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Advancing Adolescent Literacy in Urban Schools

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America's public education system faces a serious challenge in the area of adolescent literacy. By most accounts, our school system has begun to make progress boosting the reading skills of students at the early elementary school level. The past decade has seen a significant focus on the instruction of basic literacy components such as phonemic awareness, phonics, decoding, and basic fluency, resulting in measurable progress in elementary reading achievement. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 4th grade proficiency rates grew from 29 percent in 1998 to 33 percent in 2007. The percentage of 4th graders scoring at or above the "basic" threshold of achievement on NAEP increased from 60 to 67 percent over the same time period.¹

Yet we face persistent, systemic challenges maintaining this level of support for literacy development through adolescence.² Efforts to improve literacy often overlook the more advanced skills required to access the academic content taught in the upper elementary and secondary grades.³ The result is that early achievement gains are undercut by a lack of comparable progress among older students. Eighth grade NAEP performance in reading has remained virtually unchanged over the last decade. In 1998, 32 percent of 8th grade students across the country scored at or above proficient on the NAEP reading test, compared to 31 percent in 2007. Seventy-three percent of 8th graders scored above basic in 1998, compared to 74 percent in 2007. In fact, long term NAEP trends suggest that reading scores among students ages 13 and 17 have changed very little over the past thirty years.⁴ These stagnant trend lines present a particular challenge for large urban school districts, where students face even greater odds. Though they have made faster reading gains than those seen nationwide, students in urban schools still score well below their peers across the country.⁵

The lack of sufficient literacy skills is a major factor contributing to poor performance in high school and



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post-secondary education. Many students – particularly those in urban schools – lack the foundational literacy skills necessary to read and comprehend the academic texts appropriate for high school and beyond.⁶

At the same time, changes in the economy have made these skills essential for participation in the modern labor market. Dramatic shifts in technology, along with other changes in global labor markets, have virtually eliminated low skill, high wage jobs from the US labor market and placed an increasing premium on what had previously been thought of as "academic" skills.⁷ Simply put, the skills needed to succeed in higher education are also the skills now necessary to navigate our modern economy — young people cannot function in school or the workforce without high levels of vocabulary and reading comprehension skills.

Clearly, creating a school system focused on promoting adolescent literacy is a fundamental challenge in



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education reform. A growing base of research suggests that adolescent readers – defined here as students in grades 4-12 – present a set of needs distinctly different from those of beginning readers. Yet our current school system fails to dedicate sufficient emphasis on and resources toward effective instruction in the vocabulary and comprehension skills necessary to access academic content beyond the primary grades.⁸ Although the research specific to adolescent literacy is not as extensive as that of early childhood literacy instruction,⁹ leading literacy experts believe that if what we currently know about literacy development in adolescents were more broadly applied in schools, “there is little doubt that levels of adolescent literacy would improve.”¹⁰

This brief attempts to provide a synthesis of the research on adolescent literacy, with a particular emphasis on those policies and practices that can support the development of the academic language skills necessary to access high school content. The first section attempts to clarify the fundamental challenges we face in adolescent literacy. The second section discusses what we know about effective strategies for addressing these challenges and the implications for policy and practice aimed at improving literacy outcomes in large urban school districts. The third section concludes.

Defining the Challenge

- ▶ **In order to succeed at the secondary level, as well as in post-secondary education and the work force, students must develop the vocabulary and comprehension skills that comprise “academic literacy.”**

Reading on grade level in late elementary and secondary school requires much more than the basic reading skills taught in the early primary grades. As students progress through school, they are faced with increasingly complex texts that require advanced vocabularies and comprehension skills. High school freshman, in par-

ticular, often face a sea change in both the amount and difficulty of required reading in their courses.¹¹

These challenges are not confined to middle and high school students — struggling readers at the late elementary level often have more in common with students at the secondary level than with beginning readers. While they can often read the words in front of them, and may be familiar with the isolated elements of decoding, struggling readers often cannot comprehend the meaning of what they read.¹² As literacy experts point out, the difficulties students face with reading comprehension can result from a number of factors, including a lack of vocabulary, a lack of fluency (not being able to read quickly enough to facilitate comprehension), a lack of reading strategies (methods for organizing information and making sense of reading materials), or the inability to apply such strategies to different kinds of reading materials across subject areas.¹³

Academic literacy is often the term used to characterize the vocabulary and comprehension skills required to engage challenging texts across the curriculum in a meaningful way. More specifically, academic literacy can be defined as:

“... the kind of reading proficiency required to construct the meaning of content-area texts and literature encountered in school. It also encompasses the kind of reading proficiencies typically assessed on state-level accountability measures, such as the ability to make inferences from text, to learn new vocabulary from context, to link ideas across texts, and to identify and summarize the most important ideas or content within a text. Notice that the definition of academic literacy includes not only the ability to read text for initial understanding but also the ability to think about its meaning in order to answer questions.”¹⁴

So while some adolescent readers may still need support with basic literacy skills – decoding, phonics, phonemic awareness, and so on – most need additional support and instruction in developing academic literacy,



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i.e., the vocabulary and comprehension skills necessary to access higher level academic content.

► **A lack of explicit literacy instruction beyond the early elementary grades undermines the development of academic literacy throughout adolescence.**

The International Reading Association’s Commission on Adolescent Literacy argues that improving basic reading skills in early grades cannot by itself solve literacy problems in later years.¹⁵ Reading instruction is not a “vaccine”—students need ongoing instruction and support after the early elementary years to continue developing academic literacy.¹⁶

Yet this is precisely the point at which school-based support and instruction in reading ends. Schools and teachers have fallen prey to the deceptive educational tenet that somewhere around the 4th grade, students are no longer “learning to read,” but “reading to learn.” Thus, explicit instruction in developing and practicing specific literacy skills is abandoned in favor of content-area instruction.

“Improving basic reading skills in early grades cannot by itself solve literacy problems in later years.”

The relative lack of emphasis on literacy instruction may also be symptomatic of a lack of accountability and targeted assessment for higher level literacy skills. State-administered reading tests for grades 3-8 and those for high school students are mainly designed to measure basic and intermediate skills, not to assess complex reading of specialized disciplinary texts.¹⁷ Some educators also surmise that the current accountability regimes in many states, with their emphasis on content standards, may reward students for demonstrating knowledge of facts and producing quick, superficial essays rather than thoughtfully developed, independent writing.¹⁸

The lack of literacy support in upper elementary and secondary school is compounded by a dearth of capacity for delivering effective literacy instruction, as well as a lack of interest in this type of instruction, within the teaching corps. As students progress through school, their school days become increasingly segmented into specific, differentiated academic subject areas or departments.¹⁹ A troubling feature of this disconnected subject-area approach is the diffusion of responsibility for instruction in reading and writing. Learning subject-specific modes of reading and writing is as important to advancing in an academic field as learning facts and theories.²⁰

Research suggests that instruction, modeling, and guided practice in specific reading comprehension strategies can help students access many different kinds of written materials, and as a result, can improve student outcomes in content area courses, including math.²¹ Yet there is often strong resistance among content area teachers to incorporate literacy skills instruction.²² Teachers in these areas do not see themselves as literacy teachers, and often believe that if they attempt to teach reading they will only be taking valuable instructional time away from their designated subject areas. Therefore teachers devote little class time, if any, to providing explicit instruction in vocabulary and reading





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comprehension strategies in their respective disciplines or content areas.²³ Even English teachers tend to see themselves as teachers of content, with literature as their specific subject matter, rather than as teachers of reading and writing skills.²⁴

One leading reason for this resistance may be that content area teachers often lack the training and resources necessary to deliver effective literacy instruction. Many teachers – including English/language arts teachers of older grade students – do not receive sufficient pre-service or in-service training that addresses how to support reading and writing in their subject areas or across the curriculum, or how to effectively use reading and writing as teaching tools.²⁵ One national survey found that secondary teachers in the majority of states take, at most, one course related to reading or literacy instruction during their pre-service training.²⁶ While extensive certification standards – often requiring a number of courses in reading instruction – exist at the elementary school level, literacy certification requirements at the secondary level are considerably

more limited. Where they do exist, they are often not linked to specific grade levels or content areas.²⁷

Furthermore, current policies do not provide meaningful standards or incentives for helping students develop advanced, discipline-specific literacy skills. For example, state standards do not include specific reading and writing skills for academic content areas other than English/Language Arts.²⁸ And, while all 50 states have implemented grade-specific learning standards in literacy at the elementary level, almost no grade or subject-specific reading standards for middle and high schools exist.²⁹

► **The social context of secondary education often weakens student motivation and engagement in school, further impeding the development of critical adolescent literacy skills.**

There is strong evidence that, after the early elementary grades, intrinsic motivation and interest in reading decline — particularly for struggling readers.³⁰ Research shows that reading motivation determines students' effort, persistence, and focus on reading comprehension tasks. To begin with, empirical research demonstrates that students who are frustrated or less motivated read less frequently.³¹ Even controlling for prior achievement and other student characteristics, time on task in reading predicts reading achievement, including increased fluency, vocabulary, content knowledge, and comprehension.³² Unmotivated students are also less likely to be *engaged* readers, i.e., they are less attentive, involved, and enthusiastic about comprehending text.³³ As a result, they are less likely to employ a variety of comprehension strategies to derive meaning from what they read.³⁴ This is a problem because acquiring reading skills and strategies demands a great deal of effort and motivation.³⁵

The available evidence also suggests that this challenge of diminished motivation is exacerbated by the social and instructional contexts students encounter as they progress through middle school and into high school. In addition to mounting literacy demands and a



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lack of instructional support, most traditional, comprehensive high schools are larger and more impersonal than most elementary and middle schools. Many argue that this bureaucratic, impersonal environment makes schools less able to respond effectively to students' needs, resulting in lower levels of student engagement.³⁶ In fact, students in smaller, more personalized high school environments report higher levels of engagement than their counterparts in large, comprehensive high schools.³⁷

In addition to these structural factors, the materials and instructional practices employed in elementary, middle, and high schools can be a further obstacle to student motivation and engagement. For example, teachers often rely on handouts and textbooks, rather than exposing their students to primary sources and other real-world materials.³⁸ These types of reading materials lend themselves more readily to short forays into reading rather than to sustained, in-depth reading assignments. Without the explicit expectation of meaningful reading on a regular basis, it is hard to imagine how students – particularly socio-economically disadvantaged students without access to educational resources at home – will develop literacy skills and an appreciation for reading.

Effective Practices for Improving Adolescent Literacy

Improving the extent to which children in urban school districts develop the literacy skills they need to succeed will require increased focus on literacy instruction throughout grades 4-12. Fortunately, several recent high quality research reviews on adolescent literacy sponsored by the US Department of Education provide some very useful guidance on this subject.³⁹ These reviews are important resources, and instructional leaders in large urban school districts should turn to them for guidance on the best available evidence and its implications for policy and practice. The findings in

these reports, along with other relevant research on the subject, point to the following conclusions:

- ▶ **Explicit instruction in both vocabulary development and comprehension strategies should be a central component of instruction in grades 4-12.**

Individual students' language challenges vary. While most secondary school students struggle with vocabulary and comprehension issues, a few still have a hard time with "word-level" skills such as decoding.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the fundamental problem in adolescent literacy is the failure to help students develop the vocabulary and comprehension skills that comprise academic literacy. The available evidence strongly suggests that systematic implementation of explicit literacy instruction throughout the upper elementary and secondary grades is an effective means of helping students develop the vocabulary and comprehension skills necessary to engage higher level academic content.⁴¹

Multiple research studies, including reliable experimental and quasi-experimental studies, have shown that providing students with *direct support* for developing comprehension skills improves students' comprehension outcomes over and above the outcomes achieved in more "typical" instructional environments.⁴² Direct and explicit instruction in comprehension strategies refers to teachers modeling and providing explanations of specific comprehension strategies, providing students with opportunities for guided practice, giving feedback on the application of specific comprehension strategies, and promoting independent practice of these strategies.⁴³ In particular, studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of instructional techniques such as summarizing main ideas within and across texts, asking questions about what's been read, drawing inferences based on both text and prior knowledge, answering questions at different points in the text, and using graphic organizers.⁴⁴

Overall, the evidence on instruction in comprehension strategies suggests three important points. First, which particular strategy or strategies students are



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instructed in appears to be less important than whether or not they actually receive explicit instruction in reading comprehension strategies. Second, instructing students in multiple comprehension strategies appears to be more effective than providing instruction in only a single strategy.⁴⁵ Third, ensuring active participation among students and providing students with sufficient scaffolding and support as they implement these strategies are important elements of effective practice.⁴⁶

Instruction devoted directly to word meanings or strategies to promote vocabulary acquisition skills has also been shown to be effective. In particular, both experimental and quasi-experimental research shows that repeated exposure to new words in new contexts, opportunities to use new vocabulary in a variety of contexts, and instruction in strategies for learning new words independently can improve vocabulary outcomes. The evidence does *not* show that these approaches, by themselves, yield improvements in comprehension skills or measures of overall literacy.⁴⁷ However, the demonstrated role of vocabulary in mediating access to content⁴⁸ suggests that improvements in vocabulary could interact with direct instruction in reading comprehension strategies to improve overall academic literacy.⁴⁹

“Increasing direct instruction in vocabulary acquisition and comprehension strategies throughout grades 4-12 should be a core component of any strategy for systematically improving adolescent literacy outcomes in urban districts.”

In addition, the research on strategies aimed at increasing the amount and quality of classroom discussion suggests that comprehension – particularly of difficult texts – can be improved by replacing traditional, lecture-style instruction with discussion based strategies.⁵⁰ Students in most classrooms are not often challenged to talk about what they read or to demonstrate deeper read-

ing comprehension through open, extended classroom discussions.⁵¹ However, research suggests a consistent relationship between the extent to which teachers asked students “higher level” comprehension questions during classroom instruction and higher levels of student growth in reading comprehension.⁵²

Given the lack of emphasis on vocabulary and comprehension instruction throughout upper elementary and middle school, the implications of all this evidence are relatively straightforward. Increasing direct instruction in vocabulary acquisition and comprehension strategies throughout grades 4-12 should be a core component of any strategy for systematically improving adolescent literacy outcomes in urban districts. Moreover, rather than focusing solely on teacher-centered instruction, teachers should attempt to incorporate much more student centered activities to maximize opportunities for discourse and push students to develop and demonstrate deeper understanding of reading materials.

► Districts must provide targeted and intensive support to struggling readers throughout grades 4-12.

Even if districts systematically improve the amount of direct support for the development of academic literacy skills, it is likely that some students will struggle and fall behind. Providing these struggling adolescent readers with the support that they need (e.g., teaching word-analysis strategies) requires special skills that are beyond the background and training of most content-area teachers.⁵³ As is the case for students who perform at grade level, students lacking in literacy skills vary in their specific needs. Some struggle with fundamental skills like phonemic awareness and decoding, or reading accuracy and fluency, while others have mastered these basics but require more support in vocabulary and the use of specific reading comprehension strategies. Appropriate support for these students might therefore focus on any number of a wide variety of specific skills.⁵⁴



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“Programs that identify struggling readers and provide them with intensive supplemental literacy supports that match their particular needs can produce statistically significant positive effects on literacy outcomes.”

Moreover, given how far behind they are, many students have to make substantially more than one year’s worth of progress each year in order to get back on grade level.⁵⁵ Consequently, struggling readers require support that is targeted to their specific needs, intensive, and lasts for a significant period of time.⁵⁶ Even if their regular classroom teachers had the requisite skills and background, the kind of support these students need cannot typically be provided in the context of regular content courses or even language arts classes.⁵⁷

Therefore, providing intensive, targeted, individualized interventions supported by trained specialists and delivered in small group settings should be a core

component of urban districts’ strategies to improve adolescent literacy. The available research suggests that programs that identify struggling readers and provide them with intensive supports that match their particular literacy needs can produce statistically significant positive effects on literacy outcomes.⁵⁸ In particular, interventions that give students structured, explicit, targeted support provided by trained specialists can significantly improve struggling readers’ comprehension over and above what would be achieved in the absence of these interventions.⁵⁹ The evidence suggests that while interventions are most effective when they focus on the particular dimensions of skill that undermine each student’s comprehension, a relative emphasis on overall comprehension skills, particularly among older struggling readers, is also warranted. In particular, recent research finds positive effects for interventions that focus on both basic word analysis skills and more advanced comprehension strategies. However, the effects on comprehension among older struggling readers are consistently larger for those interventions that actually focus directly on teaching comprehension strategies.⁶⁰

- ▶ **The effectiveness of targeted supports for struggling readers depends heavily on the intensity and quality of implementation.**
- ▶ **Supports for struggling readers should be offered across multiple grades and be combined with efforts to improve language support throughout the instructional core.**

Though targeted interventions for struggling readers have been shown to have positive effects, the research suggests that these effects depend on the intensity of the implementation effort and fidelity to the program model. For example, a recent study funded by the US Department of Education (the *Enhanced Reading Opportunities* study, or ERO) identified 9th grade students who were two to five years behind grade level in literacy and randomly assigned these struggling readers to ei-

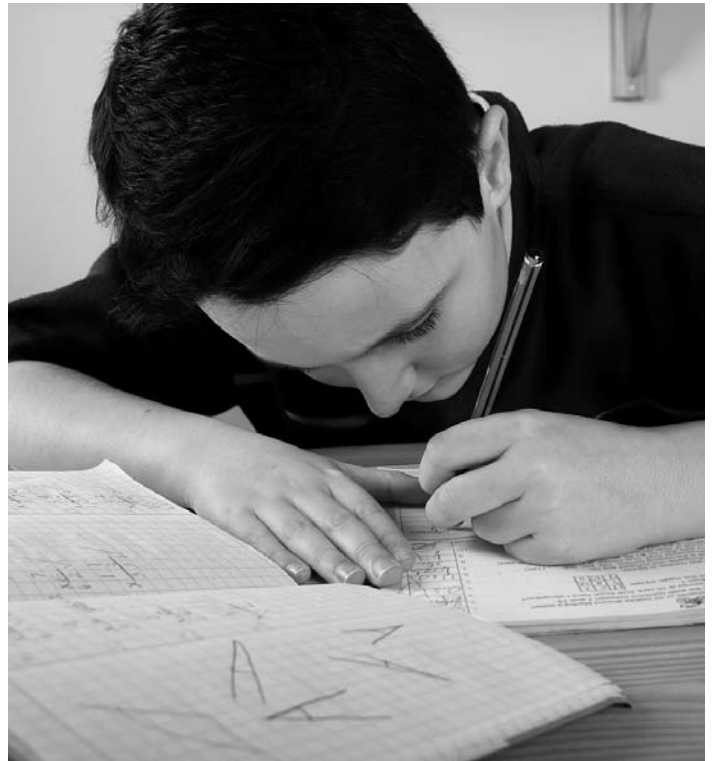


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“One year of a supplemental literacy intervention is simply not, by itself, a sufficient response to the size of the deficits struggling readers face.”

ther a group that received intensive literacy supports or a group that experienced “business as usual” in the 9th grade—which typically meant an elective class of some sort. These supports consisted of year-long, small group (12-15 students), 45 minute supplemental literacy programs that typically replaced a 9th grade elective course. The programs focused on motivation and engagement, reading fluency (the ability to read quickly and accurately), vocabulary, comprehension, phonics and phonemic awareness (for those who needed it), and writing. At the end of one year, the study showed that the intervention in question had a statistically significant, positive impact on student literacy outcomes. However, the estimated impacts in the schools that initiated the program earlier in the school year and implemented the program in alignment with the intended model were nearly twice as large as the sample average, while effects in the sites with poor implementation were essentially non-existent.⁶¹

The evidence on interventions for struggling readers also clearly indicates that, if students are to catch up by the time they are scheduled to complete high school, they will need to make much more progress than can be generated by one year of instruction and support. Evaluations suggest that – even when implementation is good – one year of a supplemental literacy intervention is simply not, by itself, a sufficient response to the size of the deficits these students face. For example, at the beginning of the 9th grade the struggling readers selected for the ERO study averaged reading comprehension scores equivalent to a grade level of 5.1. On average, these students received approximately 11.3 hours of small group instruction and support in literacy per month, for just under 8 months. Even at the sites with more effective implementation and longer program durations, at the end



of the 9th grade, students receiving the intervention averaged comprehension scores equivalent to a grade level score of just 6.2.⁶² While this exceeded the control group average of 5.9, the intervention still left these students approximately four years behind.

To be fair, the impacts reported were from the first year of program implementation, and effectiveness tends to grow over the life of an intervention. Nevertheless, this pattern of findings has several important implications. First of all, it suggests that these sorts of supports should be ratcheted up in terms of intensity, implementation, and reach. Districts should attempt to increase both the percent of struggling readers who have access to these programs, and the amount and duration of the support these students receive within these programs. In addition, districts should attempt to ensure that the programs are implemented with fidelity to the fundamental design. Though not as productive as we would like, these interventions are significantly better



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than business as usual, and the evidence suggests that amplifying the intensity of implementation may yield a payoff in terms of their effectiveness. Moreover, in the absence of a more effective, proven alternative, it would be unwise to abandon an approach with proven (albeit limited) effects in favor of programs and practices that have yet to be subjected to rigorous study.

These findings also strongly suggest that identifying struggling readers, diagnosing their strengths and weaknesses, and providing them with targeted, intensive support should be a process that is in place *throughout* upper elementary and secondary school, rather than being concentrated at particular points in the system, such as the 9th grade. Given the size of the plausible effects of (even intensive) literacy interventions over the course of one year, school systems cannot afford to wait for deficits to accumulate to start providing additional supports for struggling readers. The longer students go without receiving the support they need, the larger the deficit may become and the shorter the available time frame within which the deficit can be addressed. Similarly, school systems should expect that – even if they intervene in earlier grades – there will still be students who continue to need supplementary literacy supports and interventions as they progress through the education system. Finally, the difficulty of successfully remediating students who have fallen behind underscores the importance of including the core components of effective literacy instruction in the instructional program from the outset.

- ▶ **Schools should employ instructional strategies aimed at increasing student engagement and motivation to read.**

Given the crucial role played by student motivation in the development of reading skills, any comprehensive plan to improve literacy outcomes should include strategies for increasing student motivation and interest in reading. For example, increasing the amount of high-quality discussion of reading content is frequently cited as an important factor in engaging students in higher

“School systems cannot afford to wait for deficits to accumulate to start providing additional supports for struggling readers.”

level reading coursework.⁶³ One meta-analysis of studies investigating the effects of different instructional practices on student motivation cited the importance of providing opportunities for students to collaborate with their peers in discussion groups, along with the use of interesting texts and a certain amount of choice and autonomy in choosing reading materials.⁶⁴

However, it is important to note two limitations in the research base. There are simply not a lot of studies tracking the effects of motivation-enhancing strategies on *reading outcomes*, and the studies that are available are not as rigorous or definitive as those looking at the effects of explicit literacy instruction. Still, the research is clear that student motivation is an important, determining factor of the success with which students respond to literacy instruction and develop important literacy skills. Furthermore, we know that teachers can impact student motivation through the texts they use and the way they structure their assignments and classrooms.⁶⁵ While further research is needed to determine which motivational strategies are most effective, and with which students, schools should aim to address student engagement in their efforts to advance adolescent literacy.

- ▶ **Districts should provide their teaching corps with professional development focused on specific strategies for direct instruction in vocabulary and comprehension.**
- ▶ **Teacher training programs and certification requirements should be enhanced to include substantially greater amounts of training in literacy instruction.**

If urban districts are to incorporate explicit instruction in vocabulary and comprehension into the



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instructional core and provide targeted support to struggling students in grades 4-12, they will need to provide their teachers with the training necessary to support these reforms.⁶⁶ The available research suggests that professional development is a potentially effective strategy for improving student reading outcomes.⁶⁷ For example, the majority of studies reviewed by the National Reading Panel indicated that professional development in reading was an effective means of both changing practice and producing higher student achievement.⁶⁸ More research is still needed to determine the particular types of training that would be most effective, understand the circumstances under which impacts are maximized, and expand the findings on professional development at the secondary school level. However, both the nature of the teacher knowledge deficit and the available evidence on the effects of professional development suggest that substantial investments in relevant, high-quality, focused in-service training are necessary to generate systematic improvements in adolescent literacy.

However, it is unlikely that urban school districts can close the gap between pre-service training and certification requirements in literacy on their own. Despite the obvious need, pre-service training does not provide most teachers with the skills required to meet their students' literacy needs. In order to address this problem, requirements for teacher certification and the nature of teachers' pre-service preparation – for elementary and secondary school teachers – must evolve to emphasize the role of vocabulary and comprehension skills in the development of academic content knowledge, as well as exposure to and practice in delivering effective literacy instruction.

“Substantial investments in relevant, high-quality, focused professional development are necessary to generate systematic improvements in adolescent literacy.”

► Urban districts should develop concrete, intensive plans for leading, monitoring and supporting the implementation of effective strategies for improving adolescent literacy outcomes.

Unfortunately, the current research literature provides little in the way of conclusive guidance for achieving effective implementation of particular strategies at the classroom level, and suggests that actual changes in instructional practice are often difficult to achieve — particularly on a system-wide basis.⁶⁹ However, observational research studies of large urban school districts that have in fact made progress suggest several potential strategies or principles districts should consider.⁷⁰

First, district leadership should articulate a clear vision for reform that includes a concrete direction for instructional practice around literacy. Several research studies show that a clear vision on the part of central office leadership for the type of instruction that should be provided to students, combined with a specific strategy for monitoring and supporting implementation of these changes in practice and a commitment to ensuring that these changes are implemented, are often defining characteristics of districts that succeed in improving elementary achievement. The specific supports employed often include coaching; the use of data to monitor student progress; and mechanisms for assessing the implementation of desired practices, reporting these results back to the central office and/or central office intermediaries, and holding schools and teachers accountable for implementation and results.⁷¹

There is also evidence that – if done well – providing common planning time for teachers to share their experiences, discuss instructional strategies, and work



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together to address implementation challenges is an important element of instructional change.⁷² This is likely to be particularly true for the somewhat more complex instructional changes required at the secondary level. Common planning time is also an important opportunity to coordinate instruction across classes and subjects and to discuss the progress of particular students so that instructional supports can be adjusted to better meet their needs.

- ▶ **Districts should employ benchmark tests that assess students' literacy needs at regular intervals throughout the year, and train their teachers, principals, and key district staff to interpret and respond to these data.**

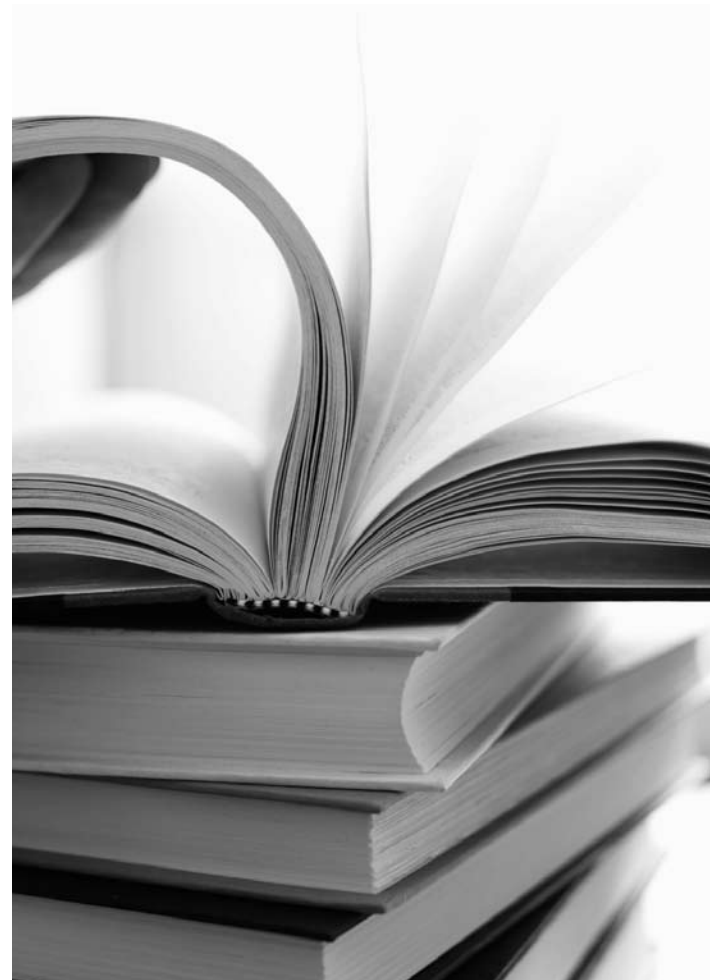
Effective systems for assessing student needs, monitoring progress, deciding on interventions, and directing support are particularly important tools – if not absolute prerequisites – for providing system-wide supports for improved literacy.⁷³ Urban school districts need systems for assessing student progress toward clearly established literacy goals, diagnosing students' specific strengths and weaknesses in this area, analyzing and disseminating this information in a timely and efficient manner to teachers, principals, and key district staff, and guiding students and teachers toward the appropriate instructional responses.

In fact, making progress in literacy will require urban school districts to track student literacy progress *well before high school*. Districts should develop strategies and systems for measuring student progress in vocabulary development and reading comprehension at regular intervals throughout each year and at the end of each school year. These systems should be implemented in each grade from the upper elementary grades through the end of high school. In order for these systems to generate leverage for improving literacy, districts will have to ensure that principals and teachers monitor and respond to these data. This requires establishing expectations around the interpretation and use of data and providing

systems for ensuring that these expectations are met at the central office, school, and classroom levels.⁷⁴

- ▶ **Districts, states, and the federal government should develop meaningful standards for measuring literacy skills in upper elementary, middle, and high school, and strategies for holding students and teachers accountable for reaching them.**

Though the emphasis of this brief is on the implications of what we know about adolescent literacy for policy and practice in urban districts, it is hardly realistic to think that progress in this arena is unaffected by the states and federal government. Of particular im-





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portance in this regard are the standards set by state governments and their appropriateness as a tool for guiding and supporting meaningful progress in literacy. Many argue that the NAEP represents more rigorous standards than those currently in place in most states, and, though not perfect, more closely represent the standards of learning that our citizens must meet if they are to succeed in post-secondary education and compete in the global labor market. Though many states and districts are not yet making sufficient progress on their own standards, it is possible for schools to make progress on these state standards and still fail to provide students with the literacy skills they will need in secondary school and post-secondary education or employment. This is underscored by studies that note disparities in scores and progress on state tests versus the NAEP.⁷⁵

States need to assess carefully whether their standards for English Language Arts and other associated assessments measure the vocabulary and literacy skills students must master in order to make true progress. Based on these standards, states and districts should develop curricular frameworks and instructional guidelines that illustrate and support the use of explicit teaching strategies that address these skills. They should also develop formative and summative assessments that accurately reflect students' progress toward developing these skills – something which the field currently lacks.⁷⁶ This entire process, of course, is made much more difficult by the patchwork of fifty different state standards, and would be dramatically simplified by the presence of clear national standards — particularly those pertaining to the vocabulary and comprehension skills required to access academic content.

Conclusion

It is difficult to imagine making meaningful progress in education reform without dramatically improving urban students' literacy outcomes. Building the capacity of students in the late elementary and secondary grades to comprehend what they read, understand the complexity and subtlety of texts of various lengths and genres, synthesize meaning from those texts, and apply their understanding to a broad array of other texts and situations is critical for reforming urban schools and enabling them to raise academic attainment to competitive levels. Addressing this challenge will require the investment of considerable resources, the energy of committed individuals, and considerably more research on what works.

Focusing on the goal of *academic literacy* is a first step in addressing this challenge. Leaders in urban education should make this an explicit priority, setting explicit, measurable goals for progress in the vocabulary and comprehension skills required to engage academic texts. We must then support



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the achievement of these goals by making explicit instruction in vocabulary and comprehension a centerpiece of the instructional program from late elementary through the end of high school and providing teachers with the substantial training and support necessary to implement these changes and sustain them over time.

Urban districts cannot do this alone. There are several issues that must be addressed at the state and federal levels to maximize the chances for improvement. Providing a teaching corps that is prepared to address this issue will require federal policymakers to approach the issue of Highly Qualified Teachers more comprehensively, and will necessitate states revisiting their teacher credentialing mandates and literacy standards. In addition, teacher education programs should move to dramatically increase their emphasis on literacy instruction.

States must also carefully address whether their English Language Arts standards and assessments truly address the skills and knowledge required to engage rigorous academic content. They should work to support and facilitate the development of both interim and summative assessments that effectively measure these skills. Finally, this entire process is made more difficult by the lack of clear national standards for fundamental literacy skills.

Improving student literacy in urban districts will also require a considerable investment of resources to mount interventions and support research on effective strategies. This will most likely entail new funding from both the state and federal levels to support the programs and professional development that will be needed at the local level to do what we already know needs to be done to bolster instruction in vocabulary and comprehension.

Additional funding will also be needed to conduct research to fill in the gaps in our knowledge about the most effective strategies for boosting academic achievement. For instance, though we know explicit support for vocabulary and comprehension skills is necessary, it is

still not entirely clear which particular strategies and techniques (or combinations thereof) are most effective in building adolescents vocabulary and comprehension skills. We are even less clear about the specific nature of the professional development needed to build the capacity of teachers to deliver effective instruction in these areas, much less about how to bring these instructional strategies to scale.

“Improving student literacy in urban districts will require a considerable investment of resources to mount interventions and support research on effective strategies.”

Finally, local school districts – particularly urban school systems – will need to think more critically about how they use the resources they currently have to improve adolescent literacy. This may mean ensuring more effective use of extended-time programming, literacy coaches, walkthrough systems, and common planning time, or the redeployment of federal Title I and Title II funds toward literacy programs and interventions. It may also mean that urban schools will have to restructure their professional development offerings in order to enhance literacy instruction. And it may mean that urban schools put more of their scarce dollars into data systems that can better track student progress in literacy throughout the school year and across the grades, and ensure stronger accountability for results.

The ability of our nation’s urban schools to improve academic achievement and reduce racial and socio-economic performance gaps, stem the flood of dropouts, and meet the nation’s growing demand for an educated citizenry will ultimately depend on our ability to improve adolescent literacy outcomes. The stakes could not be higher.



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