SMALLER
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PROGRAM

Addressing the "Crisis" in Adolescent Literacy

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Introduction

Policymakers, educators, parents, the public, and undoubtedly many secondary students themselves have heard about the adolescent literacy crisis in this country (Jacobs, 2008).[1] At the most fundamental level, the gist of the crisis is that the literacy skills of many students in grades 4 to 12 are so alarmingly low that the students have difficulty meeting the academic challenges of high school and are ill prepared for postsecondary education and the workforce. The term "literacy" has come to include reading, writing, and many other skills, but it is most often data on students' reading skills that generate concern.

This paper discusses aspects of the crisis in adolescent literacy from the perspective that the crisis requires focused action at the local and state levels. New literacy plans are needed—ones that acknowledge the variation in students' literacy achievement, lay out ways to address this variation, and never lose sight of postsecondary school outcomes for students with low literacy skills. In developing plans for addressing the needs of struggling adolescent readers, educators often try to adapt approaches in the early grades. However, even though there is much to learn from looking at kindergarten to grade 3 reading programs, it is often the strategies in place in the early grades that have failed to prepare students for the transition to the increasingly sophisticated literacy tasks adolescents encounter as they move through middle and high school.

Some Reasons Why Many Students Struggle as Adolescents

Research on the causes and correlates of adolescent reading difficulties is extensive. One overarching message is that these difficulties are diverse and complex (Scammacca et al., 2007; Torgesen et al., 2007). A short list of possible causes includes learning disabilities (Swanson and Hoskyn, 2001); a lack of strong English skills (Short and Fitzsimmons, 2007); and students' low levels of belief in their ability to succeed at reading and subsequent lack of engagement in academic tasks (Guthrie, 2008; Yudowitch et al., 2008). Debate exists about when and in what forms these difficulties manifest themselves and whether early identification and intervention will forestall later needs. Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) show that adolescent literacy levels have remained relatively "flat" for decades (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009), and two studies of students on the cusp of adolescence shed some light on why there have been too few safety nets to catch students earlier.

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[1] Various perspectives on this topic are presented in the spring 2008 volume of the *Harvard Educational Review, 78*(1); see also the websites for the Alliance for Excellent Education (www.all4ed.com) and the National High School Center (www.betterhighschools.org).

Leach, Scarborough, and Rescorla (2003) were interested in students who were identified as struggling readers in grades 4 and 5 and specifically whether they had had earlier difficulties that had been overlooked. They gathered questionnaire data from parents and examined the school records of 2,300 students in grades 4 and 5 to trace their academic histories, especially related to previous reading difficulties. They also assessed the students with a battery of reading and cognitive abilities tests. The data showed that almost half the students could be classified as "late emerging" poor readers because their difficulties had not been apparent in earlier grades. These students' reading problems were "heterogeneous with regard to their skill deficits" (p. 221); that is, they varied enough that it was unlikely that one intervention program would be appropriate to address the needs of all the students in their sample. It is also noteworthy that even though more than two-thirds of these students seemed to have weak phonics and decoding skills when tested in grades 4 and 5, the initial sign of their problems came through their poor comprehension when they were asked to read and make meaning independently.

Buly and Valencia (2002; Valencia and Buly, 2004) studied 108 fourth-graders from 17 of the 20 elementary schools in a large, ethnically diverse district in Washington State. These students had scored in the bottom 2 of 4 levels on their state reading test. The researchers, like Leach and her colleagues, wanted to know about variability in difficulties of these students, whose less-than-proficient results put them "below the bar" for a passing score. They administered diagnostic tests to the students and used factor analysis to develop profiles of students' performance. The data yielded 10 somewhat overlapping clusters, which they reported as 6 profiles. Only 9 percent of the students in their sample had identifiable learning disabilities; these students were weak in comprehension, fluency, and word identification. The other students offered an array of strengths and weaknesses. Approximately 18 percent of the students in the sample had difficulty identifying words either by recognizing sight words or applying decoding skills; many of these students were English language learners. Approximately 41 percent of the sample read slowly. Individual students differed in the accuracy with which they identified words, but, as a whole, the group demonstrated weak silent reading fluency, which affected the overall comprehension of what they read. The remaining students, approximately 33 percent, could often identify words correctly and read with relative fluency, but their abilities to derive meaning from text seemed weak—just at the point in their school lives when comprehension becomes an essential skill for success.

Students in both studies probably all had difficulty moving from elementary to middle school. Grade 4 is almost universally recognized as the point at which students must make a transition from "learning to read" to "reading to learn" (Chall, 1983; Chall et al., 1990; Chall and Jacobs, 2003). Students entering grade 4 find little or no explicit reading instruction and may move among departmentalized classes. They also encounter instructional material that varies in quality, is unlikely to follow a narrative pattern, contains more content than previously, and has fewer textual aids than the "basal"

material found in the early grades (Kamil, 2010). Students must read independently with end goals of comprehending what they have read and gaining content knowledge, often without the scaffolding and support that teachers previously provided.

The Developmental Continuum From Early Reading Onward

Almost 30 years ago, Chall (1983) wrote that reading strategies and skills develop in a series of stages that are still relevant and informative. Preschoolers and many kindergarten students are in the "getting ready to read stage," which is followed by the introduction of formal instruction and the "learning and practicing beginning reading skills" stage. Many of the behaviors students need to learn are still the same, although, increasingly, electronic text is part of the media from which students in these stages explore and learn (Bus and Neuman, 2009). Learning to read with fluency—speed and accuracy—is an important goal for these stages.

At grade 4, students pass into a new stage, which Chall termed "reading for learning the new." As mentioned above, this passage represents a significant transition and is, in many ways, the entry into the challenges of "adolescent reading." Even though educators often recognize the dramatic change in the school literacy context as students move from grade to grade, they also have many reasons to overlook its importance. One reason may be the hope that carefully delivered, scientifically based early reading instruction aligned to stringent state standards will prepare students for the transition. Under No Child Left Behind requirements, students in kindergarten to grade 2 have rarely been tested, other than with the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) or similar benchmark tests. The logic of various iterations of reading programs and strong early childhood education in general is that supportive, well-informed teachers attending to students' oral reading, their invented spelling, and their first expressions of comprehension will prepare them for grade 4. Standardized testing at grade 3 will then indicate their progress along this trajectory, right before students make the critical transition to "reading to learn." The timeline can be beneficial, especially for children traditionally considered at risk because they did not attend high-quality preschools and have not gained the rich vocabularies and wide storehouse of concepts needed for early reading acquisition (Hart and Risley, 1995). But this period of movement from pre-reader onward must include careful progress monitoring and differentiated instruction, as needed, to address identified gaps in learning before students are expected to read and make sense of text independently.

Expectations of what students should know and be able to do as readers shift dramatically from grade 3 to grade 4 or 5. Chall recognized these changes, although she could not anticipate the variety in reading texts and tasks that technology has introduced (Alvermann, 2001; Guzzetti and Gamboa, 2004; Hargood, 2007). Although

these changes do not negate the fact that students' reading skills are still developing, it has become increasingly important for them to apply both foundational and comprehension skills into a flexible, strategic approach to different kinds of reading. Writing about what she termed a "lifespan developmental perspective on reading," Alexander (2005) acknowledged the changes that readers must make in their strategic processing that must accompany their transition to "reading to learn."

The period from grade 4 to grade 8 is critical in students' development, and the transition to high school at grade 9 can be even more overwhelming academically (Grossman and Cooney, 2009; Legters and Kerr, 2001). Chall's terminology for this period provides only a suggestion of the complexity of the tasks students must now perform: "reading multiple points of view and constructing and reconstructing meaning." Even students who seemed to do well in middle school are often challenged by the social and academic shifts when they move to large, often impersonal high schools, where they must form new relationships with teachers and peers while simultaneously adjusting to a new level of academic rigor.

Insufficient Guidance From State Standards

The change in instructional context that occurs in the fourth grade and beyond is rarely fully reflected in state English language arts standards or, to a large extent, in the assessments aligned to them. Comparisons of state standards and assessments reveal significant variation in definitions of the essential knowledge and skills that students must acquire and in the rigor, expectations, design, and difficulty of tests that measure student achievement (Linn, 2006). At the same time, the current interpretation of standards-based accountability seems to have increased the practice of "teaching to the test," resulting in the narrowing of schools' curricula to aspects of the standards that are tested (Center on Education Policy, 2010). Writing about reading testing, Paris (2005) has argued that standardized tests given during elementary grades assess primarily "constrained skills," such as letter-sound knowledge, decoding, and low-level comprehension. These skills, he maintains, are quickly learned and easily tested, but initial proficiency with these skills may mask a shallow overall mastery, which will ultimately impede students' ability to read independently with deep comprehension. Students in the Leach, Scarborough, and Rescorla (2003) study may have done well on the first reading tests they took.

A recent study funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation illustrates how state standards can narrow the scope of what students experience (Council of the Great City Schools and the American Institutes for Research, in preparation). One aspect of the study focused specifically on four districts—Atlanta, Georgia; Boston, Massachusetts; Charlotte, North Carolina; and Cleveland, Ohio. These districts, all members of the

Council of the Great City Schools, participate in the Trial Urban District Assessment, which administers NAEP reading, mathematics, and science assessments at grades 4 and 8 to district samples (see http://nationsreportcard.gov/tuda.asp for details). Researchers looked for the extent of alignment among these states' reading standards at grades 3, 4, 5, 7, and 8; district standards where applicable; and the tasks implied by the framework and specifications for the 2003 NAEP reading assessment. In addition to content alignment, the researchers compared these documents to determine their equivalence in terms of cognitive demands students were expected to exert as they read. In many cases, even though the state standards in grades 3, 4, and 5 implied a developmental progression of skills, it was the standard at grade 5 that matched the level of cognitive demand expected at grade 4 by NAEP. Examples of skills not taught until grade 5 are distinguishing relevant from irrelevant information in a text and understanding an author's purpose for writing. This suggests that fourth-graders in this sample—who are in the critical transition period—are not being expected to read with the level of sophistication demanded by NAEP.

Reading for Meaning and Learning

A consideration of task and text sophistication has recently dominated the discourse about students' reading. For example, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS; www.commoncorestandards.org) emphasize that students need to learn to apply sophisticated skills and strategies in all their reading, with the skills and strategies consciously differentiated by content areas. The CCSS and other sources emphasize that reading tasks in college and the workplace are most often sophisticated, data-filled informational texts, with complex structures necessitated by the information they present. But for adolescents, what do these increasingly sophisticated texts look like, and what are the tasks students must perform?

NAEP is the single most dependable and consistent measure of aggregate reading levels of students in grades 4 and 8 at the national and state levels and nationally at grade 12. NAEP sets demanding national goals for literacy, includes long and varied reading tasks on the assessment, and elicits responses to multiple-choice and constructed-response items. Many states and commercial test developers have used NAEP as the model for state tests, but local standard-setting processes mean that the actual difficulty levels of state tests differ widely. Disparities are consistently present when state tests and students' scores on them are compared with NAEP state data (McCombs et al., 2005).

NAEP also publishes achievement levels at grades 4, 8, and 12 for each tested academic subject. The achievement levels provide concise descriptions of the kinds of reading the test-takers have been able to do when their scores fall into the Basic, Proficient, and Advanced categories. The descriptor for the Advanced level is a good starting point for understanding the concept of sophisticated reading. Table 1 presents the Advanced achievement-level descriptors for grades 4, 8, and 12. Achievement at this level

assumes mastery of the specific skills and strategies represented by the Basic and Proficient achievement levels as well. As the table shows, students scoring at this level must be sophisticated readers who can comprehend and make inferences about difficult text, then use it to explain or justify their opinions. On the NAEP, sophisticated reading tasks span literary, informational, and procedural genres.

Table 1: Advanced-Level Reading Tasks for Grades 4, 8, and 12

Grade 4 Advanced-level readers should be able to	Grade 8 Advanced-level readers should be able to	Grade 12 Advanced-level readers should be able to
• Make complex inferences • Construct and support their inferential understanding of the text • Apply their understanding of a text to make and support a judgment	• Make connections within and across texts and explain causal relations • Evaluate and justify the strength of supporting evidence and the quality of an author's presentation • Manage the processing demands of analysis and evaluation by stating, explaining, and justifying	• Analyze both the meaning and the form of the text • Provide complete, explicit, and precise text support for their analyses with specific examples • Read across multiple texts for a variety of purposes, analyzing and evaluating them individually and as a set

Source: Adapted from NAEP achievement-level descriptors. Retrieved June 28, 2010, from http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/reading/achieveall.asp#2009ald.

The NAEP achievement-level descriptors present one picture of sophisticated reading; studies done at ACT, the testing company, present a complementary one. Drawing on an extensive analysis of data from middle school students, researchers found that fewer than 2 in 10 students in grade 8 were on target to be ready for entry-level college coursework when they graduate from high school (ACT, 2008). Additional analyses of tests taken by high school students suggest that most high school experiences leave students so inadequately prepared for entry-level coursework in 2- and 4-year colleges, trade schools, and technical schools that success in these situations will depend on the availability of remedial help of some kind (ACT, 2009). Although the researchers found gaps in mathematics and science knowledge, reading seemed to be the most serious area of concern, primarily because reading is such an essential component for success in the postsecondary world.

Chief among the challenges students seem to face is the ability to read and understand what ACT refers to as complex literary and informational texts. Informational texts can pose particular challenges because students are unaware of the different textual structures used in different disciplines (Gersten et al., 2001). The characteristics of complex texts for both genres, as defined by ACT for its tests and instructional materials, are presented in table 2.

Table 2: Descriptions of "Complex" Text as Presented on the ACT Tests

Complex Literary Narratives (essays, short stories, novels)	Complex Informational Passages
• Make generous use of ambiguous language and literacy devices • Feature complex and subtle interactions between characters • Contain challenging context-dependent vocabulary • Contain messages and/or meanings that are not explicit but are embedded in the passage	• Include sizable amounts of data • Present difficult concepts that are embedded (i.e., not explicit) in text • Use demanding words and phrases whose meaning must be determined from context • Include intricate explanations of processes or events

Adapted from ACT. (2006). *Reading Between the Lines: What the ACT Reveals About College Readiness in Reading.* Iowa City, IA: Author.

Together, information in tables 1 and 2 demonstrates the realities of the kinds of texts and tasks that should prepare students for entry-level college coursework, job training programs, and the military. Most adults can identify with the concept of "complex texts" by remembering some college or graduate school textbook, a scholarly article, a highly theoretical essay, the recipe for an elaborate dessert, or maybe the instructions for installing one's own computer.

Outcomes of Low Literacy for Students in Secondary Schools

In 2009, NAEP reading was administered to 160,000 students in grade 8 but not in grade 12. Nationally, there was a small improvement in scores since 2007. Scores in nine states and in some large urban districts went up, and no state's scores declined. Still the data showed that racial and ethnic gaps that have existed for years persist. Furthermore, only 3 percent of the grade 8 students demonstrated reading at the Advanced level; that is, they were able to perform the tasks presented in the first column in table 1. The outcome for students like those who score well on NAEP is usually success in high school and in postsecondary pursuits, but those scoring at Basic or below may find themselves scrambling to keep up in their courses or falling further and further behind. It is true that many students who read 2 to 4 years below grade level on state reading tests often receive supplemental reading instruction, but research has shown little impact from even full-year, intensive programs (Kemple et al., 2008; Corrin et al., 2008; James-Burdumy et al., 2009).

The negative outcomes of adolescents' low literacy continue long after high school, no matter whether they have actually acquired a high school diploma or not. As young adults seeking entry into the workforce or military, they confront training programs that assume proficient literacy (and often numeracy) skills. Data from the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) (Kutner et al., 2007), which was administered in 2003, support the links among literacy levels, employment, and income. Individuals with higher levels of literacy were more likely to be employed in full-time positions and early higher wages and were also less likely to have received public assistance during their adulthood. Individuals with higher levels of literacy also were more likely to report that they obtained information about current events, public affairs, and government by reading, that they voted in elections, and (not surprisingly) that they read to their children.

The most recent data on high school dropout rates is for the class of 2007 (Diplomas Count, 2010). Only 68.8 percent of the class of 2007 graduated, with an average of only 60 percent graduating in large urban areas. Of the 11,000 U.S. school districts, 25 percent account for the majority of the dropouts. Dropouts do not usually mention literacy skills as their motivation for leaving high school, but their major reasons all suggest literacy-related issues. A recent study found that only 35 percent of dropouts reported leaving school because they were failing, as opposed to 47 percent who claimed that uninteresting classes were their main reason for leaving (Bridgeland et al., 2006). The literature on dropouts often uses the term "pushed out" for students who leave early, sometimes within sight of graduation day, perhaps because they cannot keep up but more likely because they are bored or find school irrelevant (Achieve, Inc., and American Diploma Project, 2004; Bridgeland et al., 2006). Here again, it is not much of a stretch to think that decisions to leave before obtaining a diploma may be influenced or exacerbated by reading issues.

Furthermore, the American Diploma Project (Achieve, Inc., and American Diploma Project, 2004) found that even when students graduate from high school and go on to college, they frequently need some sort of remedial help to get through entry-level courses. Employers of high school graduates also often report that new hires are not prepared for entry-level job training because they lack basic literacy and mathematics skills, and most workers question the preparation their high schools have provided to them. To a large extent, these perceptions have not been quantified, but they corroborate ACT's contention that even for high school graduates, literacy levels are inadequate for postsecondary pursuits.

A recent revision of a decade-old report (Carnevale et al., 2010) provides the numerical data needed to illustrate these issues. The report reviews what is known about current relationships between education level and job requirements and forecasts these relationships to 2018. The researchers' focus is postsecondary education in general, both college attendance and job training programs, and they are very clear in stating that "dropouts, high school graduates, and people with some college but no degree are

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on the down escalator of social mobility, falling out of the middle-income class and into the lower three deciles of family income" (p. 3). The report points out that, on average, workers with higher levels of education receive higher salaries and suggests that in the near future, only blue-collar and food and personal service jobs will be open to dropouts and those with only a high school diploma. The report authors remind their audience that postsecondary education is the "best umbrella in a recession" (p. 5) and caution that the increasing dependence on technology will only increase the importance of college or career training after high school. The report offers no direct links between its data and forecasts and the adolescent literacy crisis, but the relationships are obvious.

Planning to Meet the Adolescent Literacy Crisis

Recognizing the need to improve the quality of literacy instruction from preschool to grade 12, many state and district leaders have taken direction from Achieve, Inc., the National Governors Association (2005), and others (Joftus, 2002; Martinez, 2005; Togneri and Anderson, 2003) to develop local frameworks to guide literacy instruction across the grades. As states begin to introduce the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), many existing plans will be revisited and revised. The revision process can be very productive because it will motivate states and districts to think seriously about adolescent literacy in light of the CCSS focus on college and career readiness. Some suggested steps in this process are presented in table 3 and detailed next.

Table 3: Questions to Ask About Data

Questions to Guide Analysis of Data	Questions the Analysis Will Answer
What differences are shown in the achievement of different groups, when analyzed according to racial/ethnic and socioeconomic status and other variables?	Are there significant gaps in achievement that must be addressed? What characterizes these differences?
In what schools, districts, or areas do students seem to be doing well on the state reading tests?	Where are the differentials in achievement?
What are the characteristics of teachers in districts or schools that seem to be doing better than others in closing achievement gaps for adolescents?	Are there teacher characteristics that seem most closely associated with student success as readers? Do teachers' years of experience or educational level seem to be related to student achievement?
What support and training is offered to teachers in areas that seem to be doing better than others in meeting the needs of struggling adolescent readers?	What practices are in place in sites where students' needs seem to be met effectively? Do teachers in these schools take advantage of more professional development? Do they have Common Planning time? Do the schools have a literacy leadership team that actively supports teachers' work?

Questions to Guide Analysis of Data	Questions the Analysis Will Answer
What interventions, if any, are used in the areas that seem to be doing better than others in meeting the needs of struggling adolescent readers?	Which intervention programs and/or procedures seem to be most effective?
What can be generalized from sites where local efforts seem most successful at meeting the needs of struggling adolescent readers? Are there differences in teachers, students, or procedures that may account for differences?	Are there lessons to be learned from these sites? Can procedures be transported elsewhere?

Even in states and districts that have spent time planning for K–12 literacy instruction, the existing plans may not be the best place to start new efforts to think about adolescent literacy. It might be more informative to conduct a two-part review that asks tough questions about student test data and about the instruments that yielded the data. Table 4 presents some sample questions. Starting with data is perhaps the most efficient first step. Miskel and his colleagues (2003; Miskel and Song, 2004) found that the power to shape reform efforts in early reading resided with the individuals who best understood the relevant data, for example, the relationship between low scores on phonics measures and subsequent difficulties in comprehension. Their observation generalizes well for planning for adolescent learners. Similar power can reside with those who understand data from secondary students' reading tests.

Table 4: Suggested Steps in the Process of Planning New Comprehensive Literacy Plans

Step in the Planning Process	Purpose of the Step
1. Examine existing test data and the tests that students have taken	Understand at a content level what test scores mean in terms of the tasks students have been asked to perform, the cognitive demand of the tasks, and the complexity of the texts that tests have included
2. Examine data for indicators that students may be at risk for dropping out	Become vigilant as early as possible to identify students who need extra support and instruction to forestall their dropping out of high school
3. Create ownership of the planning process and the plan to develop a cadre of individuals who can translate the plan downward to local administrators and teachers	Create a plan that reflects local needs, as well as research evidence and best practice, and ensure that the plan will be explained accurately and enthusiastically to educators not involved in the planning process
4. Take advantage of adoption of the Common Core State Standards and interest in instruction to emphasize the importance of teaching literacy in the content areas	Demonstrate to content-area teachers the real importance of their learning to integrate discipline-specific literacy instruction into their teaching
5. Provide literacy interventions for students who need help filling in gaps in their literacy skills	Provide the support and remediation needed by students whose low literacy skills inhibit their abilities to succeed in content-area coursework

Without dipping down to the individual classroom level, the interrogation of the data is a search for "value added," for those places and situations that seem to be doing the best job teaching students to read and helping them maintain and apply their skills in increasingly sophisticated ways. Because the search looks at data in aggregate and then disaggregated by group and situation, it can help locate schools and districts that are beating the odds, from which best practices can be generalized (Langer, 1999; Uzzell et al., 2010). In addition, reviewing the actual state tests further grounds discussions about data in the texts that students read and the tasks that they performed to achieve their test scores. The review might show that the tests, even though aligned to the state standards, contain short, low-level texts and ask for shallow application of a limited range of reading skills through low-level multiple choice and short-answer questions. This information could suggest that teachers, guided by the test's requirements, limit the opportunities that students have to thoughtfully apply sophisticated reading skills. For example, a review conducted by Achieve (2004) found that, with a few exceptions, most of the grade 10 and grade 11 state-mandated high school exit exams targeted the application of skills aligned to expectations at a grade 8 level.

Answers to this interrogation of student data might show that current approaches to literacy instruction seem to work better for some students than for others, or in only some grades, or in some parts of a state, or in some kinds of schools—that is, in what the Learning First Alliance called "islands of excellence" (Togneri and Anderson, 2003). Whatever story the data tell, it will be clear that no one approach to instruction—or to changing instruction—will work for all. This is the fallacy in the common approach to developing a framework for literacy instruction that adheres strictly to a longitudinal or developmental progression. Such plans must be flexible, responsive to students' differences and needs, and differentiated across the grades and content areas. The inappropriateness of this type of approach was proven in Alabama, where the carefully developed kindergarten to grade 3 plans for the Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI) were extended with little differentiation to upper grades. Teachers in middle and high schools rejected the one-size-fits-all professional development and collaboratively tailored ARI procedures to fit their needs (Salinger and Bacevich, 2004).

Another data source may seem somewhat unexpected: students' attendance records. Frequent absenteeism (more than 20 percent of the school year) has been identified as one of the risk factors associated with students' likelihood of leaving high school before graduation (MacIver and MacIver, 2009; Allensworth and Easton, 2005). Absenteeism can have an insidious effect on students' learning. Accessing background knowledge is an essential reading strategy, one that is frequently taught as part of reading intervention programs (Shanahan, 2005). But frequent absenteeism equates to increasingly large gaps in the knowledge base students need for success in all their academic work. This suggests that attempts to address the needs of struggling readers should include use of study material that helps students not only to practice emerging skills but also to fill in gaps in what they know.

The second step in the planning process is to create genuine ownership of the literacy plan among literacy educators from around the state. Efforts to create ownership begin with the selection of participants in the revising or planning process. Taking the time to identify and enlist the help of local academics and educators with expertise in adolescent literacy can be valuable for many reasons, but two reasons stand out: (1) recognizing that expertise exists locally and (2) acknowledging that the needs and unique concerns of secondary teachers and learners will be incorporated into the planning process. Including secondary educators can build grassroots support and understanding as they serve as communicators of the state intent.

These participants in the planning process, far more than any national consultants, will help translate the state framework and communicate its content to other secondary educators. They can be the ones who start professional networks that can deepen understanding and foster engagement among the district and school staff who will have to implement the plan. Coburn (2001) and Coburn and Russell (2008) have studied what they call "collective sensemaking" as new reading initiatives are introduced into school systems. They maintain that change happens only when teachers "co-construct" understanding of the messages inherent in new policies and procedures. The ideal, of course, is that the co-constructed meaning accurately reflects the intended literacy plan, but achieving this ideal is often challenging. Teachers need to see the connections among their own practice and instructional setting and the perspectives of and procedures in the new plan. Unless these connections make sense and the requested instructional changes seem valuable, teachers will see the new plan in the same way Coburn's subjects saw new reading standards—"the same stuff" (Coburn, 2001, p. 158).

Many state and district literacy plans have tried to encourage secondary content-area teachers to integrate literacy instruction into their teaching. Although this approach has gained traction in some areas, many teachers continue to maintain that this is not their responsibility. Thus, the third step in creating a new literacy plan entails two strategies: (1) taking advantage of the adoption of the Common Core State Standards and (2) building on interest in a three- approach to instruction, which will be discussed later. Here, the primary goal is to draw attention to content-area literacy, the integration of instruction into discipline-specific reading and writing strategies, and greater demands for reading and writing in content-area classes. Heller and Greenleaf (2007), drawing on a long history of research and theory, state that "the vast majority of middle and high school students engage in very little sustained reading, and when they do it is mainly from brief, teacher-created handouts and, to a lesser degree, from textbooks. . . . Most [teachers] devote little if any class time to showing students, explicitly, what it means to be a good reader or writer in [a] given subject area" (p. 16). Content-area teachers have traditionally clung to their role as experts and have resisted suggestions that they modify instruction to place their students in the role of novice readers of science, history, English literature, and even mathematics. Yet integrating discipline-specific literacy strategies into content area is the foundation of secondary Tier 1 instruction.

Opportunities for in-person and online professional development in content-area literacy are abundant (see, for example, http://www.literacy.uconn.edu/contlit.htm), but the Common Core State Standards can serve as the incentive for new interest in this topic. Indeed, the structure of the CCSS is a veritable blueprint for a professional development curriculum. Standards for kindergarten to grade 5 integrate the teaching of content areas into the reading and writing standards, but those for grades 6 to 12 are finely differentiated. In addition to anchor standards for college and career readiness and standards for writing, speaking, listening, and language usage, the CCSS detail what students need to know and the skills they need to read informational text and literature and to read in history, social studies, science, and technical subjects. They emphasize the differences in presentation of information across different disciplines; lack of understanding of these differences has been found to be a large determinant in students' reading difficulties (Gersten et al., 2001). Furthermore, the CCSS provide clear metrics for determining text complexity and readability and for matching readers to texts to promote not just engagement but also students' ability to build on previous knowledge.

In far too many cases in the past, standards documents probably languished on teachers' shelves, while the actual instruction was guided by the reduction of the breadth and depth of these standards to the content of state tests. It is too early to know whether this will be the fate of the Common Core State Standards, but the opportunities they present for rethinking adolescent literacy instruction are huge.

The final step in the planning process is addressing the needs of students with significant literacy weaknesses. No matter how effectively elementary teachers teach reading or content-area teachers embed literacy into their instruction, some students will need more intense intervention to help them overcome the challenges they face (Kamil et al., 2008). A comprehensive literacy plan must require interventions for students who need them, ideally as soon as their needs are identified. Of course, this does not mean that interventions and support offered to older students cannot be effective! Students in upper grades have had more time to reinforce their perception of themselves as weak readers, more time to be disappointed in their application of insufficient reading strategies, and more time to fall behind in acquiring the knowledge needed for content-area learning. "Catching" students as early as possible in the safety net of interventions benefits the students as well as the system that is working to make them college and career ready.

The current interest in an approach to instruction, often categorized under Response to Intervention (RtI) (see www.rti4success.org), suggests an effective approach to addressing the needs of all students. Tiered instruction is elegant in its simplicity but challenging in its implementation, especially in secondary schools (Duffy, 2007). For the first tier, evidence-based instruction is provided in all content areas. The CCSS for grades 6 to 12 are grounded in research on the discipline-specific strategies needed to

read successfully in each content area, as well as on best practices in adolescent literacy instruction. Professional development on the CCSS should strengthen teachers' ability to provide sound Tier 1 instruction to students whose low literacy skills put them off track for college and career.

Tiers 2 and 3 provide increasingly targeted instruction designed to address significant literacy deficiencies. The most common Tier 2 services, which are often offered several times a week for a full year, are reading programs designed for students who read 2 to 4 years below grade level. Students who benefit from Tier 2 services have mastered basic decoding and low-level comprehension skills but need instruction that will strengthen and expand their strategies for figuring out unfamiliar words and making sense of complex texts. Tier 3 reading programs are designed for students with the kinds of severe reading difficulties that are best pinpointed by diagnostic tests administered and interpreted by specialists. Many Tier 3 programs begin with the fundamentals of reading to ensure that students have mastered basic decoding and word identification strategies; they then move on to address vocabulary and comprehension. Tier 3 reading classes are usually small so that teachers can differentiate instruction and practice to meet students' individual needs.

The range of these reading interventions is huge (Deshler et al., 2007; Shanahan, 2005), as is the evidence base that supports them (Torgesen et al., 2007). Tier 2 interventions are for students who score approximately 2 to 4 years below grade level on reading tests. Their basic word attack and silent reading fluency skills are usually developed, but they will benefit from instruction that will increase their abilities to figure out unfamiliar or technical vocabulary, add to their comprehension strategies, and teach them to check their reading for meaning and apply "fix-up" strategies if meaning is foundering. Tier 3 interventions are for students who need more basic instruction, often to solidify and strengthen word identification and silent reading fluency skills. Although commercial programs at both levels often recommend a full year of intense instruction and extensive professional development for teachers, Tier 2 programs are usually designed to accommodate somewhat larger classes and to emphasize reading in content areas more than Tier 3 programs.

Implementing any Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions poses challenges for scheduling, teacher training, and budget planning, but the long-term benefits of overcoming these challenges include an increased likelihood that students will remain in school and acquire the levels of literacy and academic readiness they need for postsecondary education.

Conclusion

Educators and policymakers recognize that too many adolescents lack the reading strategies and skills necessary to do well in middle and high school academic work and their poor scores on state accountability tests reflect badly on their schools and districts. The real outcomes of poor literacy skills manifest themselves when students try to make their way in postsecondary pursuits. Even for those with a high school diploma, workplace requirements will continue to rise and the need for advanced literacy skills will accelerate. Achievement gaps noted while individuals are in school will become "employment gaps" and "salary gaps," as fewer and fewer opportunities are available for individuals who cannot read well enough for even entry-level training. Students' annual yearly progress, while important, is not as important as students' ability to survive in the world they encounter once they leave school.

The realities of college and workplace requirements should provide educators and policymakers with the incentives they need to rethink their current literacy plans. As they do so, they ought not to lose sight of the importance of building strong foundational skills in the early grades, but they also need to recognize two other important factors. First, the continuum of many students' reading development does not keep pace with the challenges presented by their reading texts and tasks. The transition from early grades to grade 4 represents a major shift in the literacy expectations placed on students, and their acquisition of foundational skills may not have prepared them well enough to make this transition successfully. Also, the transition to grade 9 presents a host of new academic and social challenges, as the texts and tasks students encounter become even more sophisticated and their ability to quickly form relationships with new teachers and peers becomes increasingly important. The second factor for educators and policymakers to consider is that increased emphasis on the importance of college and career readiness is accompanied by tools that can help districts and schools develop forward-looking literacy plans—ones that acknowledge the kinds of reading students in middle and high schools need to do to be competitive in their postsecondary education and employment pursuits. The tools exist to help define the literacy tasks students must acquire. The Common Core State Standards, which differentiate literacy tasks by content, and the tiered structure proposed as a way to provide quality instruction to all students and appropriate safety nets for those who struggle, also hold promise.

Literacy plans that look beyond the requirements of grade 12 and address what students need to know and be able to do after they leave school are needed now more than ever because it is preparation for this phase of students' lives that should be the real focus of our educational efforts.

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