

## Why the Crisis in Adolescent Literacy Demands a National Response

Over the past four decades, Congress has directed substantial resources toward improving young children's literacy skills, and that investment has grown significantly in recent years. Through initiatives such as Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (better known as the No Child Left Behind Act), Reading First, and Head Start, the federal government has spent billions of dollars promoting vital research and improved reading instruction in the home, in preschool settings, and during the first few years of elementary school. As long as millions of young readers continue to struggle, this work should remain a high priority.

But it can't be the only priority.

America's adolescents face a literacy crisis every bit as alarming as the one confronting younger children. Millions of middle and high school students lack the reading and writing skills they need to succeed in college, compete in the workforce, or even understand their daily newspaper. However, while Congress has demonstrated a real commitment to improve reading instruction in grades K–3, it has made relatively trivial investments (mainly through the new Striving Readers program) in the literacy skills of students in grades 4–12.

Today, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (also known as “the nation's report card”), more than two thirds of all eighth graders read below grade level, and half of these students are so far behind that they drop off the scale entirely, scoring below what the U.S. Department of Education defines as its most basic level. Students in this group read at the equivalent of two or more grades below their proficient peers. Moreover, while fourth grade reading scores have risen for several years, reflecting the nation's investment in early reading instruction, eighth and twelfth grade scores have remained flat since the 1970s.

In total, more than six million of America's middle and high school students are struggling readers. Many of them are likely to drop out—it seems no coincidence that the national

### Recommendations for Federal Policymakers

- Build on the success of Reading First (K-3) by expanding it to the upper grades.
- Give schools the flexibility and resources they need to schedule more time for reading and writing instruction.
- Increase federal funding for enhanced assessments to help states use open-ended writing and analytic reading items as part of No Child Left Behind accountability systems.
- Increase funding for the federal school libraries program and target the increase to low-performing high schools, in order to provide content area teachers with access to more and better reading materials.
- Support more teacher professional development in adolescent literacy.
- Increase federal support for the National Writing Project.

*For details of the Alliance's policy recommendations, see pages 5-7*

dropout rate closely mirrors the percentage of students reading at “below basic” levels—and of those who go on to receive their diplomas, many will remain unprepared and unlikely to succeed in college or at work. Struggling adolescent readers may be able to sound out the words they see on a page or to comprehend simple texts, but most have difficulty understanding substantive reading assignments, following complicated directions, drawing conclusions, or thinking critically about what they read, whatever the subject.

Educators are now beginning to recognize that the teaching of reading and writing cannot end at third grade; they must provide intensive, high-quality literacy instruction *throughout* the K–12 curriculum. Not only must educators teach decoding skills to middle and high school students who still struggle with the very basics of reading, but they must help *all* students to go beyond those basics. They must teach students reading comprehension strategies, vocabulary, writing, and other forms of communication, or millions of adolescents will lose whatever momentum they may have gained as a result of improvements in early reading instruction.

Unless the nation devotes more attention and resources to literacy in grades 4–12, it will squander the considerable resources it has spent on grades K–3, and it will leave millions of students without a meaningful opportunity to succeed in high school and beyond.

### **STUDENTS NEED A STRONG FOUNDATION IN LITERACY, BUT THAT’S NOT ENOUGH**

There is a reason why education reformers devote so much effort to the early grades: in order to build a house, you must secure the foundation.

But the opposite is true as well: there is little sense in laying a foundation unless there are plans to build something on top of it. Students need a lot of help to raise the roof on learning, even after they learn the foundational skills of reading.

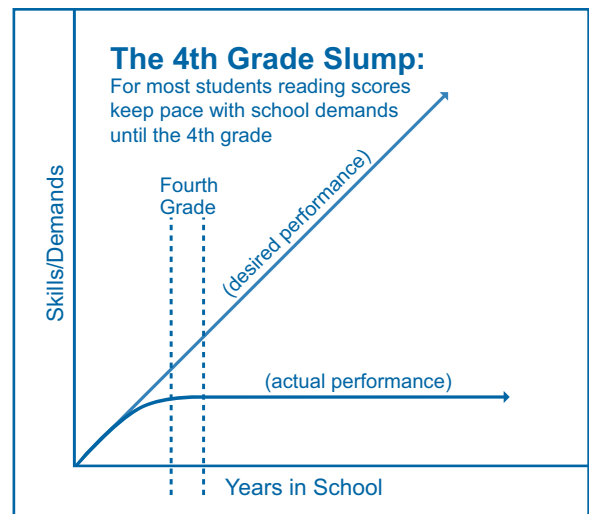
Why isn’t a set of third-grade literacy skills enough to support the full weight of a middle and high school education? Because sooner or later—typically in the fourth grade—teachers set aside the basic readers and storybooks and start to assign longer, more difficult, and content-rich reading materials, ranging from textbooks, short stories, and biographies to laboratory instructions, technical manuals, and mathematical word problems.

## **Adolescent Literacy** By the Numbers

- **More than eight million students in grades 4-12 read far below grade level.** (Perie et al., 2005)
- **Only about a third of America’s eighth grade students read at grade level.** (Perie et al., 2005; NCES, 2003)
- **Among low-income eighth graders, just fifteen percent read at grade level.** (Perie et al., 2005)
- **Between 1971 and 2004, the reading levels of America’s seventeen year-olds showed no improvement at all.** (NCES, 2004)
- **In a typical high-poverty urban school, approximately half of incoming ninth-grade students read at a sixth- or seventh-grade level or below.** (Balfanz et al., 2002)
- **High school students’ ability to read complex texts is strongly predictive of their performance in college math and science courses.** (ACT, 2006)
- **Among high school seniors who intend to go to college, roughly half are unprepared for college-level reading.** (ACT, 2005)
- **Forty percent of high school graduates lack the literacy skills employers seek.** (Achieve, 2005)



Prior to the fourth grade, children are judged to be competent readers if they can sound out words and follow a simple plot. At the very moment that most schools stop providing reading instruction, however, the demands of literacy change. Middle and high school students have to move beyond merely decoding texts to gather information from them and—in the best and most challenging classrooms—to analyze, interpret, and respond critically to what they read, to write sophisticated texts of their own, and to discuss, debate, and defend their ideas. Just when students need support to reach higher literacy levels, most schools stop providing literacy instruction altogether. It is no surprise, then, that data show a pronounced drop-off in reading achievement at that point, long known as the “fourth grade slump.”



To complicate things further, schoolbooks don’t just increase in length and amount of information; they also become more *varied*. In the middle grades, the curriculum divides into the familiar subject areas—with English, math, history, and science comprising the academic core—each with its own distinct kinds of texts. For students in the earlier grades, reading is reading, and books are books. But when they move into the middle grades, students soon discover that what the science teacher writes on the blackboard is nothing like the poems assigned by the English teacher, that the math textbook has a very different style from the history textbook, and that none of them resembles the many other sorts of materials that teachers assign, from newspaper stories to reference materials, Web pages, and technical manuals.

To succeed in high school and beyond, students must become chameleons, able to adapt to a range of academic contexts, each of which requires its own set of literacy skills.

## RESEARCH IS CLEAR ON HOW TO HELP OLDER STUDENTS

In order to succeed in high school, college, and beyond, students not only need to master the mechanics of reading, but they also must develop more advanced reading comprehension, writing, and other communication skills.

### **Some students need help with the basics.**

Among the eight million students in grades 4–12 who read significantly below grade level, researchers estimate that perhaps as many as a million struggle with the basic skill of sounding out words on the page (Kamil, 2003). Even students who can decode the words often do so with too little accuracy or speed to permit them to grasp the meaning of what they read. Those students need and should get high-quality instruction in phonics and reading fluency, so they can finally master the basic mechanics that they should have been taught in elementary school.

Depending upon the specific needs of their students, schools have several options: they may choose to hire reading specialists to provide this instruction, or they may invest in English as a second language teachers who have a background in reading instruction, develop after-school or tutoring programs, or purchase one of the many pre-packaged, commercial reading programs created for the middle and high school levels.



Whatever the specific course of action, schools must provide students with intensive, accelerated, supplemental reading instruction that is designed to help them catch up to grade level as quickly as possible, without falling further behind in their content-area courses.

**All students need help with reading comprehension and writing, particularly in the academic content areas.**

In the upper grades, literacy cannot easily be separated from the learning of academic content. Reading and writing are the key means by which students learn, think about, and debate the meaning of the content they study. To require middle and high school students to read and write is simply good instruction, whatever the subject area.

All students, even those reading at grade level, need strategies for understanding what they read in school; but those who have the most severe difficulties need the most help, and they need it from all of their teachers. For instance, teachers in every subject area can help students review the vocabulary in a given text, encourage students to use the dictionary or encyclopedia, and have students summarize the main points of the reading. This kind of reading instruction does not constitute an undue burden on the teacher, nor does it require math, history, and other content-area teachers to become reading specialists. In fact, research supports a number of straightforward techniques that all teachers can learn with some targeted professional development.

Teaching reading comprehension cannot be left to reading specialists alone. In every classroom in which students are asked to read—and they should be assigned to read advanced, high-level texts in all of their academic courses—they will need this sort of explicit support, particularly when they encounter vocabulary, text formats, stylistic conventions, and other features that are specific to a given subject area. In history class, for instance, students should be taught how to read and write like historians, and in biology class, students should be taught how to write a laboratory report.

## Does this Make Sense to You?

The valves are located in the press pit. One valve controls two prefill valves. The valve solenoid is de-energized when initially closing the press. Once the pressure transducer indicates that there is approximately 1800 PSI pressure in the line, SOL P1-P4 are energized. Oil is then ported to extend the actuators which shifts the prefill valve spools. Flow from the pumps is now directed to pressurize the main rams. The pressure will initially drop and once again build. The valves remain energized until the pressure reaches the PTP11 setting in Weight Transfer. Flow from the DP pump is then ported to the rod side of the cylinders. The oil that exhaust out of the full piston side of the cylinders returns to tank through the directional valve. The prefill valves shift back to the open position when this occurs. The valves are two position, three way, single solenoid, spring return, directional control.

Chances are—and unless you've taken advanced coursework in hydraulics—you find this text baffling. You can make out the words just fine, and you understand that some sort of mechanical device is being described, but most of the passage goes over your head.

That's exactly how many high school students feel when asked to read their textbooks in math, history, and other courses. And that's why it's so important to give students ongoing and explicit support in reading and writing.

Difficult texts can make sense, but only if somebody takes the time to go over the specialized vocabulary, explains things step by step, and gives you the practice and support you need to more fully understand what you read.

*Text excerpted from GPM Hydraulic Consulting (n.d.).*



## READING FIRST & STRIVING READERS

How much does the U.S. spend on each program?



**Reading First**  
Grades: K-3

FY 2006 =  
\$1 Billion

**Striving Readers**  
Grades: 6-12

FY 2006 =  
\$29.7 Million

How much does the U.S. spend per student?\*



**Reading First**  
Grades: K-3

Reading First  
spends  
\$72 per student

**Striving Readers**  
Grades: 6-12

Striving Readers  
spends  
\$0.13 per student

\* Figure is based on public school enrollments in the United States for grades K-3 and 6-12 in 2003-2004 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2004).

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FEDERAL POLICYMAKERS

As long as millions of American adolescents struggle to read and write, they have little hope of competing in a global economy or becoming the truly engaged citizens the nation needs in order to thrive. The federal government has a major role to play—as it does in early grades—to help improve adolescent literacy instruction, but it will require the same sort of commitment and resources that have been directed toward the teaching of early reading skills, an investment that has shown results.

Based upon a research and best practices, the Alliance for Excellent Education strongly recommends that federal policymakers:

***Build on the success of Reading First (K-3) by expanding it to the upper grades.***

The federal government should strengthen literacy skills in the upper grades, much as it has strengthened early reading instruction with Reading First. The President's Striving Readers initiative, launched in 2005, is a good start, but at its current funding level it supports adolescent literacy programs in only eight of the nation's school districts. In the first competition, 148 districts applied for these eight grants. Clearly, the demand is far greater than can be supported at existing levels. If Striving Readers is to make a dent in the nation's adolescent literacy crisis, it must be greatly expanded.



***Give schools the flexibility and resources they need to schedule more time for reading and writing instruction.***

To prepare middle and high school students for college and the modern workplace, they will need to read and write extensively, immersing themselves in various kinds of texts and learning how to communicate to many different audiences, for many different purposes. Because literacy instruction can be time intensive, teachers are unlikely to assign more independent reading and writing, such as drafts and revision of student work, without significant adjustments in their class sizes, teaching loads, and schedules. The federal government should encourage states to leverage Title I and Title II funds in No Child Left Behind to free up time for literacy instruction and train teachers in adolescent literacy strategies.

***Encourage states to incorporate reading and writing skills into content area standards.***

As the ACT notes in a recent study (2006), only a handful of states currently even include reading skills in their high school standards, and no state has specified literacy standards for each of the academic content areas. Drawing from the most current scholarship—and in accordance with the recommendations of the National Governors Association (2005)—states should revisit their math, science, English, and social studies standards to ensure that each of them addresses the reading and writing skills that are specific to that discipline. So long as reading and writing are relegated to their own standards document—or solely to the standards document for English Language Arts—teachers in the content areas will have tacit permission to ignore them.

**Researchers strongly agree on many steps that can be taken to improve middle and high school literacy instruction ... When it comes to adolescent literacy, there are no “reading wars.”**

(Biancarosa & Snow, 2004)

***Increase federal funding for enhanced assessments to help states use open-ended writing and analytic reading items as part of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) accountability systems.***

While open-ended writing and analytical tests can be more expensive than those that rely on multiple choice and short-answer questions, they create a greater incentive for teachers to offer more and better literacy instruction. A federal program to support enhanced assessments exists, but it has been poorly funded and is used almost exclusively to develop tests for students with disabilities and English language learners. Support to develop those tests should continue, but funding should increase to cover additional needs such as open-ended questions that would increase the focus on literacy skills.

***Increase funding for the federal school libraries program and target the increase to low-performing high schools, in order to provide content area teachers with access to more and better reading materials.***

Many of the nation’s teachers have little access to primary reading materials, real-world documents, and high-quality disciplinary texts. Particularly lacking are reading materials that are high in interest but low in frustration; that is, schools need more books about topics that appeal to older students while using language and vocabulary that struggling readers find manageable.

***Support more teacher professional development in adolescent literacy.***

The Higher Education Act reauthorization bill passed out of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee creates literacy partnerships similar to existing math and science partnerships. These partnerships should be included in the final reauthorization bill. In addition, as part of reauthorizing



NCLB, Title II funding should be targeted to ensure more teachers learn to incorporate literacy strategies into their teaching.

***Increase federal support for the National Writing Project.***

The National Writing Project (NWP) is a proven, effective professional development network that has helped thousands of middle and high school teachers incorporate writing into the curriculum, primarily in English classes, but also in the other content areas. Increased funding would permit the NWP to seek greater participation from math, science, and social studies teachers and also to accelerate efforts to expand programs to include a broader emphasis on reading and oral communication, in addition to writing.



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