

# Reading at Risk



The State  
Response to  
the Crisis in  
Adolescent  
Literacy

**Executive Summary**

**NASBE**  
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF  
STATE BOARDS OF EDUCATION

The Report of the NASBE  
Study Group on Middle and  
High School Literacy

October 2005

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## Executive Summary

**P**resident Bush has called reading the “new civil right.” Certainly, such a statement emphasizing the essential nature of reading is warranted. If anything, however, the sentiment understates the indispensableness of reading skills. Reading is a basic human right. An inability to read in today’s world is to be consigned to educational, social and economic failure—an existence entirely devoid of meaningful life, liberty, or the pursuit of happiness.

Yet, despite the fundamental importance of reading to personal fulfillment and two decades of rising academic standards and student achievement, the education system still needs to address one of our nation’s most serious problems: that approximately 70 percent of adolescents struggle to read.\* The young people enrolled in middle and high school who lack the broad literacy skills to comprehend and learn advanced academic subjects will suffer serious social, emotional, and economic consequences. As a country, the repercussions of a national literacy crisis will seriously hinder this nation’s ability to sustain its social, political, and economic well-being in this century.

The scope of this literacy problem is staggering. According to the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), approximately two-thirds of 8th- and 12th-graders read below the proficient level, and one-quarter are unable to read at the most basic level. For minority students, the figures are even more depressing: almost half of African American and Latino 8th-graders read below the basic level. It is estimated that about half of the incoming 9th-graders in urban, high-poverty schools read three years or more below grade level. The simple and sad fact is that very large numbers of students entering secondary school cannot comprehend factual information from

their subject matter texts and struggle to form general understandings, develop interpretations, and make text connections.

The tragic consequences of such low student achievement levels for both individuals and society are well documented. Poor academic skills are consistently linked with higher dropout rates, entrance into the juvenile justice system, and unemployment. Indeed, one-third of all juvenile offenders read below the 4th-grade level and about 82 percent of prison inmates are high school dropouts. The figures overall are disconcerting enough, but the truly disastrous outcomes for portions of the student population segmented by race, ethnicity, and income level reverberate through our national education system. Even more distressing is that the figures reported for grade 12 performance do not reflect the low achievement of those students who have already left the system.

Amid these discouraging statistics, there have been some promising signs of progress in the field of literacy research. Policymakers who recall the “reading wars” of the 1990s may be surprised to learn that there has been a remarkable convergence among researchers about what constitutes effective reading instruction, particularly with regard to teaching adolescent literacy skills.

Unfortunately, there remains a huge gap between these proven practices and their adoption among educators, where what has remained unchanged in too many secondary schools and classrooms is the nature of teaching reading itself. States can no longer afford to neglect taking to scale those practices that are well-documented and that have been demonstrated to be effective.

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\* Sources for all data and other information contained in this summary may be found in the chapters that follow and in the Endnotes beginning on page 70.

The first place for policymakers to start is understanding what works and then designing the overall system to ensure that the knowledge about effective practice is applied to all content areas for all students. Specifically, there is general consensus among researchers about the five major factors for advanced literacy skills and the ability of adolescents to understand and learn from what they read: speed and accuracy when reading text, vocabulary, background knowledge, comprehension, and motivation.

What becomes apparent, however, after examining the scope of the problem, understanding the research, and looking over the wide breach between research and practice, is that it will take a full-scale effort by states to truly address this issue. Despite the indisputable importance of literacy instruction, however, NASBE's Study Group on Middle and Secondary School Literacy found that only a very few states have begun to think systematically about how state policies and practice should support a new approach to the education of adolescents. Rather, improvements have more commonly been made at the margins, with scattered sites served by a disparate collection of programs—while most secondary schools remain impervious to significant change. It has been easier to focus attention on the early grades and hope that reading successes in the primary years will translate to resolving the problems in middle and high schools.

States, specifically state boards of education, have a significant role to play in making student literacy a priority for all students at all grade levels.

Simply put, literacy is the linchpin of standards-based reform. As literacy skills improve, student achievement rises not only in reading and writing but across the curriculum spectrum, a benefit that has profound consequences for the ultimate success of standards-based reform. Indeed, a state literacy strategy incorporates those elements considered essential in the design of the larger standards-based reforms efforts. Thus, a key finding of the Study Group is that *state plans must target improving literacy skills by teaching them within the context of core academic subjects, rather than apart from challenging content instruction.*

The importance of connecting reading and writing across the curriculum has never been more clear.

Indeed, comprehension instruction that promotes strategic behaviors to encourage active and purposeful reading and writing (something that most struggling readers have trouble with) should not only be taught explicitly, it should be incorporated into content area teaching, beginning in the early grades and continuing through high school. This is especially important for low-achieving students.

Of course, any state plan to improve adolescent literacy must be considered within the state's overall accountability system. Fortunately, adolescent literacy goes to the essence of school improvement: fundamentally transforming curriculum and instruction and applying the important principles of research-based practice towards to goal of all students achieving high standards.

The transformation of the day-to-day practice of our middle and secondary schools begins with the fundamentals of school effectiveness and good instruction and then goes a step beyond—to continuously monitor, course correct, and infuse our growing knowledge base about teaching students to read and write well. Nothing less than a new paradigm is required—one based on joint problem-solving, collaborative practice, and collective accountability that engages students in purposeful reading and writing in the service of subject area learning. State boards of education must craft a comprehensive state literacy initiative that jettisons the old system for a new vision of teaching and learning for all students.

To accomplish this, states must take a broad systems approach to ensuring that students have the literacy skills they need by strategically attending to: 1) alignment of content standards, curricula, and assessments; 2) development of a high-quality teacher workforce that understands the importance of literacy instruction and how to do it; 3) use of data to identify student needs and monitor the efficacy of instruction; 4) development of district literacy plans that use research-based literacy support strategies in all content areas; and 5) design of organizational structures and leadership capacities to sustain and enact these elements strategically. All of these elements should be addressed in a state's comprehensive literacy strategy.

The following are the steps states need to take in implementing a literacy plan.

**STEP #1: *Set state literacy goals and standards, ensuring alignment with curricula and assessments, and raising literacy expectations across the curriculum for all students in all grades.***

What we want students to do by graduation must inform what goes on at all grade levels. Hence, it is essential to develop state standards that reflect developmental literacy skills and to design curricula and instruction grounded in the research about effective practice. While the majority of states now have standards that meet our common core criteria, policymakers must ensure that proficiency standards are sufficiently rigorous—something called into question by the significant gap that exists in some states between how many students are meeting state reading standards versus how many of those same students are reaching proficiency on NAEP. In addition, most states continue to lag behind in developing curricula to accompany standards.

**STEP #2: *Ensure that teachers have the preparation and professional development to provide effective, content-based literacy instruction.***

Teachers must have considerable knowledge to use research-based literacy strategies in content-area instruction. States have only recently begun to redefine the requirements for middle and secondary teachers concerning knowledge of reading strategy instruction. Although revised standards may reflect sophisticated literacy skills inherent in mastering content standard, states typically need to do much more to ensure that content teachers know about the textual demands of their subjects and have the ongoing supports to build literacy skills appropriate to the requirements of the discipline.

**STEP #3: *Strategically use data to identify student needs, design cohesive policies, and evaluate quality of implementation and impact.***

The story of adolescent literacy begins with data—good data based on multiple indicators that can answer a range of essential questions for different purposes. States typically collect summative data based on state assessments and high school exit exams, which can be used to evaluate overall district and school reading achievement and to compare relative performance by different units of analysis such as school, district, or

subgroup (race and ethnicity, language, gender, disability, and income level). States need to use a number of data sources on literacy performance given the variability in reading performance outcomes across assessments.

**STEP #4: *Require the development of district and school literacy plans that infuse research-based literacy support strategies in all content areas.***

Redesigning standard practice in middle and high schools is no easy task. It requires leveraging policies to ensure that districts focus on equipping and supporting schools to infuse research-based instructional practices as part of a schoolwide focus. It embodies planned system-wide elements—which have been shown to be effective in studies of high performing districts—including: creating a climate of urgency regarding improving reading achievement; fostering a culture of shared accountability for student learning; designing the central office as a support and service organization for schools; providing a high level of resources devoted to professional development on research-based practice; and equipping leaders to exercise data-driven instructional leadership.

State policies should build district capacity to help teachers and leaders work collaboratively to pursue viable solutions to advance the literacy levels of adolescent learners. It begins with designing coherent district and school literacy plans that can provide teachers and school leaders with the tools, resources, and training to provide literacy instruction within content-area teaching. Districts and schools should design comprehensive programs and supports based on detailed information on students' needs. State policies should also develop accountability and oversight mechanisms to ensure that programs are implemented effectively and result in improving students' reading skills and content learning.

**STEP #5: *Provide districts and schools with funding, supports, and resources.***

Schoolwide literacy initiatives require sufficient funds to provide schools and teachers with the necessary resources and supports to differentiate instruction for students across abilities and grades. There are numerous implications for resource-related decisions on

staffing, time, instructional organization, assessments, curriculum, textbooks and materials, and professional development. It is largely impossible for schools to implement schoolwide literacy interventions without the funding and resources to go beyond day-to-day operations.

Moreover, states must target additional funds and resources to high-poverty districts and schools where large numbers of students struggle with foundational literacy. Because large numbers of minority and low-income students perform below basic on state and national reading assessments, politicians and the public must be willing to commit in this area if they are serious about the goal of high levels of performance for all students.

***STEP #6: Provide state guidance and oversight to ensure strong implementation of comprehensive quality literacy programs.***

States need to craft detailed guidance on the key specifications for district and school-based literacy plans. To ensure the quality of programs, there should be well-defined expectations for what elements districts and schools need to address in order to support quality reading instruction. Rhode Island, for example, requires schools and districts to report to the state the reading level of all students who fail to attain proficiency on reading state assessments; submit school improvement plans and district strategic plans to the state that outline the mechanisms by which students who are reading below grade level will attain at least grade-level abilities; and conduct periodic district evaluations based on student performance of the effectiveness of their literacy program.

Accomplishing all these aspects of a state plan will not be easy. It will require strong state leadership to enlist the multiple constituencies in framing a vision and setting the public agenda. It will also require finding common ground among the reading experts, administrators, and practitioners who will implement state policies, and the key players who can deliver the political and social capital. In addition to state and local

boards of education, planning must include governors, legislatures, business, professional associations, universities, and most importantly, the professions, particularly teachers. People support what helps them and what they help create—and they resist what they don't understand or value. States must work closely with their teachers and administrators to identify the needs of struggling readers and to identify solutions that are viable for districts and schools.

The problem of low levels of literacy among our nation's adolescents is enormous—and getting worse because the stakes are climbing higher. This nation is confronted with the realities of low literacy levels among many young adults, while at the same time facing the growing imperative of providing everyone with a high-level education that includes training through and beyond high school. Moreover, the literacy crisis threatens to derail the ongoing implementation of standards-based reforms and to regress on advances in academic achievement that have already been made. The goals of improving adolescent literacy and achieving success in standards-based reform are inextricably intertwined.

Given the scope and seriousness of the problem, the Study Group urges state policymakers to become more engaged in developing and overseeing comprehensive literacy policies that address the reading needs of students along the entire K-12 continuum. The current low level of adolescent literacy is not a problem that can be solved in isolation with some extra tutoring or supplementary programs for those unable to read well—it will take a concerted state-wide policy and program effort that reaches deep into districts and the instructional practices of teachers across the curriculum. The challenges to success are daunting, but the alternative is too bleak to contemplate.

\* \* \*

Note: Please refer to the “State Policymaker’s Literacy Checklist” on page 56 of this report for a more detailed listing of the actions states should take in tackling this important issue.