

# ADOLESCENT LITERACY: THE CORNERSTONE OF STUDENT SUCCESS

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The Alliance for Excellent Education was founded seven years ago to encourage and support effective federal policy that supports and incentivizes the work taking place at the local and state levels to improve middle and high schools and increase the achievement and attainment levels of all of their students.

It was then—and is today—the only national, non-membership policy and advocacy organization focused specifically on improving academic outcomes for all of America's secondary school students, with a particular focus on those who are most at-risk of dropping out or graduating without the knowledge and skills needed for college, work, and life.

Shortly after its founding in 2002, following extensive study and consultation with some of the foremost researchers and educators in the nation, the Alliance published a report that laid out its initial framework for the federal policy changes that it believed were necessary. It was no accident that the first topic addressed in that document was the importance of improving the literacy levels of students. After all, the main objective of the framework was to make sure that students attained the skills they needed to be successful in high school and to graduate prepared for the challenges of life. And as the report noted, "No student with low literacy skills can graduate from high school prepared for college or a career."

The report also clearly stated a statistic that many of its readers, at the time, had trouble believing: *About six million middle and high school students read below grade level.* Nor, it noted, were the students' problems small ones. Granted, only a relatively small number of students—researchers estimate between 5 and 10%—are in need of intensive and massive extra help; these are the students who enter ninth-grade testing at only the second- or third-grade level

and have problems decoding words. But a second, considerably larger group read with limited fluency, often testing at a sixth- or seventh-grade reading level when they enter high school. Finally, there is a third group that consists of students who are not fully prepared to succeed in their courses because they have only partially mastered the more advanced reading capabilities increasingly needed for challenging high school work (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006).

As the kids might say, "Well, duh!" This certainly wasn't news to the secondary school teachers in almost every community across the nation who already knew that far too many students were entering their science, math, history, and English classes without the comprehension and vocabulary skills they needed to comprehend adequately the increasingly difficult texts and materials they were assigned in middle and high school.

But federal, state, and local policymakers were harder to convince. They had lived for years with the conviction that educational success depended on building a strong foundation in the early years, one they thought would be sufficient to allow students to continue learning as they progressed along the educational continuum. But developing strong skills in reading, writing, and critical thinking is a little like building a house: A strong foundation is critical, but if the builder leaves before putting up the walls and roof, it's not a finished product.

Six years ago, the education policymaking community—particularly at the federal level—was basking in the glow of a newly reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which had been championed by the president, enthusiastically supported by Congressional Republicans and Democrats alike, and given a catchy new name: the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). That legislation included a recognition that the foundational literacy skills for students in the early elementary grades needed to be strengthened; it created the Reading First program that allocated a billion dollars a year to provide assistance to states and districts to establish reading programs for students enrolled in kindergarten through third grade.

However, no program was created and no funds were allocated to support literacy interventions for older students—

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in part because federal legislators did not yet recognize the severity of the adolescent literacy challenge, but in part because NCLB essentially was not a bill designed to address the educational needs of high schools or their students. In fact, the first draft of what evolved into NCLB that was sent to Congress by President Bush in 2001 mentioned high schools only twice. And although provisions, which affect students in 9th through 12th grades, were eventually added to the legislation, they were, in essence, afterthoughts that have had the kinds of unintended consequences that often result from last-minute add-ons.

Why weren't high schools and the needs of their students a higher priority for Congress and the administration? There are many answers to that question, but perhaps the most accurate is that, as recently as the beginning of this decade, not many people outside of the classroom knew what was happening in the nation's secondary schools. In fact, much of the little data that did exist about the status of these schools and their students did not seem terribly urgent. Now, of course, we recognize that most of what we thought we knew was either inaccurate or misleading, but it did not seem then like cause for serious alarm.

That assumption could not have been more wrong. Over the past decade, reams of research have proven that in far too many of the nation's secondary schools, we don't just have a problem; we have a national crisis that demands a national response.

### **Consider Graduation Rates**

An increased commitment that holds schools accountable for how they educate their students, coupled with groundbreaking research on graduation rates by independent experts, has come together over the past several years to demonstrate that far more students are dropping out of high school than anyone had realized.

Until recently, the only source for determining the national high school graduation rate was the data reported by the states and posted by the U.S. Department of Education. For years, they had held steady at above 80%. That wasn't great, but it didn't seem too awful, particularly since so many people could clearly remember a time when a high school diploma wasn't necessary—high school dropouts could often get a good manufacturing job or make a decent living in farming.

That national graduation rate was more or less accepted for years—until in 2001 and 2003, when reports were published by Jay Greene of the Manhattan Institute and Chris Swanson (now director of the research arm of *Education Week*, but then at the Urban Institute), respectively, reports that effectively galvanized the education policy community. Greene's and Swanson's findings didn't rely on the questionable data that served as the basis for the official reports; instead, using different methodologies but coming to the same conclusions, they determined that the actual national graduation rate was a mere 70%—and that it was far worse for minority and low-income students. (The updated graduation rates published in *Education Week's* "Diplomas Count 2008" [Editorial Projects in Education, 2008] place the graduation rates for African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans at 55.3%, 57.8%, and 50.6%, respectively, compared with a white graduation rate of 77.6%.) Other respected researchers around the country have delved into the numbers as well, coming up with similar results.

Graduating students with the knowledge and skills that prepare them for the challenges that come after high school should be the ultimate purpose of the K–12 educational system. Graduation rates are a fundamental indicator of whether the nation's public school system is doing what it is intended to do: enroll, engage, and educate youth to be productive members of society. But graduation rates are not just a "bottom line" for schools; they are critical predictors of individual achievement and have undeniable consequences for communities, states, and American society.

### **Consider the Economic Realities**

Over the past several decades, shifts have been taking place in society that portend—unless Americans begin to pay attention and make some significant changes—a major alteration in the strong economic position that the United States has traditionally held in the world. Among the most important of these shifts is the fact that the educational requirements of the jobs that have supported a strong economy are changing. The U.S. Department of Labor estimates that 90% of new high-growth, high-wage jobs will require some postsecondary education, in comparison to decades past, when even a high school dropout could find a position in the manufacturing or agricultural sectors that would support a family in a middle class lifestyle.

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Today, many jobs once held by dropouts or by individuals who had attained only a high school diploma are being automated or going overseas, leaving minimally educated Americans with increasingly diminished options to support themselves and their families.

The United States can no longer absorb the costs and losses associated with an education system that already produces about 1.2 million dropouts every year. Clearly, the dropouts themselves suffer the most direct impact. But the economy, social fabric, and security of the nation, states, and local communities are also affected. The opportunities these young people will miss throughout their lives will have cumulative costs for them as individuals; these missed opportunities also represent a significant loss for individual states and the country as a whole. The following are a few examples taken from different reports and analyses:

- Over the course of his or her lifetime, a single high school dropout costs the nation approximately \$260,000 in lost income. So, if the nation's secondary schools improved to the point at which they were able to graduate all of their students, the payoff would be significant. If all of the students who dropped out of the Class of 2008 had graduated, for example, the nation's economy would have benefited from an additional \$319 billion in income over their lifetimes.
- High school dropouts are far more likely than are high school graduates to be arrested or incarcerated. Increasing the high school graduation rate and college matriculation for male students by only 5% would lead to combined crime-related savings and additional revenue of almost \$8 billion each year.
- Each student who graduates from high school will save states an average of \$13,706 in Medicaid and expenditures for uninsured care over the course of his or her lifetime. States could save more than \$17 billion if those young people earned their high school diplomas.
- For every \$500 of wealth that households headed by a high school dropout accumulate, households headed by high school graduates possess approximately \$5,000. This means that there would be an additional \$74 billion in collective wealth in the United States if every household were headed by an individual with at least a high school diploma.
- Because too many students are not learning the skills they need to succeed in college or work while they are in high school, the nation loses more than \$3.7 billion a year in costs associated with college remediation.
- If high schools and colleges were able to raise the graduation rates of Hispanic, African American, and Native American students to the levels of white students by 2020, the potential increase in personal income across the nation would add, conservatively, more than \$310 billion to the U.S. economy.
- Approximately one-third of students who enter ninth grade each year drop out, and they have a tremendous impact on the nation's economic condition. But dropouts obviously aren't the only ones whose lack of a good education is resulting in negative implications for the economy. Researchers estimate that another third of each class entering ninth grade will graduate from high school—but without the skills and knowledge that adequately prepare them for college and work.

Several facts support that estimate. For instance, a third of students who enter college must take remedial courses, costing the nation over \$1.4 billion every year at community colleges alone. Routinely, professors report that freshmen arrive unprepared for the rigors of college work. Employers, too, consistently express strong disappointment in the skills of high school graduates who are hired for entry-level positions. About 60% of American manufacturing companies, for example, say that high school graduates are poorly prepared for typical entry-level jobs.

### Consider International Comparisons

Despite the nostalgic memories that some hold of a time when a high school diploma was not necessary to find and keep a good job, the modern workplace has radically changed, and the demands on those making the transition from the classroom to the workforce continue to rise. Students from Birmingham and Boston no longer compete against each other for jobs; instead, their rivals are well-educated students from Sydney and Singapore. But as globalization has progressed, American educational progress has stagnated.

Today, the United States' high school graduation rate ranks near the bottom among developed nations belonging to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and

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Development (OECD). On virtually every international assessment of academic proficiency, American secondary school students' performance varies from mediocre to poor. Given that human capital is a prerequisite for success in the global economy, U.S. economic competitiveness is unsustainable with poorly prepared students feeding into the workforce.

In 2003 (the last year for which data are available), the United States ranked 15th of 29 OECD countries in reading literacy. In 2006 (the last year the test was administered), the United States ranked 21st and 25th of 30 OECD countries in scientific literacy and in math literacy, respectively.

### **What Does All This Have To Do With Adolescent Literacy?**

Awareness has grown dramatically in the education community about just how serious and widespread the crisis in many of America's high schools has become. And as research and data have provided a better picture of the crisis and its impact—not just on individuals, but on the national economic condition and the strength and stability of our society—policymakers at all levels of government, too, have begun to take note. In school board meetings, mayors' offices, state capitals, and Washington, DC, elected and appointed officials are struggling to understand the problems and to craft policies that will endorse solutions supported by research and best practice.

Over the past several years, a strong coalition of educators, researchers, professional associations, and advocacy groups—including, among others, the International Reading Association, National Governors Association, National Association of Secondary School Principals, National School Boards Association, National Council of Teachers of English, and the Alliance for Excellent Education—has worked to focus the attention of policymakers and the public on the plight of millions of students in grades 4–12 who are unable to read and write well enough to achieve even basic academic success. Already, the efforts of those organizations and individuals have resulted in a wide range of local, state, and federal initiatives designed to help struggling students develop the reading fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension skills they need to move

beyond the basic mechanics of literacy and move ahead in the secondary school curriculum.

Literacy is, in reality, the cornerstone of student achievement, for any student in any grade. To graduate all students prepared for college, success, and productive lives, secondary schools must anchor their reform efforts in a number of foundational strategies. Chief among them is improving literacy. Literacy—reading, writing, speaking, and thinking—is such a fundamental skill that all other academic success hinges on it. For example, a recent study by American College Test found that greater literacy skills in high school led to better achievement in math, science, and social studies, and higher levels of literacy contributed to greater college enrollment and higher grades in all college courses. Thus, secondary educators have begun to look at literacy skills as a key indicator of how “on track” students are to graduate from high school ready for college and work. Yet, a whopping 69% of 8th graders and 65% of 12th graders read below proficient as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress. While literacy skills in the lower grades have risen over the past 30 years, adolescent literacy rates have remained virtually stagnant.

Why the success in the lower grades and not in the upper ones? As literacy researchers and experts Catherine Snow and Gina Biancarosa have so eloquently noted:

Getting third graders to read at grade level is an important and challenging task, and one that needs ongoing attention from researchers, teacher educators, teachers, and parents. But many excellent third-grade readers will falter or fail in later-grade academic tasks if the teaching of reading is neglected in the middle and secondary grades.

Another factor is that elementary educators have integrated reading into every aspect of instruction and made reading the cornerstone of reform. Unfortunately, the same is not true in the upper grades.

In many middle and high schools, literacy is seen as secondary to school reform; it is often perceived as being a problem for only a few students, that improving the literacy abilities of students is remedial in nature and should not be part of the “normal” classroom, and that improving literacy levels should be the responsibility of English teachers—who, ironically, are rarely trained to teach literacy. Yet most students in middle and high schools read below grade level and

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are unable to comprehend their increasingly complex texts and course materials. Thus, they fall behind and struggle to advance through the grades, in every subject, suggesting that literacy should be the concern of teachers in every subject. Therefore, if efforts to turn around low-performing secondary schools are to succeed, educators and policymakers must take their cue from elementary schools and make literacy the cornerstone of school reform.

In recent years, policymakers have begun to take notice and make some investments in adolescent literacy programs, most notably in states like Alabama, Florida, Kentucky, and Rhode Island. In 2006, urged by President Bush, the federal government launched the Striving Readers program, a pilot project that funds middle and high school literacy programs in eight sites. While this is a good start, educators and policymakers must recognize the intrinsic link between literacy and school improvement, coordinating their investments in middle and high school improvement with their investments in adolescent literacy.

### **Striving Readers: A Federal Program That Must Be Expanded**

The bulk of federal investment in literacy lies in Reading First, a program that has provided grants of over \$6 billion to states and districts for creating literacy programs for students in the first through third grades. Reading First, though not without some implementation problems, has been found to improve reading skills and to be well liked by most states and districts. Fortunately, that investment in the early grades has begun to pay off and has encouraged federal policymakers to expand literacy interventions for students most in need of them into the upper grades.

The Striving Readers program, in its current form, was a first step toward meeting that goal.

Funded at roughly \$30 million per year, the program was launched and currently operates in eight sites—six large school districts, one consortium of multiple rural districts, and one statewide education system for students in the juvenile justice system. Each program is required to execute a comprehensive adolescent literacy program with at least two components:

- A targeted intervention for students reading two or more grade levels behind. Most programs have selected

off-the-shelf intensive reading courses and materials. In addition, most hired reading specialists to help execute the courses with at-risk students.

- Literacy instruction for all students that asks teachers in core subjects, such as English, math, science, and social studies, to teach literacy skills specific to their subject. Most programs have created teacher and principal training programs that help educators infuse literacy into classroom work.

Each site must rigorously evaluate the outcomes of each component, which has to include a randomized control trial of the targeted intervention. Thus, most sites have invested large amounts of their funds in the design and execution of research, as is necessary when implementing a randomized trial and implementation studies on this scale.

At the close of the 2007/2008 school year, Striving Readers grantees had completed two years of implementation, and preliminary analyses of student achievement data from some of the programs are promising in terms of student outcomes. All results are still preliminary; yet, given the early signs of success noted by participating schools coupled with the urgent need to address the nation's adolescent literacy challenges, it is clear that the federal government would be wise to increase its investment in middle and high school literacy to be on par with that of Reading First.

In fact, in early 2007, the Striving Readers Act was introduced—with strong bipartisan support—in both the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate to authorize the Striving Readers program and expand it to serve students in every state. It has been embraced by legislators in both chambers of Congress and in both political parties, and many of its provisions were incorporated into committee drafts of legislation to reauthorize NCLB. However, the reauthorization process has been stalled, and it seems unlikely that it will move forward until 2009 at the earliest.

In the meantime, it is critical that individuals and organizations concerned with improving the literacy levels of the millions of American students in the later grades keep encouraging federal, as well as state and local, policymakers and decision makers to support a number of recommendations that reflect a powerful consensus that has developed about the nature of the adolescent literacy challenge and the kinds of investments that are most likely to improve

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student achievement in reading and writing. Specifically, policymakers should take the following steps:

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

In adolescent literacy, there are no “reading wars.” Researchers strongly agree on the nature of the adolescent literacy crisis and about the fact that a sufficiently strong knowledge base exists to justify a major federal investment in adolescent literacy. Educators are increasingly willing to step up to the challenges of incorporating literacy into the curriculum if the proper supports and training are provided to them. Policymakers understand that their willingness to act effectively to improve the literacy levels of secondary school students is intrinsically linked to the schools’ ability to improve the way they educate their students and will result in an increase in the number of students who graduate from high school prepared for success.

A lot has changed since 2002, when the Alliance for Excellent Education issued its report calling for action to improve the reading, writing, and thinking skills of older students. We know more about the crisis in many of the nation’s middle and high schools. We know more about its impact on students and their future prospects in life, as well as how their communities, states, and nation are affected when they do not receive an excellent education. Most importantly, we know a great deal more about how to improve our secondary

schools and the achievement and attainment levels of their students, including the critical importance of improving the literacy skills of all American students.

What is needed now is the public and political will to act on this knowledge. Excellent results are being seen in schools and communities across the nation that have taken the lessons of research and best practice and put them to work for their students. Researchers, educators, administrators, policymakers, and advocates must each play a role in assuring that those lessons are applied effectively in all of our country’s schools. We must work together to make every child a high school graduate who is prepared for college, work, and success in life. We owe nothing less to our students and to our nation.

## References

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Founded in 1956, the International Reading Association (IRA) is a nonprofit, global network of individuals and institutions committed to worldwide literacy. More than 85,000 members strong, the Association supports literacy professionals through a wide range of resources, advocacy efforts, volunteerism, and professional development activities. Its members promote high levels of literacy for all by improving the quality of reading instruction, disseminating research and information about reading, and encouraging the lifetime reading habit. For more information, see [www.reading.org](http://www.reading.org).