



National Association of Elementary School Principals

Serving Elementary and Middle-Level Principals
Leading Learning Communities for the Success of All Children

ABOUT NAESP
MEMBERSHIP
CAREERCENTRAL
ADVOCACY
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
PUBLICATIONS
AWARDS
RESOURCES
COMMUNITY & STUDENT SERVICES
SITE MAP

RESEARCH
CONNECT
LEAD
JOIN
EVENTS

Home » [Research a Topic](#) » [Middle Grades/Schools](#) » Improving Adolescent Literacy

Improving Adolescent Literacy

Middle schools are at the core of helping students learn to read.

[Middle Matters](#) » September 2005, Volume 14, Number 1

by Bob Wise

PRINTER-FRIENDLY VERSION

For all the headlines devoted to the so-called “reading wars” during the past few decades, and for all the recent federal and state investment in research-based reading programs, the nation’s education policy-makers have only just begun to take a serious, sustained interest in the literacy needs of students in the middle grades.

To date, nearly all of the attention, resources, and research have focused on improving the reading performance of students in the elementary grades, leaving adolescent literacy to become—as the RAND Corp. put it in a landmark 2002 report—an “orphaned responsibility.”

Yet, America’s middle school students face a literacy crisis that is every bit as alarming as that faced by their younger siblings. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, only about a third of the country’s eighth graders read at or above a proficient level. The data are especially troubling for black and Hispanic students, with less than 15 percent testing at or above proficiency.

Translated into real numbers, this means that on any given school day, millions of American adolescents get out of bed, put on their clothes, and spend the next several hours trying to fight off confusion and despair. In their history classes, they struggle to make sense of their textbooks; in science, they stumble over the laboratory instructions; in math, they are baffled by the word problems; and in every class, they find themselves defeated by the simplest writing assignment.

Since the Alliance for Excellent Education was created in 2001, it has been working to call attention to this neglected crisis, to promote more and better research on adolescent literacy, and to advocate for policies and legislation that will better meet the needs of struggling readers and writers in middle and secondary schools. Our role is not to conduct basic research or run school-based programs. Rather, it is to bring together the scholars and educators who have done excellent work in this field, and help them communicate their findings to decision-makers who can then shape effective policies based on research and promising practice.

We hear from researchers and reformers that the knowledge base on adolescent literacy instruction remains thin and requires urgent attention. However, we also hear that the available research, while not yet fully mature, does provide a number of strong, reliable findings.

What We Have Learned

Perhaps the most important lesson we have learned is the need for schools to distinguish clearly between two distinct goals for student literacy: learning to decode and learning to comprehend—or, as literacy experts like to put it, it’s the difference between *learning to read* and *reading to learn*.

To the extent that middle schools provide specialized literacy instruction for adolescents who read below grade level, the typical approach is to place all such students together in single-purpose remedial classes, with little regard for the different needs they may have. Moreover, those classes tend to over-emphasize the first (mechanics of reading) and give far too little attention to the second (instruction in strategies that help students comprehend the increasingly varied, content-rich, and academic texts that teachers begin to assign by the fourth or fifth grade).

The fact is that while many adolescents do continue to struggle with decoding skills, they comprise only a small portion of those who require assistance—no precise figure is available, but experts tell us that decoding is a real stumbling block for just 10 percent to 15 percent of all struggling readers (defined as those who score two or more years below grade level on conventional reading assessments).

SEARCH

GO

NAESP MEMBER LOGIN

Username:

Password:

SUBMIT

Remember Me

NAESP Members first time registration: use your last name as the username and your member ID# as your password. Create your personal username and password on the next screen.

Login Help

Forgot your password?

NOT A MEMBER?
JOIN TODAY



Copyright Statement

Rather, the vast majority of struggling adolescent readers can decode with a reasonable amount of fluency and have little need for such instruction. Indeed, many students become entirely competent readers by the third grade, when reading tests focus mainly on mechanics and comprehension of simple passages, only to see their scores and confidence plummet within a couple of years, once tests no longer emphasize the basic skills.

Identifying Students' Needs

As we describe in detail in the Alliance's 2004 publication *Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy* (see sidebar), it is imperative that schools make a concerted effort to learn precisely what the needs are of their given students. Which require instruction in phonics and which do not? Which require more specialized instruction, given particular disabilities or language issues? Also, schools must invest in continued and ongoing assessments in order to keep track of when those needs change.

Key Elements in Programs Designed to Improve Adolescent Literacy Achievement in Middle and High Schools

Instructional Improvements	Infrastructure Improvements
1. Direct, explicit comprehension instruction	10. Extended time for literacy
2. Effective instructional principles embedded in content	11. Professional development
3. Motivation and self-directed learning	12. Ongoing summative assessment of students and programs
4. Text-based collaborative learning	13. Teacher teams
5. Strategic tutoring	14. Leadership
6. Diverse texts	15. A comprehensive and coordinated literacy program
7. Intensive writing	
8. A technology component	
9. Ongoing formative assessment of students	

Source: *Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy*, Alliance for Excellent Education, 2004

While keeping in mind the need for differentiated services and instruction, one important generalization about struggling adolescent readers can be made. The majority of those students would benefit not from skills-based remedial classes but from direct, intensive, and, above all, *explicit* instruction in the kinds of metacognitive strategies that advanced readers tend to have internalized already.

For instance, adolescents often benefit from having their teachers model and/or walk them through the sorts of steps that capable readers take before, during, and after reading difficult texts, such as making predictions about the content to be learned, writing down questions about key ideas or points of confusion, consulting a dictionary or asking for help when they get stuck, and summarizing the main ideas of the texts they have just read.

Likewise, struggling adolescent readers often require help in choosing appropriate reading materials, recognizing the different formal and stylistic conventions used in different content areas, and taking note of authors' differing purposes and implied audiences. And they tend to benefit from frequent vocabulary-building exercises, especially when linked to the subject matter they will encounter in their reading assignments.

Finally, educators should keep in mind that the older the student, the more likely it is that reading comprehension problems will be compounded by and tangled up with problems of motivation and engagement. Teachers must be especially careful to give students assignments that are challenging but at which they might reasonably be able to succeed, thus helping to boost their sense of accomplishment and efficacy. Further, because so many adolescent readers have experienced months or years of frustration in school, and because so many have long since become disengaged from and disinterested in the reading assigned to them, it is often helpful for teachers to give them opportunities to choose their own reading topics, and/or to steer them in the direction of materials that are geared toward their age level without being so difficult as to make them give up.

In short, if adolescent literacy is to improve, middle-grade educators must bring to this challenge precisely the sort of carefully balanced approach that has long been the hallmark of the middle schools movement—teaching a rigorous, academic curriculum while simultaneously taking great care to give adolescents the kinds of encouragement and emotional support they need to succeed.

Bob Wise is president of Alliance for Excellent Education. His e-mail address is wise@all4ed.org.

Also at NAESP.org

▫ **Schoolwide Literacy: The Principal's Role**

This all-too-familiar headline in newspapers and magazines across the nation emphasizes the importance of middle-grades principals making literacy a schoolwide issue. Because their students are transitional readers who vary in their ability to read and understand what they read, principals need to create and maintain a schoolwide reading culture. Many Students in the middle grades continue to need time and thoughtful instruction in learning to read as well as reading to learn.

▫ **Supporting Literacy in the Later Years**

Meeting the needs of a wide range of readers is a daunting task for many middle-grade teachers. Limited preparation in how to teach reading and overwhelming pressures to improve scores on high-stakes tests exacerbate the problem as teachers try to balance curriculum coverage with meeting the literacy needs of individual students. Unfortunately, federal and state legislation is focused almost exclusively on beginning reading in the primary grades, despite undeniable needs for research and practical advice on how to help older readers.

▫ **Working with Words: A Summer Reading Intervention Program**

By the time students reach middle school, basic reading instruction is often ignored as teaching is focused on curriculum content. But many incoming, low-achieving sixth graders--especially special education students and second-language learners--still need this instruction. At Meadowbrook Middle School, we've developed a summer reading intervention program that has been proven effective in improving students' reading fluency, comprehension, and written language skills.

Our Principal Mission is YOU!

1615 Duke Street Alexandria, VA 22314 • 800-386-2377 • (703) 684-3345 • fax 800-396-2377 • e-mail: naesp@naesp.org