
Accelerating Instruction in Reading: Grades 9-12

National High School Center

Many high school students are below grade level in reading. While the extent of the problem depends on the standard that is used, there is agreement that a substantial segment of high school students are behind (Balfanz, McPartland, & Shaw, 2002). Students needing reading remediation are not evenly dispersed among schools and population subgroups. High poverty schools have a higher rate of students who cannot read at the high school level. In addition, specific groups of students have a higher occurrence of reading deficiencies. For example, students with learning disabilities may enter high school reading on an elementary level (Bremer, Clapper, & Deshler, 2002). The increased enrollment of English language learners has also contributed to a wider gap in reading achievement (Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center, 2005).

All students can benefit from comprehensive interventions embedding literacy strategies into content area classes. High school students struggling with reading need targeted supplemental interventions in order to help accelerate their basic reading levels (for examples, see What Works Clearinghouse, n.d.). Often, students who have difficulty reading in high school face struggles in content-area courses that assume grade-level reading (Bremer, Clapper, & Deshler, 2002). The texts with which students interact in high school become longer and more complex, and the specific disciplinary skills required to interact with those texts become more demanding in high school. At the same time, students' reading challenges also can accumulate as they progress, making the task of identifying the specific nature of students' difficulties and appropriate interventions more challenging.

A number of recent reports point to the challenges of advancing adolescent literacy (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; Carnegie Corporation, 2010; Graham & Perin, 2007). The following section highlights specific action principles at the state, district, and school levels and provides selected resources that include strategies which might be useful for supporting literacy instruction in high schools.

Action Principles

For State

1. Create a task force or statewide initiative focused on adolescent literacy that would include representatives from various divisions of the state education agency (curriculum, teacher certification, assessment, high school office staff, etc.), institutes of higher education that have teacher pre-service training programs, district staff, and teachers (including high school content area teachers).
2. Design policy structures and supports to drive local implementation of district- and school-wide literacy plans.
3. Consider embedding content area literacy strategies into the certification and recertification process for high school teachers.
4. Create a certification process for high school literacy coaches.

For District and School

1. Develop and support expertise in content area literacy strategies.
2. Screen all high school students for reading achievement levels and provide appropriate interventions to help those several grade levels behind.
3. Provide ongoing, job-embedded professional development on content area literacy strategies for all content area staff.
4. Make instructional and structural changes in the high school that support interventions for struggling readers and literacy strategies (e.g. tiered interventions, extended learning time).
5. Implement, with fidelity, reading intervention programs for students who need additional support with reading.

Annotated State High School Reading Resources

- Bacevich, A. & Salinger, T. (2006): This report provides five recommendations for states and districts based on a study of the Alabama Reading Initiative: begin with a flexible model that reflects a broad research base that can be responsive to the needs of students, content areas, and local conditions; use explicit strategies to increase comprehension across content areas; identify and intervene as early as possible with students who are most at risk; ensure leadership development; and be creative and vigilant with local and external funding.
- Carnegie Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy. (2010): The Carnegie Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy has recently released a series of reports that provide research and specific recommendations designed to tackle adolescent literacy. The first of those, *A Time to Act: An Agenda for Advancing Adolescent Literacy for College and Career Success*, contains a chapter with priority action steps for school leaders, district leaders, state leaders, and federal policymakers.
- Haynes, M., & Levin, J. (2009): This report outlines the actions in five states where leaders have made significant gains in adolescent literacy. Those actions include: adopting comprehensive literacy plans that connect reading, writing, speaking, listening, and thinking and integrate literacy instruction within subject areas; strengthening teacher licensure and preparation of teachers to provide research-based reading and writing throughout the curriculum; developing a continuum of supports and interventions for struggling readers and designing policy structures and supports to drive local implementation of district- and school-wide literacy plans.
- National Association of State Boards of Education. (2006): This report recommends that every state “develop and vigorously implement a statewide literacy plan to ensure that all students can read proficiently.” It provides a checklist for states that includes laying the ground work for a focus on adolescent literacy, establishing a state framework, and ensuring that teachers have the knowledge and support to provide literacy instruction.
- Southern Regional Education Board. (2009): Leaders from the Southern Regional Education Board states consulted with experts and examined state practices to generate a list of recommended state actions: define specific reading skills students need to master key subjects; identify the best teaching strategies to help students develop comprehension skills in each subject; ensure these strategies are applied statewide by including them in professional development for current teachers and in preparation programs for new teachers; and provide support that struggling readers need.

Annotated District and School High School Reading Resources

- Torgesen, J. K., Houston, D. D., Rissman, L. M., Decker, S. M., et al. (2007): This piece provides research-based evidence and endorses specific interventions for students who are reading below grade level and those who are English language learners (ELLs). The publication describes six areas that are essential for reading and thinking skills in grades 4-12: reading fluency, vocabulary knowledge, content knowledge, higher-level reasoning and thinking skills, cognitive strategies specific to reading comprehension, and motivation and engagement.
- Scammacca, N., et al. (2007): This report, commissioned by the Center on Instruction, offers decision-makers research-based information about interventions that can help older students who continue to struggle with reading. This report provides research-based implications for practice.
- Biancarosa, G. & Snow, C. (2004): This document, which was supported by Carnegie Corporation of New York, outlines 15 key components of comprehensive literacy programs, essentially providing a checklist for schools and districts that wanted to improve their services for adolescent struggling readers. The fifteen components are: direct, explicit instruction; effective instructional principles embedded in the content; motivation and self-directed learning; text-based collaborative learning; strategic tutoring; diverse texts; intensive writing; technology components; ongoing formative assessments; extended time for literacy; professional development; ongoing summative assessments of students and programs; teacher teams; leadership; and comprehensive and coordinated literacy program.

- Kamil, M., et al. (2008): The Institute of Education Sciences (IES) commissioned a practice guide designed to bring the best possible evidence to the challenge of improving adolescent literacy. This report describes five recommendations for instruction as well as the strength of evidence to support each: provide explicit vocabulary instruction; provide direct and explicit comprehension strategy instruction; provide opportunities for extended discussion of text meaning and interpretation; increase student motivation and engagement in literacy learning; and make available intensive and individualized interventions for struggling readers that can be provided by trained specialists.

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