

Adolescent Literacy: What Do We Know



Creating a Culture of Literacy:

A Guide for Middle and High School Principals



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Executive Summary

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Reston, VA



Adolescent Literacy: What Do We Know?

Across the nation, there is increasing awareness of a major deficit in the literacy achievement of the country's secondary students. Studies such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) indicate that U.S. students are reading and comprehending below expected levels. Eighth grade reading scores remain flat, and 12th grade scores have dropped significantly since 1992.

Historically, direct literacy instruction has been supported up to the third grade. However, there is a glaring need for it to continue so students can not only read narrative text, but also learn specific strategies to derive meaning from expository and descriptive text. When literacy instruction stops early, how can middle and high school students learn the strategies to read increasingly difficult text and to comprehend more abstract ideas? If a "regular" student continues to need direct instruction to read and comprehend the text found in secondary textbooks, consider the tremendous need for instruction and intervention that struggling readers must require. And sadly, if students two to three grade levels behind their peers do not receive intensive literacy instruction, the results can be devastating because the struggling reader will not experience success within the content areas. Therefore, it becomes even more critical that secondary content area teachers better understand and teach specific literacy strategies to help students read and extract meaning from the written material used to teach the course content.

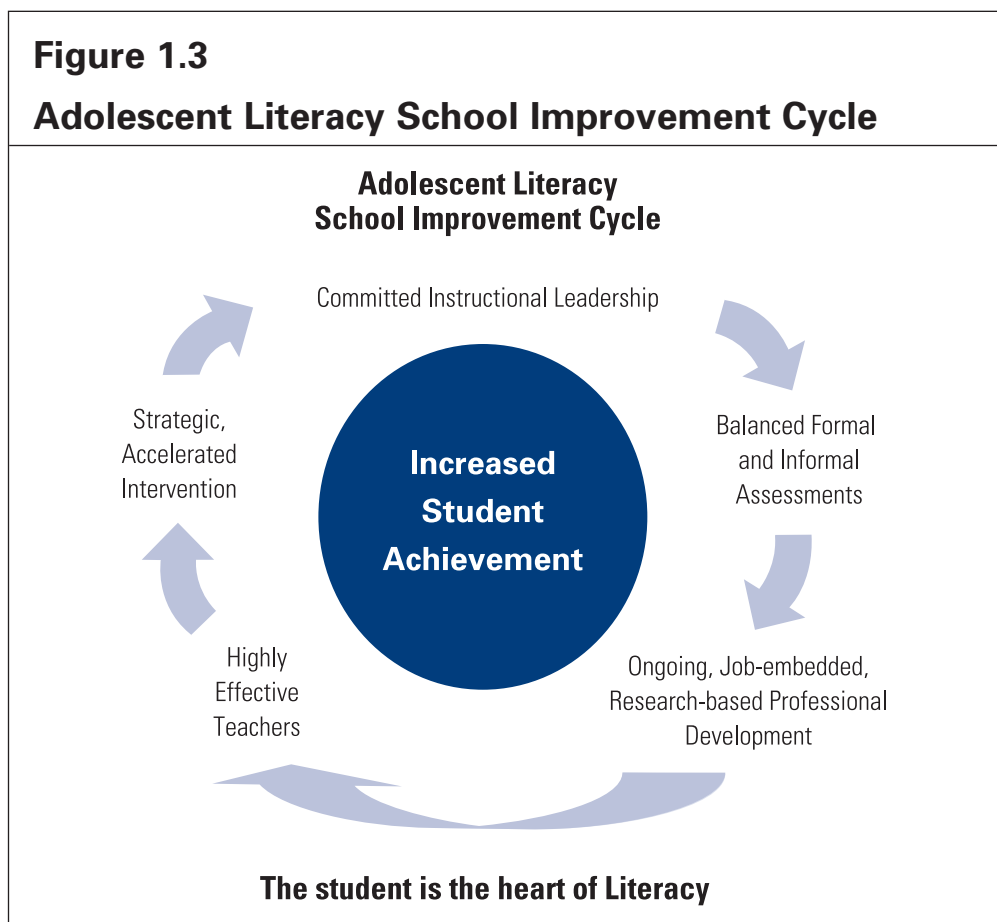
Statements released at the 2003 Alliance for Excellent Education High School Summit are disturbing, if not downright frightening. In considering the merits of implementing a secondary literacy program for the students of our schools, the following statements should be examined and used as motivators to assure that **EVERY** student within the walls of U.S. schools is receiving literacy instruction across the content areas:

- There are 6 million students in grades 6–12 at risk of not graduating from high school or of graduating unprepared for success in college or a career
- Thirty percent of U.S. students are not graduating from high school
- Only 51 percent of African-American students and 52 percent of Hispanic students graduate from high school
- Seventy-five percent of students with literacy problems in the third grade will still experience literacy difficulties in the ninth grade
- The combined literacy score of 15-year-olds in the United States ranks 15th among developed countries

- Among 12th grade students, only 42 percent of Whites, 16 percent of African Americans, and 22 percent of Hispanics scored at or above a proficient literacy level
- Approximately 25 percent of all high school students read below basic levels or three to four years below basic grade levels
- The graduation rate in urban schools is approximately 50 percent.

The disheartening and alarming statistics of the research are clear. Literacy instruction must not stop as students enter middle school, but rather be a vital component of a student’s educational experience from kindergarten to graduation. Poor literacy is not only an urban issue; it is found within every pocket of U.S. society. The time to rehash the issues and debate the problems of adolescent literacy has passed. There is a sense of urgency around finding solutions to this problem.

If secondary schools are to meet the academic instructional needs of the adolescent, there are several key elements that must be in place to fully implement an adolescent literacy program. (See figure below.) These essentials include: committed and supportive school leaders; balanced formal and informal assessments that guide the learning of students and teachers; ongoing, job-embedded, research-based professional development; highly effective teachers in every content area that model and provide explicit instruction to improve comprehension; and strategic and accelerated intervention.



Although the task can appear to be overwhelming at first, a collaborative effort of administrators, faculty members, and other key individuals can achieve a successful adolescent literacy program that will lead to student success. *Creating a Culture of Literacy* is designed to help a school use research on best literacy practices to create a well-defined intervention plan that will improve the literacy abilities of all students. By using the elements in the preceding figure as a foundation for implementing such a plan, schools will not only experience improved literacy in the present, but also impact the long-range academic success of their students by enhancing their chances for postsecondary education and future employability. It is a task that can no longer be ignored.

Leadership: Unlocking the Door to Literacy

Strong leadership from both administrators and teachers is an essential building block in constructing a successful literacy program, but the role played by the principal is key to determining success or failure of the program. To have an effective program, the school leader must be involved in all aspects of planning and sustaining the program. Above all, this must include participation in professional development sessions that he or she is fully aware of successful strategies needed to improve literacy across the curriculum. To be an effective literacy leader in the building, the principal must be viewed by the teachers as a role model of a reflective, lifelong learner and have their respect as knowledgeable in the area of adolescent literacy.

Leadership: Nine Action Steps for the Literacy Leader

1. Determine the school's capacity for literacy improvement.
2. Develop a Literacy Leadership Team.
3. Create a collaborative environment that fosters sharing and learning.
4. Develop a schoolwide organizational model that supports extended time for literacy instruction.
5. Analyze assessment data to determine specific learning needs of students.
6. Develop a schoolwide plan to address the professional development needs of teachers.
7. Create a realistic budget for literacy needs.
8. Develop a broad understanding of literacy strategies that work in the content-area classes.
9. Demonstrate your commitment to the literacy program.

Putting Assessment in the Driver's Seat

The goal of a school's assessment efforts should be to provide a clear picture of student strengths and weaknesses, teacher professional development needs, and the school's capacity to support a school literacy program. To meet this goal, the school will need to develop a balanced assessment program that uses both formal and informal measures of achievement in gathering data to determine the success of the program.

Assessment: Seven Action Steps for the Literacy Leader

1. Become an assessment-savvy leader.
2. Use data from assessments wisely and in a balanced fashion.
3. Establish a school culture that utilizes data to guide a literacy program designed to meet the needs of ALL learners, both students and teachers.
4. Implement regular data- and progress-monitoring meetings.
5. Use data to bring teachers to a full awareness of student achievement levels to meet the individual needs of *all* learners within *all* classes.
6. Conduct a weekly Literacy Walk to assess implementation of literacy strategies.
7. Use outside experts to guide the use of appropriate assessment tools for your school.

Professional Development: The Recipe for Success

There is a strong correlation between high-quality professional development and student achievement. However, professional development is not a one-size-fits-all proposition; it must be targeted to the specific needs of the school population.

Research uses several adjectives to describe a high-quality professional development plan—collaborative, relevant, job-embedded, and collegial. To achieve effective professional development, teachers must be involved in the creation of the school's plan; their input is vital in assuring that the activities are relevant to both their needs and the needs of their students. To cause a significant change in a teacher's instructional practices, any professional growth effort must be directly applicable to the classroom and provide teachers with the necessary tools to implement challenging learning opportunities for their students. And finally, a collegial atmosphere must permeate the school to encourage teachers to discuss their professional practices and share their experiences with one another.

Professional Development: Ten Action Steps for the Literacy Leader

1. Work closely with the Literacy Leadership Team (LLT) to determine professional learning needs of teachers.
2. Identify and capitalize upon staff members' talents and interests to support the ongoing, job-embedded professional learning.
3. Implement shared teaching or other forms of coaching to learn and immerse literacy strategies within content classes.
4. Encourage "professional talk" among staff and provide time for discussions.
5. Conduct a Literacy Walk to identify professional development needs.
6. Actively seek and provide resources for professional learning.

7. Participate in professional learning activities.
8. Use classroom observations to identify and support ongoing professional development needs.
9. Creatively schedule blocks of time to ensure ongoing professional learning.
10. Monitor assessment data and work with the LLT to analyze the ongoing learning needs of teachers.

Highly Effective Teachers: The Essential Ingredient of a Literacy Program

There is no more important step a principal can take to encourage literacy for all students than to ensure each child has access to highly effective teachers. Survey results of 8th and 12th graders on the 1998 NAEP indicated students were more likely to score higher on the assessment if their teachers held them accountable for literacy performance and understanding.

Unfortunately, highly skilled teachers do not magically appear right out of teacher preparation programs, but rather, with the proper care and feeding, grow in effectiveness over time. Support systems such as peer coaching and shared teaching can be successfully used to produce highly effective teachers who use strategic teaching skills.

A successful literacy program takes the combined effort of skilled content-area teachers and reading specialists/coaches. Together, these teachers, along with other specialized teachers, can identify reading problems and aggressively attack the deficiency if they are given the proper tools for success, such as professional development, materials, and positive support.

Highly Effective Teachers: Eight Action Steps for the Literacy Leader

1. Hire the best teachers possible.
2. Generate excitement for change among the teaching staff.
3. Establish specific and measurable goals for improving literacy.
4. Ensure that curriculum is aligned with standards.
5. Ensure that content-area literacy strategies are used daily within classroom instruction.
6. Evaluate the use of instructional strategies to improve literacy through the use of formal and informal observations.
7. Exhibit courageous leadership in determining the need for staff changes.
8. Collaborate closely with the literacy specialist/coach and the LLT to use assessment results to determine the professional development needed to ensure a highly skilled professional staff.

Intervention: Meeting the Needs of ALL Students

As students enter middle and high school, most teachers assume that they arrive knowing how to read. However, the sad truth is that 25–35 percent of the students entering secondary-level grades have major deficits related to reading and comprehending grade-level texts. Reading difficulties usually stem not from a lack of a foundation in phonics, but rather from a lack of comprehension strategies, inadequate vocabulary development, insufficient prior knowledge, poor reading fluency, and little or no motivation to read.

The ultimate goal throughout the process of intervention is to have all students reading and comprehending on grade level. Often the first thought on how to help a struggling reader is to send him or her to the reading teacher down the hall. Yet, this action has not proven successful in creating high-achieving readers. Struggling readers do need accelerated intensive instruction, but “yanking” them from a content class for literacy remediation is not the cure-all.

Building an Intervention Program: Eight Actions Steps for the Literacy Leader

1. Develop an explicit schoolwide intervention plan.
2. Assign highly effective teachers to work with struggling readers.
3. Create a balanced literacy intervention program.
4. Recruit volunteers to assist with the intervention program.
5. Develop a strong relationship with your feeder schools.
6. Keep intervention classes small.
7. Provide intensive, continuous professional development to help teachers become strategic teachers and students become strategic readers.
8. Use formative assessment data to guide every aspect of the intervention program.

Final Thoughts

The role of today’s principal is so vast and complex that the thought of adding one more thing to the mix can seem daunting. A principal is expected to be an instructional leader, a facilities manager, a budget analyst, a personnel supervisor, a creative problem solver, a student disciplinarian, and on and on. Why, then, should today’s secondary principals place a priority on becoming literacy leaders for their schools? The statistics on adolescent literacy contained in this guide spell out the answer. Far too many of our middle school and high school students are unable to read at the level necessary to achieve academic success in the content areas. Students who leave our schools without the necessary literacy skills face an uncertain future; they are at risk for causing disruptive behavior, for dropping out, or for participating in risky behaviors that endanger their health or future success.

As principals, we must take on the challenge of becoming the literacy leaders in our schools simply because it is our responsibility to do so; in the words of Michael Fullan, it is “the moral imperative of the principal (to lead) deep cultural change that mobilizes the passion and commitment of teachers, parents, and others to improve the learning of all students, including closing the achievement gap.” If we wish to close the achievement gap, then we must tackle the literacy issue in our individual schools.

Advance praise for *Creating a Culture of Literacy*

In order to be effective, school-based literacy programs must be multi-dimensional. This book contains everything that a secondary school administrator needs in order to plan, implement, and assess an outstanding literacy program.

—Mel Riddile, principal,
J.E.B. Stuart High School, Falls Church, VA

NASSP has put together a useful tool for middle and high school principals grappling with the challenge of improving students' literacy skills. The handbook presents assessment, intervention, and professional development strategies that today's instructional leaders can put into place to get widespread teacher engagement around this critical area of focus. Melvina Phillips' recommendations have credibility because as a former principal she's been there. The book describes what Phillips and others have found to be the necessary components of a successful school-wide response to the literacy challenge at the middle and high school levels. Examples, school scenarios, tips and caveats make this a practical and helpful resource for busy school administrators who will appreciate the reminders of what is important relative to leading for literacy—and to the totality of their work as instructional leaders.

—Julie Meltzer, director of Adolescent Literacy Services,
CRM, Inc.

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