**Improving adolescent literacy
is essential to national welfare**

Lew Armistead

Calling students in high school now and in coming years "the people who will envision the future of our nation and chart our course through the 21st century and beyond," the Carnegie Corporation of New York (CCNY) has called in a new report for improvements in adolescent literacy if students are to succeed in college and careers.

"We owe it to them (the students) and to ourselves to ensure that they can read, write and learn at a high level in every classroom and every school, college and university throughout the United States," Vartan Gregorian, president, CCNY, wrote in a forward to the report, *Time to Act: An Agenda for Advancing Adolescent Literacy for College and Career Success.*

The report, which was released last month, offers keys to reforming literacy instruction and cites schools where improvements are occurring. It was prepared by CCNY's Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy, comprised of university scholars and reading experts. It also includes Mel Riddle, associate director for high school services, National Association of Secondary School Principals.

Time to Act includes specific steps that school leaders, district personnel and state and federal policymakers should take to improve adolescent literacy. Some of that information is included in this article, but principals may want to review additional aspects of the report and share them with others. The full report can be found at www.carnegie.org/literacy/tta.

While schools have had "extraordinary success" in raising reading achievement in the early grades, "the pace of literacy improvement in our schools has not kept up with the accelerating demands of the global knowledge economy," according to the report.

"Many young people drop out of high school or perform at minimal level and end up graduating without the basic skills that they need to do college-level work, get a well-paying job or act as informed citizens."

The report cites three "keys to successful reform"—

• Give teachers literacy focused instructional tools and formative assessments,
• Encourage schools and districts to collect and use information about student literacy performance more efficiently, and
• Call upon state-level leaders to maximize the use of limited resources for literacy efforts in a strategic way.

Strengthening teacher competences

"Determining what secondary school teachers need to know, ensuring they learn it, and supporting them in implementing that knowledge in classrooms is basic to achieving our goal of literacy for all," according to the report.

While teachers should enter the classroom with basic abilities, schools should encourage mentoring from colleagues and provide professional development focused on the urgent necessities. Principals should "build instructional leadership to attend to teachers' needs," and schools should have reading specialists available to provide remedial instruction.

Teachers must understand the literacy challenges students face in addition to knowing their content area. For example, high school texts have become increasingly complex and require a much greater ability for students to synthesize information.

All high school teachers should have a working knowledge of five areas—

• How literacy demands change with age and grade,
• How students vary in literacy strengths and needs,
• How texts in a given content area raise specific literacy challenges,
• How to recognize and address literacy difficulties, and
• How to adapt and develop teaching skills over time.

The report cites exemplary pre-service programs for teachers at the University of Michigan and Teachers College, Columbia University, but also points out that "it would be foolhardy to expect aspiring teachers to gain all the skills and expertise they need to be effective with adolescents" during their pre-service work. Thus, it's important that schools and school systems provide in-service opportunities, and the report offers three exemplary possibilities—the National Writing Project, literacy coaching, and a sustained, mandatory program offered at California's Hoover High School. (All three are described in the report.

Bringing assessment into literacy instruction

Collecting and using relevant data is essential to reform and will save schools from wasting time and resources.

" Data on adolescent literacy should be used in a systematic and coherent way to improve the systems supporting young learners," the report advises. "Some types of assessments are best used to help make instructional decisions about individual students at the classroom or school level; others inform policymakers and educators at the school, district and state levels, helping to evaluate programs and identify areas of need."

The report outlines three types of assessments that can be useful in determining the needs and progress of adolescents—

• Formative assessments, such as end-of-chapter tests and one-on-one conferencing, are used by teachers to determine whether students are learning lessons.
• Screen assessments identify students that need extra help.
• Diagnostic assessments that identify the precise source of reading difficulty.

Getting the school ready for success

The report outlines seven components that are found in schools which are "beating the odds" to bring about success for all students. Two case studies are offered as examples of schools that demonstrate these qualities. The seven characteristics are—

• The school culture is organized for learning. Simply put, quality instruction is seen as the central task of the school. Teachers feel personally responsible for student learning, decisions are made collaboratively and based on data, and there's a low-threat learning environment for students and teachers.
• Information drives decisions. Decisions about instruction, scheduling and interventions are all based on student achievement data, and the staff is encouraged to gather and analyze real-time data.
• Resources are allocated wisely. Since resources—time, energy and materials—are limited, they must be focused on student achievement. There should be time for teacher professional development and collaborative data analysis as part of he regular work schedule. Coaches and mentors should be available to all content-area teachers.
• Instructional leadership is strong. Student learning is the leader's primary goal in all decisions he or she makes. Principals should partner with subject area specialists, literacy coaches and other experts to ensure that critical programs are successfully implemented. The report recommends that a "literacy leadership team" is established and "centrally engaged" in designing, supporting and overseeing the school's literacy work.

• Professional faculty is committed to student success. Teachers must
put student needs first, willingly participate in professional development
that is focused on the challenges they are facing and designed to
improve their work, recognize the importance of literacy skills to content
area learning, participate in vertical and grade-level teams, and
work with coaches and colleagues to observe, describe and analyze
instructional practice.
• Targeted interventions are provided for struggling readers and writers. Opportunities exist for
multi-tier instruction to help student develop the skills and strategies they need. Youngsters
lagging the furthest behind
are provided intensive courses with explicit instruction on critical reading
and writing skills and strategies with ample opportunities for practice.
These courses should not replace content area classes, and,
if possible, students should receive credit for them.
• All content area classes are permeated by a strong literary focus. Core classes should have
reading and writing woven into them. Teachers
should be prepared to teach challenging material to both advanced
readers and struggling readers.

Moving toward action

The report concludes with a "Call to Action" and outlines specific steps for school leaders,
district leaders, state leaders, and federal policymakers. The nine actions for school leaders
are—

• Make advancing the literacy of all students a priority and establish
literacy goals.
• Make commitment to the vision and goals a priority when hiring and training teachers.
• Hire capable teachers trained to teach reading and writing.
• If incoming teachers lack the know-how to teach literacy effectively
across the content areas (and most do), provide the in-service support
they will need to gain this know-how.
• Encourage existing faculty to pursue advanced coursework in
adolescent literacy and to become active in planning in-service
professional development that addresses local problems of practice.
• Align resources to ensure that efforts are suitably supported.
• Create conducive schedules to allow teacher teams to meet
and discuss student data and progress.
• Set up school wide screenings of all entering students and conduct an inventory of the
instructional and intervention options available to
get the necessary information for accurate literacy programming.
• Ensure that existing resources are being optimally distributed and that students assigned to
the various programs are indeed benefiting from instruction.

The report concludes by indicating that educators and policymakers must use current knowledge in a targeted and systematic way.

" We can equip our young people to take charge of both their learning and their lives. We already know more than enough to raise the level of adolescent literacy and learning achievement in our schools."

October 2010

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