Overcoming Adolescent Literacy Hurdles Should be a Priority, Experts Say

By Tim Weldon [1]
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A majority of students in America’s public schools fail to meet national reading standards. The lack of strong literacy skills is a factor in the nation’s high dropout rate. It’s also a barrier to preparing students for a rigorous college curriculum or a career. Education experts say policymakers should take actions to ensure middle and high school students are taught reading skills in every subject and every grade.

Elementary schools in the U.S. have a successful track record of teaching literacy skills in early grades. Compared to other nations, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization reports U.S. fourth grade students have among the best reading scores in the world. The organization also reports that by 10th grade, U.S. students score among the lowest in the world.¹

Less than one-third of America’s eighth-grade public school students meet the National Assessment of Educational Progress standard of reading proficiency for their grade level, according to the U.S. Department of Education.² Furthermore, the national data shows while fourth-grade reading proficiency rates increased between 1998 through 2007, the percentage of eighth-graders who score at or above the proficient level declined. A mere 2 percent of eighth-graders read at an advanced level, according to Department of Education data.³

“The bad news is all the data is correct,” said Mel Riddile of the National Association of Secondary School Principals. “Half of entering ninth-graders cannot read their textbooks. They are not illiterate. They can read the words, but they can’t process their meaning on a higher level.”

Riddile served as principal at a high school in Falls Church, Va., that improved from a failing high school to an award-winning one in four years by changing methods for teaching literacy skills.

Table A [4] provides a comparison of eighth grade National Assessment of Educational Progress test scores for each state. The scores on the table are disaggregated according to gender, race and socioeconomic groupings. They show alarming disparities among each group. Specifically:

- Eighth-grade girls on average score more than 10 points higher than boys;
- White students average approximately 27 points higher than African-Americans and 25 points higher than Hispanics; and
Students who qualify for free and reduced-price school lunch average 23 points lower than their more affluent counterparts who do not qualify for free and reduced-price lunch. Numerous studies shed light on the problems associated with adolescent literacy disparities and the effect poor adolescent literacy has on preparedness for postsecondary education and the workforce.

In *Re-conceptualizing Extra Help for High School Students in a High Standards Era*, Robert Balfanz and other authors of the report concluded that about half of incoming ninth-graders in urban, high-poverty schools read three years or more below grade level. Furthermore, according to a Department of Education study, a mere 15 percent of low-income eighth-graders read at or above a proficient level.

The lack of adolescent literacy has far-reaching impacts. Roughly one-third of high school graduates are not ready to succeed in an introductory-level college writing course, according to American College Testing’s *Crisis at the Core: Preparing All Students for College and Work*.

At the nation’s four-year colleges, nearly 8 percent of all entering students are required to take at least one remedial reading course and only about one-third of those students are likely to graduate within eight years, according to a Department of Education report.

Former Virginia Delegate Kristen Amundson said, “Not surprisingly at all, kids who can’t meet the ACT college-ready benchmark in reading do horribly on the math and science portions of the test. You can’t do math if you can’t read.” The data supports her. Among students who failed to meet the ACT reading benchmark for college readiness in 2006, only 16 percent met the college benchmark in math and only 5 percent in science.

Even students who are not college-bound lack literacy skills needed to be successful in the workplace, according to multiple studies. Achieve Inc., an education think tank, states in *Rising to the Challenge: Are High School Graduates Prepared for College and Work?*, that approximately 40 percent of high school graduates lack the literacy skills that employers seek.

As educational and financial experts predict jobs in the future will demand increased numbers of students with a postsecondary education, clearly state policymakers as well as local educators have critical roles in identifying, enacting and implementing policies and programmatic strategies to improve literacy education, particularly in middle and high schools.

**Recommended Actions for State Policymakers**

What’s behind the seeming freefall in adolescent literacy is the subject of a recent report by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, *Time to Act: An Agenda for Advancing Adolescent Literacy for College and Career Success*. It examines factors responsible for a decline in adolescent literacy scores and recommends policies and strategies that can be enacted and implemented at the federal, state and local levels to address the issue.

*Time to Act* points out that states with targeted funding for adolescent literacy interventions are seeing positive benefits for their efforts. The report cites a 2007 study from the Center for Educational Policy that shows Delaware, Kansas, Massachusetts and New Jersey have each made targeted investments in adolescent literacy and have seen significant gains in eighth grade reading scores on both national and state assessments.

The report lists the following actions state policymakers can take to support adolescent literacy efforts:
• Align the content of state standards to models promoted by the International Reading Association adolescent literacy coaching standards [5] and the American Diploma Project’s high school standards [6].

• Align the challenge level of statewide reading assessments to National Assessment of Educational Progress standards and to states making progress on those national outcomes, such as Florida and Massachusetts, in order to move toward a common, national understanding of literacy expectations.

• Work to revise teacher certification standards, content of pre-service teacher education programs and professional development and support to districts. According to the Education Commission of the States [7], at least 17 states have strengthened the teacher preparation/certification requirements to reflect adolescent literacy.

• Define and provide mechanisms for districts and schools to identify and intervene with middle and high school students who are not demonstrating grade-level literacy skills within specific content areas, as well as across all content areas.

• Require credit-bearing reading intervention classes for students who are reading two or more years behind grade level. Fund all the elements essential to making those classes effective, including diagnostic assessments, hiring teachers to teach those classes, and providing professional development for those teachers and the broader school faculty. According to an Education Commission of the States database, at least 23 states provide student interventions when a student’s reading skills are not improving.

• Build statewide data systems to ensure that data collected from districts are captured in a central place. Enable links between district databases so assessments and instructional plans are available when students cross district lines. In some states, this will mean introducing or upgrading the data management system and providing guidance on how to access, analyze and interpret available data.

• Develop a system of tracking the Response to Intervention approach shown by students receiving supportive or intervention services in order to maintain accountability and to improve the system over time.

• States that have already launched adolescent literacy initiatives should institutionalize them while conducting ongoing evaluations to ensure they continue to work well. Andrés Henríquez, program officer at the Carnegie Corporation, explained the importance of creating data systems to track the reading needs of individual students and progress of literacy programs. “We’re putting in a number of data systems in states,” he said. “What we don’t have is basically what the reading level of those kids are after the third grade or so. Teachers, particularly at the secondary level need to understand the struggles of those students and the way in which they need to attack the problem. So it just needs to be a much more robust system of that kind of literacy data, but also an opportunity to perform what we might call formative testing.”

In addition to the Carnegie Corporation of New York, several organizations representing state policymakers have addressed the need for actions to improve adolescent literacy. In its issue brief, Supporting Adolescent Literacy Achievement, released in 2009, the National Governors Association recommends five policy strategies:

1. Build support for a state focus on adolescent literacy;
2. Raise literacy expectations across the curriculum;
3. Encourage and support school and district literacy plans;
4. Build educators’ capacity to provide adolescent literacy instruction; and
5. Measure progress in adolescent literacy at the school, district and state levels.

Barbara Elzie, interim director of Just Read Florida, a state program that promotes adolescent
reading skills, agrees that state-level policymakers must play an important role in supporting district and school-level adolescent literacy reforms.

“I think it’s essential that states establish policies that support adolescent literacy,” she said. “That has been the success of Just Read Florida, strong state policy, laws, state board rules, that went into place to ensure that there’s professional development for those teachers, that those students are in intense reading interventions, if that’s what’s needed for them.”

The National Association of State Boards of Education report, *From State Policy to Classroom Practice: Improving Literacy Instruction for All Students*, explains how states and districts can exercise policy levers and leadership to generate improvement in literacy instruction.

- State policymakers must become well-grounded in the issues—what’s at stake, the research base in literacy instruction, and the roles that must be played at all levels, including the state, districts, schools, teachers and higher education. “It is critical to secure agreements from these stakeholders about what is worth achieving, and set in motion those policies and practices that will enable people to learn what they must do to improve how teachers and students learn and apply literacy skills to content area learning,” the report states.
- States must craft comprehensive literacy plans that provide all students with reading and writing instruction across the curriculum, as well as a continuum of supports and interventions for struggling readers.
- States must take a comprehensive approach to ensure the training and supports for teachers improves the quality of key dimensions of instruction linked with improving literacy achievement and content learning, including:
  - Alignment of content standards, curricula and assessments;
  - Use of formative assessment to identify student needs and monitor the efficacy of instruction;
  - Use of research-based literacy support strategies in all content areas;
  - Quality professional development and supports; and
  - Design of organizational structures and leadership capacities to sustain and enact these elements strategically.

**What Steps States are Already Taking**

Legislatures have responded to the adolescent literacy crisis in recent years by adopting measures in several states. Some examples of legislation enacted in 2009 include:

- **Kentucky Senate Bill 1** [8] expands and strengthens existing professional development requirements pertaining to literacy. The bill, signed into law in March, replaces a provision that teacher professional development may address phonics with a provision that teacher professional development must include instruction in reading, including phonics, phonemic awareness, comprehension, fluency and vocabulary.
- **Texas House Bill 4328** [9] established the Interagency Literacy Council in order to study, promote and enhance literacy in the state. The bill, signed into law in June, specifies one of the duties of the council is to study current research to assess the adult literacy needs in the state. It also directs the council to develop a comprehensive statewide action plan for the improvement of literacy, including a recommended timeline for implementation.
- **Minnesota House File 2** [10], signed into law in May, includes an assessment of reading instruction for teacher licensure of prekindergarten and elementary school candidates as part of the Board of Teaching’s licensure exams.
- **Washington Senate Bill 6016** [11], signed into law in April, requires the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction to develop an educator training program to enhance the reading, writing and spelling skills of students with dyslexia by implementing the findings of the
dyslexia pilot program and to develop a dyslexia handbook to be used as reference for teachers and parents of students. It also requires each educational service district to report to the office the number of individuals who participate in the training.

**Just Read Florida Results in Huge Gains**

It would probably be a stretch to call Florida’s landmark adolescent literacy program a rags-to-riches success story. After all, the state still ranks below the national average in eighth grade reading scores. However, Elzie recalls when Florida was at the bottom of national rankings less than 10 years ago. That was before the enactment of Just Read Florida, which was created in 2001 by executive order 01-260.

“At that time, we were at the bottom of NAEP. We were not competitive. We were one of the lowest states. So in a short period of time we have been able to turn it around,” Elzie points out.

The results have been impressive by any standard. Florida was one of only six states that made significant improvements between 1998 and 2007 in the percentage of students scoring proficient or above on National Assessment of Educational Progress standards. It also was one of just six states that demonstrated improvement between 2005 and 2007 and the only state in the country to show improvement in both comparisons, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics.

Florida legislators took further action in 2006, enacting House Bill 7087, commonly referred to as A++. A provision of the law requires high school students who score at Level 1, or the lowest level of the state’s reading assessment, to complete an intensive reading course the following year. It also provides placement of Level 2 readers in either an intensive reading course or a content area course in which reading strategies are delivered.

Some of the key components of Just Read Florida include:

- Training highly effective reading coaches;
- Using scientifically based reading research to define effective reading instruction;
- Encouraging all teachers to integrate reading instruction into their content areas;
- Providing technical assistance to school districts in the development and implementation of district literacy plans;
- Periodically reviewing state curriculum standards for reading at all grade levels; and
- Reviewing teacher certification examinations to determine whether the examinations measure the skills needed for research-based reading instruction and instructional strategies for teaching reading in the content areas.

Perhaps most important, to ensure a long-term commitment to academic literacy, in 2006 the legislature passed a bill, signed into law by then-Gov. Jeb Bush, that designated a permanent budget allocation in the state education finance program. That allocation ensures reading education is a permanent part of the annual state funding formula.

According to Elzie, the highest allocation has been $116 million. Despite financial challenges in the state budget, the program still receives $100 million. Laurie Lee, the state’s middle school reading specialist, insists it’s an investment that’s important for the state to make.

“We’re either going to invest in our students now or we’re going to pay for them later,” Lee said. “Because many of them will end up in institutions, and if they can’t read they can’t function well in society and we’re going to be paying a lot for them later.”

More information about Just Read Florida is available at [http://www.justreadflorida.com](http://www.justreadflorida.com).
Conclusion

Although reading instruction has been, and will in all likelihood continue to be, a matter left largely to schools and local school districts, the role of state policymakers is evolving in this area. An increasing number of states have expanded their roles in adolescent literacy, attempting to provide local districts with heightened levels of support and technical assistance to improve literacy skills among middle and high school students. Policymakers recognize students must improve their literacy skills to be better prepared for postsecondary education and the workforce, and this belief clearly is supported by data. Reports, such as the Carnegie Corporation’s *Time to Act*, point to a need for state-level actions. Additionally, recent legislative activities demonstrate in many states, legislators understand that they, too, have a role to play in ensuring students graduate from high school with literacy skills needed for college or a career.

Building capacity to ensure literacy skills are taught in all grades and subject areas will require systemic changes that must come from state and federal levels in order to be implemented in individual schools. But the case is clear: Schools can no longer focus reading efforts entirely on the early grades. In short, when it comes to literacy skills, the early years of elementary education can no longer be viewed as the end, but rather as a foundation upon which teachers must continue to build the reading skills required for academic success.

Notes


7. ACT. "Crisis at the Core: Preparing All Students for College and Work." 2005.

8. C. Adelman. "The Toolbox Revisited: Paths to Degree Completion from High School through

9. ACT. "Reading Between the Lines [18]". 2006.


16. See note 12.

About the Author

Tim Weldon is an education policy analyst at The Council of State Governments. He has authored several reports and articles on a variety of issues related to college preparation and postsecondary access. He is a former high school social studies teacher and holds a master’s degree in education.

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