprisingly little to say about the benefits of parent or community involvement in adolescent literacy.

“There’s not much research on this,” says Susan McShane, reading initiative specialist at the National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL) in Louisville, Kentucky, “... [but] there seems to be a consensus that, yes, it’s very important.”

Community involvement is certainly important to school districts: “Engaging the community is essential work for school boards,” according to the National School Boards Association’s *The Key Work of School Boards*. So it’s not surprising that many literacy-minded districts work hard to involve their communities in literacy efforts.

#### Bringing in—and training—volunteers

Many districts engage their communities by bringing in volunteers—usually parents—to work on literacy programs in elementary schools, and a few districts manage to keep those volunteers through middle school and high school.



*“Engaging the community is essential work for school boards.”*

Because researchers and educators worry about the quality of untrained volunteers, some school districts make a point of providing extensive training. In Montclair, for instance, the district provides six 90-minute training sessions and a four-week internship before volunteers can begin coaching students through early drafts in the writing process. Teachers still evaluate their students’ final drafts.

Since the program began with grants funding in the mid-1990s, the district has been posting increases in language arts and writing scores on state tests. When the grants ended, the school board committed to investing about \$160,000 a year to cover the cost of training, materials, and stipends of coaches-turned-managers in each elementary, middle, and high school. “We get a lot of bang for our buck,” says curriculum director Trigg-Scales, “but there *is* a buck.”

As with any effort in a district with a variety of literacy initiatives, it’s not clear how much bang these particular bucks are creating. “How do you isolate a good teacher from [the writing coach] and know it wasn’t the influence of the teacher that caused the students’ writing to improve?” Trigg-Scales asks. “Was it the teacher who motivated the child? Or was it the coach? Or was it the new language books we bought this year?”

#### Bringing in immigrant parents

Many parents’ work schedules preclude volunteering in their children’s classrooms, and others are reluctant to volunteer if they fear they will be fingerprinted or screened, as is the policy in many districts today. This concern may be especially troubling to some immigrant parents.

Knowing this, some school leaders work to create “a very open and welcoming atmosphere at school so that parents and other community members feel comfortable coming there,” says NCFL’s McShane. In Aurora, Colorado, that translates into a volunteer program that welcomes immigrant parents into schools while improving the literacy of their families.

About 35 percent of Aurora’s 32,000 students are English-language learners, up from eight percent a decade ago. While the district made that transition, former English teacher Susan A. Lythgoe started a nonprofit organization that places immigrant parents in K-5 classrooms to help teachers while they learn alongside their children. Because the parents are working with their own children, the district excuses them from fingerprinting and screening procedures.

Volunteering helps parents with their English and dramatically improves the literacy skills of their children. “If we can have children in our family literacy program for at least a year, they are significantly ahead of their cohorts” on state reading and writing tests, says Lythgoe.

### **Reaching out to families of struggling readers**

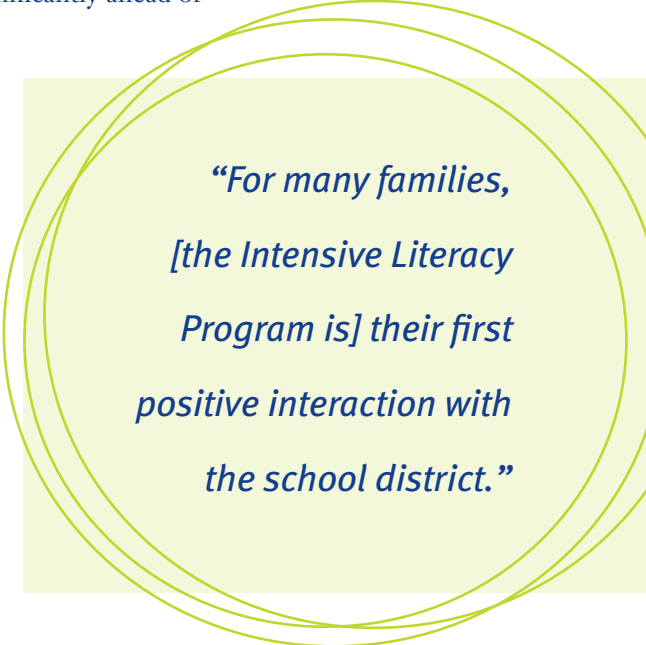
Many literacy-based districts make a special point of connecting with families of struggling readers. Teachers make home visits, for instance, to students in Santa Clarita’s Intensive Literacy Program.

“For many families, it’s their first positive interaction with the school district,” says special programs director Deloria. “Students lead the visit by talking about their ILP plan, sharing their binders, going through their assessments, and talking to parents about the kind of growth they expect.” Teachers provide strategies for helping kids read, along with suggested reading lists for the students and any siblings.

### **Gathering the community**

In Canandaigua, New York, the 4,000-student school district brings the entire community into a discussion about a single book. In a program called *Canandaigua Reads!* a school board member joins teachers, administrators, students, local residents, public library representatives, and the Canandaigua mayor in choosing a book every year that everyone can read and discuss.

At a cost of about \$10,000, the district puts a copy of the chosen book in the hands of every student in grades nine through 12 and every district employee who wants to read it. The book is also promoted by local bookstores, individual reading clubs, and special events such as author visits and community-wide discussions at Canandaigua’s library.



*“For many families,  
[the Intensive Literacy  
Program is] their first  
positive interaction with  
the school district.”*

The program, which won a Magna Award from *American School Board Journal*, began in 2002 when everyone read *The Sweet Hereafter* by Russell Banks. Almost predictably, some of the district’s bus drivers objected to the book’s depiction of a fatal school bus crash, and a couple of outraged parents wrote letters to the editor of the local newspaper about the sexual content of the book.

“The net result,” says Canandaigua board member Caroline “Tarry” Shipley, “was the whole community read the book because they wanted to find out *what* was in this book.”

Controversy has continued to follow the book selections, but the board has no plans to abandon a program that gets so many people talking about reading. The high school’s “halls are buzzing” the week that students read the book, says Shipley, as kids talk about the characters and what will happen next.

“I think,” she says, “it gives them a sense of belonging to a world beyond high school”—a world where reading and writing are important.

### Guiding Questions

- ⦿ What is our district doing to involve parents and the wider community in literacy efforts?
- ⦿ What can we as a school board do to model our commitment to literacy and promote community involvement and participation?

# Conclusion: The Role of Policy

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There's no denying the severity of the adolescent literacy problem in the United States. Although researchers report progress in teaching K-3 children to read and write, the literacy skills of American students in grades four through 12 still lag behind.

To address the problem, school districts should identify students' literacy needs, put a priority on literacy, extend the time for literacy instruction, support strong professional development, choose and develop literacy leaders, align the district's resources to support what works for both high-achieving and low-achieving students, monitor progress, and involve community members in literacy initiatives.

School boards can lead these efforts by developing policies that support literacy, which is the very basis of student achievement. *Targeting Student Learning: The School Board's Role as Policymaker*, second edition—a guide developed by five state school boards associations in cooperation with NSBA\*—advises boards to develop policies that “articulate their expectations and beliefs about student learning and communicate those beliefs through written board policy.”

Most school boards—even in districts with successful literacy programs—do not have specific policies about adolescent literacy. But successful boards do support adolescent literacy as a priority in policies that state, for instance, the expectation that all K-12 students will become proficient in math and reading or that articulate the need to focus professional development on one district initiative at a time.

Another important characteristic of successful school boards is that they keep asking questions. “Questions,” says Angela Peifer of the Illinois Association of School Boards, “are the primary tools that allow boards to build consensus and clarity about expectations; to become ‘knowledgeable about teaching and learning issues,’ as the *Lighthouse Study* suggests; and to hold the system accountable for desired results. And the added bonus is that when questions are asked for these reasons, the board models and helps to build a culture of continuous improvement that everyone wants for his or her district.”

\*California School Boards Association, Illinois Association of School Boards, Maine School Boards Association, Pennsylvania School Boards Association, and Washington State School Directors' Association.





# *Appendix A:* *Recommendations from Reading Next:* A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy

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*Reading Next* recommends schools take action to address 15 key elements of effective adolescent literacy programs. These actions include:

## **Elements of instruction:**

1. Direct, explicit comprehension instruction
2. Effective instructional principles embedded in content
3. Motivation and self-directed learning
4. Text-based collaborative learning
5. Strategic tutoring
6. Diverse texts
7. Intensive writing
8. A technology component
9. Ongoing formative assessment of students

## **Elements in the infrastructure:**

10. Extended time for literacy
11. Professional development
12. Ongoing summative assessment of students and programs
13. Teacher teams
14. Leadership
15. A comprehensive and coordinated literacy program



# Appendix B: Guiding Questions

The strategies presented in this guidebook are intended for use at the district level and by state school boards associations help their members improve adolescent literacy. Identifying students' literacy needs is a good first step, but the other strategies may be used in any order or even at the same time. Each includes guiding questions to help school board leaders explore the state of literacy in their districts.

## STRATEGY ONE

### Identify students' literacy needs

- What do our district's scores on state assessments tell us about our students' literacy skills?
- How are all of our students doing, including those identified as NCLB subgroups?
- How are our students doing over time? How do our fourth-grade reading scores compare with our eighth-grade scores? How do our ninth-grade reading scores correlate, over time, with our graduation rates?
- If all students aren't improving in reading and writing, what is our district doing to improve that situation?

## STRATEGY TWO

### Make adolescent literacy a priority in your district

- What is our district's core mission?
- How does our core mission support student literacy across grades K-12?
- Are our district goals aligned with our core mission? Is adolescent literacy included among our district goals?

## STRATEGY THREE

### Make time for literacy

- How can we create more time for literacy instruction and intervention? What might need to change in order to do so?
- How can we make sure that we identify the students who need intensive intervention and work with the master schedule to make sure they get the help they need?
- What evidence do we have that students are developing habits of reading? If there is no such evidence, what kind of evidence do we need to see?

## STRATEGY FOUR

### Support strong professional development

- How do we ensure our district provides effective training in literacy strategies for all content areas?
- Is our district using proven professional development strategies? What evidence do we have that our district's professional development is having an impact on student achievement?
- How can we support and encourage high-quality professional development aligned with our literacy goals?
- How does our district ensure the quality of teacher mentors and literacy coaches?

## STRATEGY FIVE

### Look for and nurture literacy leaders

- What are our criteria in selecting district leaders? Do our criteria reflect our literacy goals?
- Have we clearly communicated our expectations regarding literacy goals to candidates for leadership positions?
- What are we doing to develop literacy leaders? Should we be doing more?
- What kind of literacy training do our school leaders need? How can we make such training more accessible to our school leaders?

## STRATEGY SIX

### Align your district's resources to support what works

- How do our district's financial allocations and practices align with our literacy goals?
- What is the evidence of effectiveness in the literacy strategies our district is using or considering?
- What do we need to know before approving expenditures on literacy strategies?
- How can our district tap into state and federal literacy resources?

## STRATEGY SEVEN

### Keep track of what's happening

- How can we ensure our district's literacy programs are well chosen and well implemented?
- How are our schools using data to improve literacy instruction?
- What evidence do we have that all our students are improving? If they're not, what is our district doing to improve the situation?
- Are there any obstacles in our policies, resource allocations, or other areas that we need to overcome?

## STRATEGY EIGHT

### Bring in the community

- What is our district doing to involve parents and the wider community in literacy efforts?
- What can we as a school board do to model our commitment to literacy and promote community involvement and participation?

## Appendix C: Selected Resources

- Achieve, Inc. [www.achieve.org](http://www.achieve.org)
- ACT, Inc. [www.act.org](http://www.act.org). (click on *Reading Between the Lines: What the ACT Reveals about College Readiness in Reading*)
- Alliance for Excellent Education [www.all4ed.org](http://www.all4ed.org) (click on “Adolescent Literacy”)
- Center for Applied Linguistics [www.cal.org](http://www.cal.org)
- Center on Reinventing Public Education [www.crpe.org](http://www.crpe.org) (search for “Buried Treasure,” a guide to managing school data)
- Data Quality Campaign [www.dataqualitycampaign.org](http://www.dataqualitycampaign.org)
- The Education Trust [www.edtrust.org](http://www.edtrust.org)
- International Reading Association [www.ira.org](http://www.ira.org)
- Iowa Association of School Boards [www.ia-sb.org](http://www.ia-sb.org) (see *IASB’s Lighthouse Study: School Boards and Student Achievement* at [www.ia-sb.org/studentachievement/light6.pdf](http://www.ia-sb.org/studentachievement/light6.pdf))
- The Learning Source for Parents and Families [www.coloradoliteracy.org](http://www.coloradoliteracy.org)
- National Association of Secondary School Principals [www.nassp.org](http://www.nassp.org) (search for *Creating a Culture of Literacy*)
- National Association of State Boards of Education [www.nasbe.org](http://www.nasbe.org) (click on *Reading at Risk*)
- National Center for Education Statistics [www.nces.ed.gov](http://www.nces.ed.gov)
- National Center for Educational Accountability [www.nc4ea.org](http://www.nc4ea.org)
- National Center for Family Literacy [www.familit.org](http://www.familit.org)
- National Commission on Writing [www.writingcommission.org](http://www.writingcommission.org) (click on *The Neglected “R”*)
- National Council of La Raza [www.nclr.org](http://www.nclr.org)
- National Council of Teachers of English [www.ncte.org](http://www.ncte.org) (click on “Adolescent Literacy”)
- National Governors Association [www.nga.org](http://www.nga.org) (click on “Center for Best Practices”)
- National Research Center on English Learning & Achievement at the University of Albany <http://cela.albany.edu>
- National School Boards Association [www.nsba.org](http://www.nsba.org) (see *Key Work of School Boards Guidebook; Targeting Student Learning; and Team Leadership for Student Achievement*)
- National Staff Development Council [www.nsd.org](http://www.nsd.org)
- National Writing Project [www.writingproject.org](http://www.writingproject.org)
- SchoolMatters [www.schoolmatters.com](http://www.schoolmatters.com)
- U.S. Department of Education [www.ed.gov](http://www.ed.gov) (search under “adolescent literacy”; see also the What Works Clearinghouse at [www.whatworks.ed.gov](http://www.whatworks.ed.gov) and the Striving Readers program at [www.ed.gov/programs/strivingreaders](http://www.ed.gov/programs/strivingreaders))



## Essential reports on adolescent literacy sponsored by Carnegie Corporation of New York

- Achieving State and National Literacy Goals: A Long Uphill Road: A Report to Carnegie Corporation of New York.* By Jennifer Sloan McCombs, Sheila Nataraj Kirby, Heather Barney, Hilary Darilek, and Scarlett J. Magee, 2005. RAND Corp. Online at [www.rand.org/pubs/technical\\_reports/TR180-1](http://www.rand.org/pubs/technical_reports/TR180-1).
- Adolescent Literacy and the Achievement Gap: What Do We Know and Where Do We Go From Here?* By Catherine E. Snow and Gina Biancarosa. Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2003. Online at [www.all4ed.org/resources/CarnegieAdolescentLiteracyReport.pdf](http://www.all4ed.org/resources/CarnegieAdolescentLiteracyReport.pdf).
- Adolescents and Literacy: Reading for the 21st Century.* By Michael Kamil. Alliance for Excellent Education, 2003. Online at [www.all4ed.org/publications/AdolescentsAndLiteracy.pdf](http://www.all4ed.org/publications/AdolescentsAndLiteracy.pdf).
- Bridging the Literacy Achievement Gap, Grades 4-12.* Edited by Dorothy S. Strickland and Donna E. Alvermann. Teachers College Press, 2004.
- Creating a Culture of Literacy: A Guide for Middle and High School Principals.* National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2005. Online at [www.principals.org/s\\_nassp/sec.asp?CID=62&DID=62](http://www.principals.org/s_nassp/sec.asp?CID=62&DID=62).
- How to Know a Good Adolescent Literacy Program When You See One.* Alliance for Excellent Education, 2004. Online at [www.all4ed.org/adolescent\\_literacy/issue\\_briefs.html](http://www.all4ed.org/adolescent_literacy/issue_briefs.html).
- The Literacy Coach: A Key to Improving Teaching and Learning in Secondary Schools.* By Elizabeth G. Sturtevant. Alliance for Excellent Education, 2003. Online at [www.all4ed.org/publications/LiteracyCoach.pdf](http://www.all4ed.org/publications/LiteracyCoach.pdf).
- Reading at Risk: The State Response to the Crisis in Adolescent Literacy.* National Association of State Boards of Education, 2005. Executive Summary online at [www.nasbe.org/recent\\_pubs/reading\\_at\\_risk.htm](http://www.nasbe.org/recent_pubs/reading_at_risk.htm).
- Reading Next—A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy: A Report to the Carnegie Corporation of New York.* By Gina Biancarosa and Catherine E. Snow. Alliance for Excellent Education, 2004. Online at [www.all4ed.org/publications/ReadingNext](http://www.all4ed.org/publications/ReadingNext).
- Reading to Achieve: A Governor's Guide to Adolescent Literacy.* National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2005. Online at [www.nga.org/Files/pdf/0510govguideliteracy.pdf](http://www.nga.org/Files/pdf/0510govguideliteracy.pdf).
- Standards for Middle and High School Literacy Coaches.* International Reading Association in Collaboration with National Council of Teachers of English, National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, National Science Teachers Association, National Council for the Social Studies, 2006. Online at [www.reading.org/resources/issues/reports/coaching.html](http://www.reading.org/resources/issues/reports/coaching.html).

## Websites of school districts cited in *The Next Chapter*

- Aurora Public Schools, Aurora, Colorado [www.aps.k12.co.us](http://www.aps.k12.co.us)
- Austin Independent School District, Austin, Texas [www.austin.isd.tenet.edu](http://www.austin.isd.tenet.edu)
- Canandaigua City Schools, Canandaigua, New York [www.canandaiguaschools.org](http://www.canandaiguaschools.org)
- Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools, Chapel Hill, North Carolina [www.chccs.k12.nc.us](http://www.chccs.k12.nc.us)
- Jessamine County Schools, Nicholasville, Kentucky [www.jessamine.k12.ky.us](http://www.jessamine.k12.ky.us)
- Los Angeles Unified School District, Los Angeles, California [www.lausd.k12.ca.us](http://www.lausd.k12.ca.us)
- Madison City Schools, Madison, Alabama [www.madisoncity.k12.al.us](http://www.madisoncity.k12.al.us)
- Montclair Public Schools, Montclair, New Jersey [www.montclair.k12.nj.us](http://www.montclair.k12.nj.us)
- Muskegon Public Schools, Muskegon, Michigan [www.muskegon.k12.mi.us](http://www.muskegon.k12.mi.us)
- Penn Manor School District, Lancaster, Pennsylvania [www.pmsd.k12.pa.us](http://www.pmsd.k12.pa.us)
- Sioux Center Community School, Sioux Center, Iowa [www.sioux-center.k12.ia.us](http://www.sioux-center.k12.ia.us)
- South Fayette Township School District, McDonald, Pennsylvania [www.southfayette.org](http://www.southfayette.org)
- South Lane School District, Cottage Grove, Oregon [www.slane.k12.or.us](http://www.slane.k12.or.us)
- William S. Hart Union High School District, Santa Clarita, California [www.hartdistrict.org](http://www.hartdistrict.org)

# Appendix D:

## Diagnostic Assessments for Middle and High School Students

<b>ASSESSMENT</b>	<b>ASSESSES</b>	<b>GROUP OR INDIVIDUAL ADMINISTRATION/TIME</b>	<b>PUBLISHER</b>
Developmental Reading Assessment (Grades 4-6)	Fluency and comprehension	Individual, 5-7 minutes	Pearson Learning, 2002
Comprehensive Test of Phonological Processing (CTOPP) (Grades K-16)	Phonological awareness, phonological memory, and rapid naming	Individual, 30 minutes	AGS Publishing, 1999 PRO-ED, 1999 Wagner, Torgeson, Rasholte
Test of Reading Comprehension (TORC-3) (Ages 7-17)	Comprehension, vocabulary, syntactic similarities, paragraph reading, sentence sequencing. Measures content area vocabulary in Math, Social Studies, and Science.	Individual/Group, 30 minutes	AGS Publishing, 1995 PRO-ED, 1995 Brown, Hammill, Wiederholt
Group Reading Assessment and Diagnostic Evaluation (GRADE) (Ages 5-Adult)	Comprehension, vocabulary, English skills	Group, 60-90 minutes	AGS Publishing, 2000 Williams, Cassidy, Samuels
Scholastic Reading Inventory (Ages 6-17)	Vocabulary, fluency, passage details, cause and effect relationships, sequencing, drawing conclusions, making connections, and generalizations	Computerized individual assessment	Scholastic
Test of Word Reading Efficiency (TOWER) (Ages 6-24)	Measures the ability to accurately recognize familiar words as whole units or sight words and the ability to sound out words quickly	Individual, 5-10 minutes	PRO-ED, 1999
Degrees of Reading Power (DRP) (Grade 1-12)	Measures reading comprehension using nonfiction and prose paragraphs that are similar to CLOZE Procedure	Individual/Group Untimed	Touchstone Applied Science Associations, Inc. (TASA)

<b>ASSESSMENT</b>	<b>ASSESSES</b>	<b>GROUP OR INDIVIDUAL ADMINISTRATION/TIME</b>	<b>PUBLISHER</b>
Burns/Roe Informal Reading Inventory (Ages 5-18)	Comprehension, retellings, graded word lists for placement with graded reading selections	Individual	Riverside, 1999 Roe
Reading Inventory for the Classroom, 4th Ed. (Grades K-12)	Reading of connected text, word analysis, comprehension, miscue analysis, listening comprehension	Individual	Prentice Hall, 2001
Gray Oral Reading Test-Diagnostic (GORT-D) (Ages 5-12)	Paragraph reading, decoding, word identification, word attack, morphemic analysis, contextual analysis, and word ordering	Individual	PRO-ED, 1991
Gray Silent Reading Test (Ages 7-25)	Measures silent reading and comprehension	Individual	PRO-ED, 2000
Qualitative Reading Inventory-3rd Ed. (QRI-III), (Ages 6-13)	Assesses oral reading accuracy, rate, strategies, comprehension, word identification	Individual	Allyn and Bacon, 2000
Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test, 4th Ed. (Grades K-12)	General assessment of reading achievement, vocabulary/word knowledge, comprehension	Individual or group, 55-105 minutes	Riverside, 1998
Woodcock Reading Mastery, Revised (Grades K-12)	Evaluates visual auditory learning, letter identification, word identification, word comprehension, and passage comprehension	Individual, 90 minutes	AGS Publishing, 1998
Stanford Diagnostic Reading Test - 4th Ed. (SDRT-4) (Grades 1-12)	Identifies specific strengths and weaknesses in phonetic analysis vocabulary, comprehension, and scanning	Group, 90 minutes	Harcourt, Inc.
Analytical Reading Inventory, 6th Ed., (Grades K-12)	Contains narrative and expository passages designed to assess level of instruction strategies to recognize words and comprehend books, oral and silent reading performance	Individual	Prentice Hall Woods, Moe



## **ABOUT NSBA**

The National School Boards Association is a not-for-profit federation of state associations of school boards across the United States. Our mission is to foster excellence and equity in public education through school board leadership. We achieve that mission by representing the school board perspective before federal government agencies and with national organizations that affect education, and by providing vital information and services to state associations of school boards and local school boards throughout the nation.

NSBA advocates local school boards as the ultimate expression of grassroots democracy. NSBA supports the capacity of each school board—acting on behalf of and in close concert with the people of its community—to envision the future of education in its community, to establish a structure and environment that allow all students to reach their maximum potential, to provide accountability for the community on performance in the schools, and to serve as the key community advocate for children and youth and their public schools.

Founded in 1940, NSBA now through the federation of state associations represents 95,000 local school board members, virtually all of whom are elected. These local officials govern 14,890 local school districts serving the nation's more than 47 million public school students.





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