

# EDUCATION UPDATE

EDUCATION NEWS TODAY FOR A BETTER WORLD TOMORROW



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FOR PARENTS, EDUCATORS & STUDENTS

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## SCHOLASTIC EDUCATION TAKES LEAD IN LITERACY

# SCHOLASTIC OFFERS SOLUTIONS IN THE FACE OF NATIONAL READING CRISIS



*(l-r) Chauncey Veatch, Teacher of the Year, California & Ernie Fleishman, Sr. VP, Scholastic, Education & Corporate Relations*

By MICHELLE DESARBO

With 68 percent of 8th graders failing to meet proficiency requirements in reading, schools are facing a staggering literacy crisis nationwide. Scholastic's recent Superintendents' Literacy Leadership Summit brought panels of experts together with the hope of arming superintendents and teachers with the tools to build and strengthen adolescent literacy in the classroom. In a three-part presentation (moderated by Mr. Greg Worrell, Scholastic's Senior Vice President and General Manager of Read To Learn) that both moved and informed the audience, summit attendees learned about the use of classroom technology as a way of teaching students how to become better readers—and utilize their own talents to

inspire their students to achieve beyond their wildest dreams.

To begin his presentation, Dr. Ted Hasselbring, a William T. Bryan Professor of Special Education Technology at the University of Kentucky, set out to take a more in-depth look at why students have difficulty reading. "There are two problems that middle school students have when they struggle with reading: they cannot decode and read connected text fluently, and they cannot create mental models and comprehend text," he said. Hasselbring defines fluency as the ability to perform skills and demonstrate knowledge with quickness and accuracy. "Without fluency," he pointed out, "performance is painfully slow."

A lack of fluency happens when an individual's working memory—the basic mental workings necessary for human functioning—becomes overloaded with the processing of a task. The average human can hold seven (give or take two) facts in the brain before it becomes overloaded. It is imperative that the working memory be freed up so that fluency can take hold. This is where, according to Hasselbring, technology plays a larger role in helping solve the problem of illiteracy.

Hasselbring and his colleagues developed a computer-based learning system called Fluency and Automaticity through Systematic Teaching with Technology (FASTT.) In it, students are introduced

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to groups of words, some of which they know and some of which they do not. The program divides all the words that they do not know or understand into groups of five. From there, the program practices the words with the student making each word group successively larger over time and estimating their response time to measure how fast he or she is mentally retrieving answers. The added benefit, Hasselbring says, is that FASTT works to correct errors and mistakes immediately, unlike worksheets which force students to complete a series of problems with corrections coming back a day or two later. With FASTT, fluency takes hold, and once it does, all that is required is the occasional practice session.

But augmenting students' vocabulary to help them make sense of what they read is only half of the solution. The other half involves what Hasselbring calls the "mental model theory of comprehension." When students read a chapter book, for instance, they are actually maintaining a complex model of the text that they update each time they finish a new section. The main reason why many students cannot form mental models is because they do not have enough background knowledge to make sense of what they read. This greatly interferes with comprehension. Infusing information with visual technology (i.e. videos) provides students with grounding and background knowledge for what they are reading. "This offers consistency and continuity," Hasselbring comments. "It provides increased opportunities to respond, and it gives feedback and instruction." The technique—known as "anchored instruction"—also gives teachers who are not reading specialists a form of support in their efforts to combat illiteracy in their classrooms. "The key is to get interaction between the teacher and the technology," he emphasizes.

Given this information, what can teachers do? Mr. Patrick Daley, Vice President and Publishing Director of Intervention Curriculum at Scholastic, Inc., recommends Read 180, Scholastic's reading intervention program, which uses technology to augment vocabulary and create mental models. Tailored to a student's grade level and reading ability, the program is broken down into three "stages" that address students' needs at the elementary, middle, and high school levels.

For a total of 90 minutes every day, students are divided into three groups: one group works on computers with Read 180 software, another reads quietly in a designated area and the last group spends time with their teacher. Each group rotates three times over the 90 minute period to receive personal attention and instruction.

The technology behind Read 180 offers an alternative to worksheets. Students read passages from what are called rBooks, then respond and write according to what they've read. The reading material gets increasingly difficult over time and covers an array of subjects in literature, science, life skills, and cultural studies. Meanwhile, computer software enables students to hear passages read aloud. Then, they can read them aloud to themselves. There are various "zones" in which students can play games with vocabulary words with emphasis on speed, accuracy and comprehension. The games help students gain fluency as a result of the repetition and practice. Finally, DVDs accompany the rBooks and serve as effective mental models that supplement reading.

Indeed, Read 180 and the use of classroom technology has proven effective, but it is the teachers who ultimately make the biggest difference. Take Chauncey Veatch, 2002 National Teacher of the Year. Veatch, an 8th grade teacher at Coachella Valley High School in Thermal, California, spoke on

the importance of attitude and approach when increasing literacy in any subject. He did not know that when he applied for a substitute teacher position in Thermal, he would be working in a bankrupt school district in which 86 percent of the students were children of migrant workers. Feeling very unprepared, he called his brother, Greg, also a schoolteacher in CA, for insight. "It will be an experience," was all he could say.

"I had the one pre-requisite to be hired that day: I was breathing!" Veatch recalled. Soon, he was responsible for teaching everything from reading and writing to social studies. He learned of the working conditions that students' families were forced to endure in the fields. It was not unusual, for example, to face oppressive temperatures of 125 degrees. Workers also had to wear extra layers of clothing everywhere except their eyes and hands to prevent bites from the flies that swarmed through every square inch of the stifling air. Veatch knew his mission was to help these students dream big and achieve. "You have to look for the gift in each kid, to see it and build on it," he says. And that he did. A total of 29 out of the 34 students in his class went on to college—one was even accepted at Yale, and another at Stanford—while two went to the Navy and the remaining three became Marines. "It's about their dreams and their choices...Truly, it really has nothing to do with me. My students and their parents gave me all the cues and clues to succeed. It's about the community. You have riches in your community but you need to look at them again just to remind yourself that they're there." Veatch encourages teachers to make their jobs less curriculum-centered and more student and family-centered. "Yes, there are obstacles," he says. "But there is a moral imperative to overcome them."#

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### SCHOLASTIC HOSTS SCHOOL REFORM INITIATIVE



*(l-r) Virginia Governor Mark Warner & NYC Schools Chancellor Joel Klein*

By LIZA YOUNG

Opening at the Majestic Ballroom of the Westin Hotel before a crowd of scores of superintendents from around the country, Scholastic graciously hosted a two-day Superintendents' Literacy Leadership Summit to address the national dilemma of adolescent literacy.

Luminaries in government and education highlighted the underpinnings of school reform. Guest speaker Governor Mark Warner of Virginia—describing the pressing issues of global competition and education as tied to national security—underscored the need to bring qualified teachers into poor areas to overcome the ironic trend of sending less qualified teachers to these areas. He stated his willingness to “give bonuses to teachers going into schools in poor areas.” Warner also stressed the need for defining educational standards and for remediation based on these benchmarks.

With his classically upbeat style, Schools Chancellor Joel Klein stated in his opening remarks that though “school reform is urgent it must not be joyless.” Klein cited that only two out of 10 students and one of 10 Latino and African American students earn regents diplomas. He indicated that students three to four years behind in reading cannot be expected to graduate high school and stated that early intervention is vital so that students enter high school prepared with the necessary skills. Klein espouses a pedagogical and instructional pattern of school reform. He stated that through the use of such instruction there was an 11-point increase in reading scores for grades three through eight. At the same time, it is essential that literacy programs be individually tailored to the needs of students: “The days of using only one basal

reader for all students are thankfully over,” he exclaimed.

Klein highlighted the human resource factor as a key dynamic for successful school reform. He cited the case of a student who performed poorly at one school and then phenomenally at another school where expectations for him were high. When asked why the sudden shift in his performance, the student responded that in the first school the teachers didn't expect anything from him and so he met those expectations. Klein expressed the importance of coaching teachers—New York City Public teachers and staff are currently receiving training—and stated that it is crucial for principals to be “chief instructional leaders.”

On day two of the leadership summit a panel of superintendents at Scholastic headquarters—moderated by Ernie Fleishman, Senior Vice President Education and Corporate Relations—provided their views on school reform with respect to infrastructure.

Panelist Dr. Clayton Wilcox, Superintendent of Pinellas County Public Schools in Florida, expressed that “while there may not be magic bullets there are magic babes” for school reform. Among these ‘bebes’ are to “create a sense of passion and urgency around the need for reform and then provide leadership.”

The general consensus among Warner, Klein, and Superintendent panelists is that leadership, literacy coaching, data accountability, and instrumental use of time using key instructional programs are all vital components for addressing the urgent need to raise literacy levels across the nation.#