

Informing Adolescent Literacy Policy and Practice: Lessons Learned from the Striving Readers Program

By Jeremy Ayers and M Miller

A growing body of research points to the critical need to foster reading, writing, speaking, and critical thinking skills for students in order to ensure their success in college, careers, and life. In recent years, there has been a strong push to enact literacy policies and programming at all levels of government. But these efforts have tended to focus more on developing literacy skills in the early years, often ignoring secondary students.ⁱ The outcome has been undeniable: while the literacy skills of students in the primary grades have improved, achievement for middle and secondary students has remained virtually unchanged. Results from the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) showed that while fourth-grade proficiency rates in reading grew by 4 percentage points over a fifteen-year period, trends for students in grade eight remained virtually unchanged, and proficiency for students in grade twelve actually dropped over a similar period by 5 percentage points.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Striving Readers program is the main federal effort aimed at reversing these trends at the secondary school level. In 2005, with bipartisan support, federal policymakers established the Striving Readers program to support literacy interventions in the upper grades. The program 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. In a move to strengthen and scale this initiative, there has been a call from the U.S. secretary of education to expand Striving Readers to ensure that young people in grades 6–12 have the skills for the challenging text they encounter in high school and college.² A look back at the first round of Striving Readers grants could be helpful in shaping the next phase of the federal effort in adolescent literacy.

“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.”

Source: G. Biancarosa and C. Snow, *Reading Next—A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy: A Report to Carnegie Corporation of New York*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education, 2006).

The Alliance for Excellent Education convened representatives of seven of the Striving Readers projects, including the project developers, evaluators, and other experts in adolescent literacy research, to reflect on two years of implementation. This brief seeks to connect the experiences of those involved with the eight Striving Readers projects with the most current research, in an effort to guide recommendations for future adolescent literacy policy and programming.

ⁱ The Reading First and Early Reading First Programs targeted students in grades pre-K–3.

ⁱⁱ Fourth graders’ proficiency grew from 29 percent to 33 percent between 1992 and 2007. Eighth graders’ proficiency grew from 29 percent to 31 percent between 1992 and 2007. Twelfth graders’ proficiency dropped from 40 percent to 35 percent between 1992 and 2005.

The Federal Approach to the Secondary School Literacy Crisis

The Adolescent Literacy Problem

Too often, the importance of secondary literacy instruction is not seen as integral to improving the performance of all secondary students. Generally, literacy instruction is used only as remedial support for the students who are struggling most, an important group but not the only one in need of literacy intervention. Additionally, no matter whom the literacy initiative is focused upon, it is often viewed as the responsibility of English teachers, who, ironically, are often not adequately trained to explicitly teach literacy skills to their students.³

According to the most recent data, 69 percent of eighth graders and 65 percent of twelfth graders cannot read at or above grade level, thus making it difficult for them to comprehend complex texts and course materials. Too often, they fall behind in almost every subject and struggle to advance through the grades. As a result, many of them drop out of school.⁴

In addition, literacy skills are becoming an important indicator of a student's ability to graduate from school ready for college and careers.⁵ One study by ACT found that students with greater literacy skills in high school had better achievement in math, science, and social studies; additionally, higher levels of literacy contributed to greater college enrollment and higher grades in all college courses, including math, science, and the social sciences.⁶

The Federal Approach

Recognizing the critical need to support literacy interventions in the upper grades, federal policy-makers allocated funds for the Striving Readers program in 2005.ⁱⁱⁱ Funded at roughly \$30 million per year for five years, Striving Readers supports the development of three key activities:

- **schoolwide cross-disciplinary strategies** for improving student literacy, which may include professional development for subject-matter teachers and the use of research-based reading and comprehension strategies in classrooms across subject areas;
- a **targeted intervention** program for students who are reading significantly below grade level; and
- a strong experimental **evaluation** component.

The Striving Readers program^{iv} is currently being implemented in eight sites:^v

- The **Chicago Public Schools** project includes sixty-three Title I schools serving students in grades 6–8.
- The **Danville School District** project includes ten middle schools, nine high schools, and two 6–12 schools in rural areas of central, northwest, and eastern Kentucky.
- The **Memphis City Schools** project includes eight middle schools serving more than five thousand students in Memphis, Tennessee.
- The **Newark Public Schools** project includes nineteen middle schools in New Jersey.
- The **Ohio Department of Youth Services (ODYS)** project includes seven youth detention facilities, six of which implement interventions for a male population and one of which implements interventions for a female population. High schools are located within each facility; most of the students are of high school age, but a small number are middle school age.
- The **Portland Public Schools** project includes six high schools, two middle schools, three K–8 schools, and one 6–12 school in Oregon.
- The **San Diego Unified School District, Office of Instructional Support** project includes four high schools, two that are small schools in a larger high school complex, and the four

ⁱⁱⁱ Striving Readers was authorized as part of the 2005 Fiscal Year Appropriations Act. The first awards were made in March 2006.

^{iv} See appendix for a detailed description of each project.

^v For more on Striving Readers, go to www.ed.gov/programs/strivingreaders



middle schools that feed into them. In the first year of the project (2006–07), there were three high schools and two middle schools.

- The **Springfield Public Schools** project includes two high schools in Chicopee, Massachusetts, and three high schools in Springfield, Massachusetts.

Lessons from the Striving Readers Program

In the first two years, each Striving Readers project broke new ground in developing systemic supports for secondary students. As expected, important modifications for current and future sites are coming to light midway through the five-year funding cycle. As new federal funding is allocated for literacy programs, and as states and districts provide their own support for adolescent literacy, it is important to be able to draw on these experiences to permit the best program implementation possible. (It should be noted that the following points are an amalgamation of comments, not attributable to any one site or necessarily representative of every single site.)

Allow Sufficient Time for Planning and Launching the Program

Educators, administrators, policymakers, and others who are considering creating an adolescent literacy program for their school or district need to devote sufficient time and attention during the start-up phase in order to lay a solid foundation. This involves carefully selecting an appropriate intervention model for struggling readers and a professional development plan for staff, recruiting and training teachers, identifying students for participation, and building infrastructure and buy-in to support the program.

Developing infrastructure is a large and sometimes underestimated task. Several of the Striving Readers sites found that getting all of the initiative elements established and coordinated for the first year of implementation was challenging. Well before the school year starts, districts and schools should purchase needed equipment like software or books, and, when applicable, establish relationships with literacy intermediaries and service providers.⁷ They should also clear space in the master schedule for extra reading courses and common planning time, and create or strengthen data systems that enable educators to chart student

progress on an ongoing basis. Deadlines and deliverables should be mapped on the calendar. During this phase, partnerships with outside researchers, university faculty, or evaluators should be formed, protocols should be created, and preliminary data should be collected.

The most effective programs set benchmarks and identify implementation monitors who can track progress and help schools hold themselves accountable. Such efforts take significant time and are sometimes driven by district budget processes or the school calendar—factors that do not always align with the allocation of funds. Those Striving Readers sites that did not have significant program infrastructure already established strongly felt that their start-up would have been more successful had they had several months to plan, set up the program, and pilot it with a small number of students.

As a result of the vast infrastructure needs, adolescent literacy programs should be implemented in two phases.

- **Phase One:** This start-up phase would last from six months to one year and be devoted to planning and executing the program with a small number of students and teachers within each school. The goal of this phase would be to launch the program on a manageable scale with time and room to learn from inevitable mistakes or unforeseen challenges. It would also allow for the development of tools and processes through which future challenges could be identified.
- **Phase Two:** The second phase would be a full implementation. Having been informed by the first phase, it would scale up to include more students and staff.



Choose the Best Program

One of the biggest planning decisions a school or district makes is selecting an intensive intervention model that meet the needs of struggling readers, as well as a whole-school reform program. These choices should be made carefully, with an extended discussion among the parties who will be responsible for executing and evaluating the models. Numerous adolescent literacy intervention program models exist. Many are expensive and could become a significant expenditure after staffing, but there are less costly programs available as well.⁸

In order to make the best choice, schools and districts should first employ assessment tools to detail the literacy challenges of their students. The collected data should then drive the decision about which of the various programs will best address student needs. After assuring that a particular model is a good fit, it is critical to make sure that it aligns with the best research on adolescent literacy, including appropriateness with identified populations.⁹

It is also important to plan for a three-tier focus of literacy implementation in the school. The three tiers are as follows:

- **Tier One:** All students receive tier-one instruction both within an English/language arts class that focuses on reading and writing and in all content-area classes, which should include integrating content-specific literacy strategies.
- **Tier Two:** Some students receive a targeted intervention inside the classroom through one-on-one or small-group instruction, to allow them more time and individual attention to focus on skills taught to the whole class.
- **Tier Three:** A select group of students receive a targeted, intensive intervention outside of the classroom when the commonly applied approaches taught in the first and second tiers do not work for them.

This flexible grouping, determined by formal and informal assessments, allows for students to move in and out of the supports they need. This format is strongly advocated by Striving Readers partici-

Fifteen Elements of an Effective Adolescent Literacy Program

Many components must be considered before schools and districts can design an effective adolescent literacy program. Some older struggling readers, for example, need specific intervention with explicit and systemic decoding instruction, while others need comprehensive instruction that includes building vocabulary and background knowledge. Assessment tools are integral to the process of determining how to best meet the needs of particular students, teachers, and schools. However, in general, research and practice both support the inclusion of fifteen key elements. The first nine deal with classroom instruction, while the remaining six outline the school infrastructure needed to promote effective classroom instruction.

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: G. Biancarosa and C. Snow, *Reading Next—A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy: A Report to Carnegie Corporation of New York*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education, 2006). Additional information on selecting and creating adolescent literacy programs can be found in the Appendix.



pants as an integral part of a successful adolescent literacy program.

Equally important to setting the right structure is conducting a self-analysis or needs assessment that examines what resources a district or school currently has (e.g., funds, reading curriculum, or qualified staff), what new resources are needed, and how a new adolescent literacy program aligns with school improvement programs that are already in place. For example, each school and district should consider how its literacy program will fit with and enhance any overall school improvement plan that may be required by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Additionally, one Striving Readers participant noted that the district had taken on so many reform efforts that it was difficult for teachers to focus on the literacy initiative. It is important for principals and district leaders to look at all the reform efforts being launched, and integrate, stagger, or prioritize their implementation so teachers have adequate bandwidth to employ new practices.

Build Ownership and Capacity

Perhaps the most essential task of all when contemplating putting an adolescent literacy program in place is to build ownership among classroom teachers, as well as district and school leadership—which includes teacher leaders and key stakeholders—so that the program survives beyond infancy. Striving Readers participants often cited this factor as deeply important to the program’s success.

Selecting staff is a task that requires not only time but also significant planning and coordination. Unfortunately, hiring is a lengthy, bureaucratic process in many districts, and effective teachers tend to move away from low-performing schools to take jobs that do not have as many inherent challenges.¹⁰

The best programs employ specific strategies to recruit the most effective staff into the schools the literacy program is serving. These strategies include working with budget officers and union officials to speed up the hiring process, providing struggling schools with the first choice of quali-

fied candidates, and offering hiring incentives to the most qualified candidates.

Many Striving Readers participants felt that when resources are limited, it is especially critical to target recruitment and hiring resources for crucial staff such as reading teachers, because they make such a major impact on the achievement of low-performing students. They also noted how important timely hiring was, since if they waited too long, most of the desired teachers had already accepted other positions. Many districts also have used literacy coaches to work with teachers in the content areas. When used well, coaches can have a positive impact on student learning.¹¹

Acquiring adequate program resources is an important element for success. This includes providing a supply of literacy materials that are matched for the reading and interest levels of their students—rarely found in the average school library or classroom. They also need adequate space to put students in groups, up-to-date technology, extended time for instruction, and high-quality literacy assessments.

In Portland, Oregon, for example, district officials provided their adolescent literacy program teachers with resources such as data projectors and document cameras, and found that these basic teaching and learning tools provided a recruitment and retention incentive.

Working collaboratively with the teachers’ unions and teachers themselves is another important aspect to ensuring the success of a comprehensive secondary literacy program. Many of the Striving Readers sites noted the importance of dedicating significant time to communicating and collaborating with teacher’s unions in order to execute the work as planned.

In Memphis, Tennessee, and Springfield, Massachusetts, district and union leaders discussed together how to ensure the stability of staff in growing their adolescent literacy programs. The result was that the unions agreed not to transfer teachers participating in the district initiative for seniority or other contractual purposes, which insured continuity and capacity building for the project.



Providing ongoing professional development is also crucial to program success. Adolescent literacy programs require intervention teachers to employ strategies at the right time and in the right amount, so student achievement improves. Content-area teachers are also asked to integrate literacy strategies into their curriculum so students better understand and remember the content.¹² Thus, intensive staff development is required beyond pre-service training.

Additionally, some of the Striving Readers participants noted that while they were focused on literacy-specific professional development, there were teachers in the low-performing middle and high schools who needed ongoing training in their subject matter, as well as in their ability to integrate literacy instruction. While it is clearly important to provide supports for educators to teach literacy skills to their students, too many professional development plans overlook the critical need to also provide teachers with subject-specific support, since it is often assumed they already have this capacity.¹³

Building capacity among district and school leaders is key. While teachers are charged with implementing strategies of an adolescent literacy program, the viability of the program itself is the responsibility of district and school leaders. And if an adolescent literacy program is to succeed, then it should be shepherded by strong leadership at all levels.

In successful districtwide adolescent literacy programs, **district leadership** begins with the designation of one individual to lead the effort. Many other district leaders should know and be involved in executing the program, but without a clear, discernible leader the program will be too scattered to make an impact. Many of the Striving Readers participants found that the commitment of the superintendent was particularly important in championing the program across the district and securing buy-in from school principals and leaders, assuring all parties that literacy is critical to school improvement.

In large districts, a host of intermediate-level officials—assistant superintendents, supervisory principals, and liaisons between the districts and

schools—are often chosen as leaders of the literacy program, and their job is usually to offer guidance and support to school leaders. For example:

- In Portland, Oregon, district administrators in charge of the adolescent literacy program provided their school administrators with an outline of ways they could support teachers in the program. This formed a foundation for future collaboration, problem solving, and co-ownership for program success.
- Officials in Springfield, Massachusetts, convened an advisory group of codirectors of the grant effort, district coordinators, clerical staff, directors of English, and assistant superintendents to meet regularly to review issues regarding implementation across the district.
- In Chicago, the district hired and trained regional liaisons to work with principals and teachers participating in the district’s adolescent literacy initiative. Those liaisons provided practical help with implementing the program, instructional support, and formative feedback on each school’s progress. In the process, the liaisons became a vital link between the district officials who were administering the program and the school officials who were executing it.

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School-level leadership is where the rubber meets the road. It is critical for the school principals and assistant principals to understand and embrace the need and importance of a literacy program. It is these school-level administrators who often steer the course of school improvement, and their support of literacy as a part of reform is critical to any program’s success.¹⁴

Just as it is important for teachers to have buy-in for any literacy program, it is equally important for the principal and other school administrators to have sufficient time to build ownership and responsibility for the success of the program implementation. Numerous adolescent literacy programs provide support and training for school



leaders through activities such as summer training institutes, mentoring, ongoing professional development, and common planning time for principals across multiple sites.¹⁵

In Memphis, principals were asked to meet monthly with district officials and researchers. Meetings were held at alternating schools so each principal could showcase his or her implementation of the program. As each leader was asked to describe the program's accomplishments, the power of friendly competition and collaboration led to greater buy-in and closer implementation of the program to its original intention. To further increase ownership among principals, an articulate leader who supported the program was promoted to the job of regional principal coach, whose function was to secure buy-in from and offer support to other school leaders.

Classroom leaders—reading coaches, teacher mentors, or department chairs—not only execute the adolescent literacy program, but also serve as a direct support for teachers within the building. The best classroom leaders make wise curricular decisions about materials or strategies, set the agenda and tone for common planning time, offer support and guidance, champion the importance of the program, and make the case for implementing the program as intended—often referred to as “fidelity of implementation.”

Classroom leaders also impact instruction, since they are the first line of formative accountability, offering regular feedback and counsel to teachers designed to improve their instruction and their students' outcomes. The best leaders anchor such discussions in student achievement data.¹⁶ Many of the Striving Readers participants found that teachers were more likely to put effort toward their instruction and implement the program as intended when they knew when someone would both be observing their class and providing them with support if necessary.

Fostering ownership means engendering widespread, cohesive commitment to the program. Several of the Striving Readers projects noted the importance of having a point person identified in the district office and at each school site so the

project had a champion as well as an enforcer when needed.

It was critical to build ownership by investing large amounts of time to secure buy-in from all those impacted by the project, including teachers, union leaders, assistant principals, mid-level management, parents, and even students. This includes bringing stakeholders together early and often to get their input in the planning and implementation phases.

One of the first steps taken by district officials in Danville, Kentucky, for example—leading a consortium of rural districts—was to invite all key stakeholders to a meeting to discuss what their literacy program would involve and to strategize ways to build ownership among all the other important parties.

Maintain Fidelity and Accountability

School and district leaders should ensure that the literacy program is administered as intended—that is, that there is strong fidelity of implementation. Research shows that adolescent literacy programs put into operation closer to the actual program design models produce greater student achievement.¹⁷

Ultimately, school leaders, the district team, teachers, and the model developers are charged with ensuring how well the program is executed.

“Fidelity of implementation” simply means how thoroughly and faithfully a program is implemented. This information guides educators in making necessary adjustments in their instruction and helps outside evaluators explain student achievement outcomes by examining the degree to which the literacy program was implemented as designed.

Ultimately, school leaders, the district team, teachers, and the model developers are charged with ensuring how well the program is executed. The first step is for leaders to elicit buy-in and ensure that all parties agree to implement the program faithfully. They should also work with researchers or developers so it is clear how fidelity will be measured and improved throughout the program.



There are many elements that are important when assessing fidelity. Some of these include how well a school has provided for the allotted intervention time, used its software or equipment, grouped students, or made use of literacy materials. It is also critical to assess if educators are effectively employing literacy strategies in their work with students.

Additionally, there are other contextual issues to note. For example, for many students in adolescent literacy programs, attendance can be a critical issue. Even if the programmatic elements are in place, it is important to assess if students are actually in class and able to receive the instruction.

Finally, successful programs develop tools for teachers to use in their practice to ensure that fidelity is measured, to set school-level goals and expectations, and to partner with researchers to ensure fidelity is appropriately measured. Several of the Striving Readers participants felt that the program evaluators were an excellent resource to help teachers recognize the importance of maintaining fidelity throughout the entire intervention.

Accountability is a natural partner to fidelity, and there are many ways of assuring that those administering and implementing the program are being held responsible. While this may require employing negative consequences, positive incentives coupled with clear goals, useful student achievement data, and frequent feedback are keys to fostering widespread change. Smart accountability ensures that school leaders and teachers internalize the new adolescent literacy program to the point that instruction improves.¹⁸

Along the way, program leaders must continue to educate staff about the importance of implementing the model thoroughly. When a problem arises, the issue should be addressed immediately, grounding difficult conversations in data as much as possible.

For example, in one district, a particular school principal was hostile to the district literacy initiative. In a series of conversations with district leaders and the superintendent, she was presented with data comparing her students' reading performance

to that of students in schools where the model was implemented faithfully. Over time, the principal's hostility turned into cooperation. Of course, not all problems will be resolved, so leaders must be sufficiently invested and empowered to make staffing changes when needed.

Build the Knowledge Base While Supporting Student Learning

Given the dearth of effective and sustained adolescent literacy programs across the nation, the ultimate goal when creating these programs is to both serve students and schools well *and* generate information based on data that can be used or replicated by policymakers or other schools.

In good programs, research and evaluation are not an afterthought but, rather, an intrinsic part of the program from the very beginning. Some programs have found that an external party, like a research organization, can help to encourage self-examination, fidelity of implementation, and accountability. Evaluations provide the additional value of helping to build a research base focused on adolescent literacy, which currently lags behind early literacy research. The body of research that *does* exist on adolescent literacy, however, is encouragingly consistent.¹⁹

Good evaluation requires thorough planning and begins with the early identification of the evaluator. This allows enough time for frequent meetings to define the parameters of the work, determine valid and reliable ways to collect and analyze multiple types of data, and identify and solve problems early.

In-depth, rigorous evaluation usually requires significant resources, and most schools find it both prohibitively expensive and too daunting to attempt. To address the need, researchers have argued that large funders—federal and state governments or private foundations—should support the development of a variety of programs, allowing some to execute less rigorous research while requiring others to participate in a coordinated research effort across multiple sites studying different programs and different aspects of programs to see what works best.²⁰



Recommendations

School and district leaders responsible for developing and implementing literacy programs may have a slightly different focus from those creating the policy to support these programs, yet it is key that policy and practice are aligned to improve the achievement and attainment levels of all of America's students. The following recommendations target both program and policy in an effort to promote a more cohesive and comprehensive adolescent literacy effort for secondary students.

Invest in Adolescent Literacy and Ensure Integration With Secondary School Reform Efforts

Federal policymakers should invest in comprehensive literacy reform, ensuring equitable funding for adolescent literacy. Additionally, they should ensure that literacy programs are aligned with other improvement programs to maximize resources.

At the same time, district and school leaders should align their school improvement plans with comprehensive literacy plans, recognizing that a focus on literacy instruction can help improve student achievement, test scores, and graduation rates.²¹

Provide Grantees Time for a Phased-In Approach and Require a Three-Tier Focus

Federal policymakers should consider building in a phased-in process, which allows programs time to ensure successful scale-up prior to full implementation.

At the same time, policymakers should require grantees to focus on a three-tier approach—schoolwide literacy instruction for all students, differentiated small-group or one-on-one instruction within the classroom, and intensive, targeted instruction for students outside of their core classes. This should include providing funds to develop and administer appropriate assessments that support a three-tier structure, providing professional development for teachers to differentiate instruction, and holding districts and schools accountable for addressing the needs of all stu-

dents in each category. Districts and school leaders should also support a three-tier approach in program development in order to best meet the literacy needs of all students within the school.

Federal Policy Recommendations

- Invest in literacy reform from pre-K through twelfth grade, ensuring equitable funding throughout the grade spans. Include a comprehensive adolescent literacy component as part of the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.
- Establish a phased-in approach to allow programs time to ensure successful implementation.
- Ensure that programs focus on a three-tier approach to interventions.
- Require grantees to participate in an evaluation in order to build the research base.
- Invest in teacher professional development specific to adolescent literacy.
- Support the strengthening of partnerships between teacher preparation programs and districts implementing literacy programs.
- Ensure that states have a sustainability plan so the success of their literacy program does not rest solely on federal resources.

Build the Research Base

Federal policymakers should ensure that literacy programs contain evaluation and the assessment components of ongoing benchmarks for accountability. During the planning phase, policymakers should set clear guidelines for research, identify what is expected from evaluations, and set reasonable but firm deadlines for districts and schools to specify their plans so implementation and data collection can begin in a timely fashion.

On a related note, the current Striving Readers grantees have much to offer other districts and schools who wish to learn from them. The U.S. Department of Education should consider additional ways to harness this expertise, such as producing video resources or establishing a clearinghouse on adolescent literacy programs. From the program implementation perspective, district and school leaders should consider partnering with research organizations to collect student achievement data in order to further the research base.



Incentivize Program Commitment and Sustainability

To facilitate ownership by participating districts and schools, federal policymakers should ensure that states and districts have a sustainability plan so the stability of the program does not rest solely on federal or state resources.

And, following the example of successful programs across the country, policymakers should consider requiring some demonstration of teacher and principal buy-in before awarding a grant. For example, before a secondary school can become part of the statewide Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI), the principal must commit to attending all training meetings, 85 percent of teachers must agree to attend summer training, and 100 percent of teachers must agree to participate in ongoing professional development.²²

Additionally, district and school leaders charged with implementing adolescent literacy programs should formulate a comprehensive communications plan during the planning phase and execute it in a manner that elicits the participation of multiple parties during the preliminary phase. During planning, leaders should involve as many stakeholders as possible in the process and show their support to the program.

Build Teacher Capacity

Given the significant impact of teaching and leadership on student achievement, federal policymakers should ensure that any literacy initiative contains a significant funding stream to build teacher and leadership capacity in adolescent literacy.

Additionally, district and school leaders must invest in recruitment and retention strategies and provide sufficient resources for literacy instruction. Specifically, school leaders should set high goals for staff recruitment, involve multiple parties in hiring, identify qualification requirements for literacy coaches and intervention teachers,²³ provide common planning time and focus it on student achievement data,²⁴ and hold to a reasonable ratio of coaches to teachers.²⁵

While focusing on improving the instruction of those who are already the teachers of record in the classroom is critical, it is also important to work directly with teacher education programs to build capacity with teacher candidates, especially instilling the skills for secondary educators to teach literacy in their content area. Policymakers should require some grantees to partner with local institutions of higher education to inform and improve their teacher education programs in training future teachers in adolescent literacy.²⁶

Conclusion

Adolescent literacy is the cornerstone for middle and high school student achievement. Fortunately, recent investments in adolescent literacy programs have yielded valuable information for creating and sustaining programs that support the goals of broader comprehensive secondary school reform efforts. However, educators and researchers still have much to learn about what works, and much room for growth in building programs that last.

But what is known now is encouraging and consistent enough to chart a path for moving forward and implementing programs based on best practices identified by research. Together, educators and policymakers can anchor secondary school improvement efforts in adolescent literacy programs and work toward raising academic achievement so that all students are prepared for college, careers, and life after high school.



Acknowledgments

This brief was produced with the help and support of a number of people to whom the Alliance for Excellent Education is grateful. Their expertise, thoughtful advice, and comments have combined to strengthen the brief and its recommendations.

In particular, the Alliance wishes to thank the following individuals, who advised us in the planning and drafting of this document:

- Reeda Betts, Alabama Reading Initiative, Alabama Department of Education
- Don Deshler, Center for Research on Learning, University of Kansas
- Andrés Henríquez, Carnegie Corporation of New York
- Suzanne Robinson, Strategic Learning Center, University of Kansas

In June 2008, the Alliance convened experts in adolescent literacy and high school improvement from around the country for a one-day meeting in Washington, DC. The goal of the meeting was to draw lessons from two years of implementing the federal Striving Readers program for other district and school initiatives. Representatives from each grant site, along with national leaders in research, evaluation, and program implementation, gathered to share their experiences and make recommendations for strengthening future investment in adolescent literacy. The following individuals attended the meeting:

- Donna Alvermann, University of Georgia
- Amy Awbrey, Collaborative for Teaching and Learning
- Kathy Belcher, Kentucky Content Literacy Consortium
- Ken Brock, Portland Public Schools
- Kirk Cameron, Ohio Department of Youth Services
- Susan Cantrell, Collaborative Center for Literacy Development, University of Kentucky
- Elizabeth Cardenas-Lopez, Chicago Public Schools
- Caryn Cavanagh, Newark Public Schools
- Robert Cooter, Bellarmine University
- William Corrin, MDRC
- Kristin DeVivo, Scholastic, Inc.
- Jodi Dodds Kinner, Chicago Public Schools
- Karen Douglas, International Reading Association
- Jill Feldman, Research for Better Schools
- Jennifer Hamilton, Westat
- Andrés Henríquez, Carnegie Corporation of New York
- William Loadman, Ohio State University
- Theresa Mikajlo, Newark Public Schools
- Donna Ogle, National-Louis University
- Matt Rigney, Springfield-Chicopee Striving Readers Program
- Suzanne Robinson, Strategic Learning Center, University of Kansas
- Kimberley Sprague, Brown University

While the Alliance is indebted to the individuals above, the findings and conclusions of this brief are those of the Alliance and do not necessarily represent the views of the individuals, their schools, or their organizations.



Appendix

The following is a brief description of the FY 2005–06 Striving Readers grantees.

Chicago Public Schools, specifically District #299, received \$24,548,234 to implement its Chicago Public Schools Striving Readers project. Of the sixty-three schools participating in the project, the district selected thirty-one middle schools serving grades 6–8 to participate in interventions (sixteen beginning in summer 2006, fifteen beginning in summer 2007). Achieving Maximum Potential, an afterschool program developed by Timothy Shanahan, and the Chicago Striving Readers Program, an English-class model developed locally by National-Louis University, were implemented as targeted interventions. Dr. Shanahan’s program was made available to sixth graders only; Chicago Striving Readers was available for up to three years, and replaced a student’s normal English class. The district also partnered with National-Louis University to provide schoolwide professional development on seamless, aligned methods of teaching literacy across content areas. The project was initially evaluated by Learning Points Associates, and subsequently by Metis Associates.

The Ohio Department of Youth Services, in collaboration with the Ohio Department of Education and Ohio State University, received \$14,018,555 to implement its Striving Readers project; this project was designed to meet the literacy needs of students in grades 6–12 in juvenile corrections facilities. For whole-school literacy strategy, the project used a model based on the Department of Education’s State Institute for Reading Instruction—Adolescent Literacy (SIRI-AL), a modified version of the English Language Arts Writing Academy, and Marzano’s High Yield Strategies. Targeted intervention was provided through the READ 180 Instructional Program (Scholastic), which replaced a student’s standard English class. The intervention lasted for the duration of the student’s stay in the corrections facility, which averaged ten months during the first year of implementation (more recently, the average stay was 11.4 months). The project was evaluated by Ohio State University.

The Danville School District received \$16,195,959 to implement its Kentucky Literacy Consortium project (KCLC). Ten middle schools, nine high schools, and two schools serving grades 6–12 were selected to participate. Sites were provided with training for all teachers and external mentoring by Collaborative for Teaching and Learning (CTL), to support implementation of their Collaborative Model for Content Literacy (also known as CTL’s Adolescent Literacy Model). Targeted interventions were instituted through the University of Kansas’s Learning Strategies Curriculum, which employed strategies for word identification, comprehension, vocabulary, and fluency. Training in the intervention was provided by the University of Louisville. School literacy coaching development was enhanced by participation in a master’s program provided by the University of Louisville and co-facilitated by the University of Louisville and CTL program specialists. The project was evaluated by the University of Kentucky.

Newark Public Schools, in conjunction with Scholastic, the National Urban Alliance, and New Jersey City University, received \$13,968,272 to implement its Newark Public Schools Striving Readers project. Nineteen schools serving grades 6–8 were selected to participate. Students requiring targeted intervention received READ 180 instruction for up to three years. For the whole-school intervention, professional development in literacy strategies, developed by Jersey City University and the National Urban Alliance, was provided to all teachers in grades 6–8. The project was evaluated by Westat.

Multnomah County, Oregon, specifically School District #1, Portland Public Schools, partnered with the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning, along with Portland State University, to implement its Striving Readers project, for which it received \$23,536,956. As of May 2009, six high schools, two middle schools, three schools serving grades K–8, and one school serving grades 6–12 were participants in the Portland Striving Readers grant. The University of Kansas’s Xtreme Reading program was used as a



framework to provide struggling readers from grades 6–12 with targeted interventions, which were administered to the students for one year. Content Enhancement Routines from the Content Literacy Continuum, also a product of the University of Kansas, were employed for schoolwide embedding of literacy across the content areas. The project was evaluated by RMC Research.

San Diego Unified School District received \$17,574,149 to implement its Strategies for Literacy Independence Across the Curriculum project in five schools. A district-created program, of the same name as the project, set up a continuum of literacy interventions (both at the school level and targeted) for feeder groups of middle and high schools with a high percentage of struggling readers. Targeted interventions were offered to students for up to two years. The project was evaluated by the University of San Diego and WestEd, with assessments developed from the Berkeley Evaluation and Assessment Research Center.

Springfield Public Schools, in conjunction with Chicopee Public Schools, received \$16,655,483 to implement its Springfield-Chicopee Striving Readers project in five schools. This project’s whole-school reform strategy was based on the University of Kansas’s Strategic Instruction Model (KU-SIM), which focuses on content-based instruction. Targeted interventions for those students struggling with reading were based on either the READ 180 model or the University of Kansas’s Xtreme Reading model (the schools were not uniform in their choice of targeted intervention measure). Students could receive instruction through either model for up to three years. In-class literacy coaching was provided by both Scholastic and the University of Kansas. The project was evaluated by Brown University’s Education Alliance.

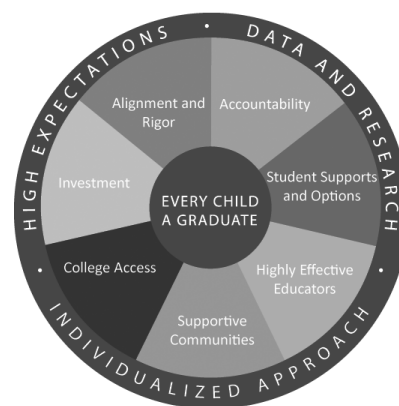
Memphis City Schools, in collaboration with the University of Memphis and Bellarmine University (KY), received \$16,074,687 to implement its Memphis Striving Readers project in eight middle schools. The University of Memphis’s and Memphis City Schools’ Memphis Content Literacy Academy model, which trains core content teachers in scientifically based reading instruction, was employed as a schoolwide reform strategy. READ 180 was used as the targeted intervention measure for struggling students in grades 6–8, for up to two years. Evaluation of the project was conducted by Research for Better Schools.

The mission of the Alliance for Excellent Education is to promote high school transformation to make it possible for every child to graduate prepared for postsecondary learning and success in life.

The Alliance for Excellent Education is a national policy and advocacy organization, based in Washington, DC, working to improve national and federal policy so that all students can achieve at high academic levels and graduate high school ready for success in college, work, and citizenship in the twenty-first century.

The Alliance has developed a “Framework for Action to Improve Secondary Schools” that informs a set of federal policy recommendations based on the growing consensus of researchers, practitioners, and advocates about the challenges and solutions for improving secondary student learning.

The framework, shown graphically here, encompasses seven policy areas that represent key leverage points in ensuring a comprehensive, systematic approach to improving secondary education. The framework also captures three guiding principles that apply to all of the policy areas. Although the appropriate federal role varies from one issue area to another, they are all critically important to reducing dropouts and increasing college and career readiness.



Endnotes

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