

After Third Grade

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The research base points to nine key instructional strategies for improving literacy for older students.

When asked what struggling older readers look like, teachers often respond that they cannot describe a “typical” struggling reader. One urban middle school teacher who shared her views with researchers from the Boston Higher Education Partnership Research Collaborative commented that only 10–20 percent of these students have problems decoding words. Another teacher observed that the good readers in her classes have “learned how to make up for any of their weaknesses. . . . And for the bad readers, it’s one of two things: Either they don’t know the strategies, or they are just so frustrated from failure in the past.”

Given the many different reading and writing skills that middle and high school students need to master, it is no wonder that struggling adolescent readers exhibit a range of difficulties. As a third teacher bluntly concluded, “It really depends on the kid.”

With more than two-thirds of U.S. adolescents struggling to read proficiently (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003), the poor rates of reading performance among students in Grades 4–12 have become a prominent topic in education policy discussions. Offices within the U.S. Department of Education have cosponsored several calls for studies designed to improve the research base in adolescent literacy, and many nonprofit and charitable organizations have also turned their attention to the question of how to meet the diverse needs of struggling adolescent readers and improve these students’ reading proficiency.

The Alliance for Excellent Education responded to the challenge by inviting a panel of researchers—Donald Deshler, David Francis, John Guthrie, Michael Kamil, James McPariland, and myself—to look at the adolescent literacy research base. The panel’s discussions led to the publication of *Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy* (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004). The report identifies 15 key research-based strategies for improving adolescent literacy—nine focusing on instruction and six focusing on structural supports.

Educators seeking to promote adolescent literacy might consider how well their current programs

implement these key strategies and identify areas where they want to focus improvement efforts. To start, educators can examine the nine instructional elements and their implications, which I describe here. (For the other six elements, see “Structural Elements That Support Effective Adolescent Literacy Instruction,” p. 2.) Although only a sampling of the research literature is cited here, readers can find the full list of literature supporting each of the elements in the full report, available at www.all4ed.org/publications/ReadingNext.

1. Direct, Explicit Comprehension Instruction

Each successive year in school, students need to gain an exponentially greater proportion of new knowledge by reading. Accordingly comprehension instruction must occur throughout a student’s education, especially in the grades where demands increase: fourth through twelfth grade.

Several meta-analyses and reviews of the research have found that direct, explicit instruction in such specific strategies as summarizing, identifying text structure and visual clues, calling on prior knowledge, and using graphic organizers improves students’ reading comprehension (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000; Pressley, 2000). Effective teachers don’t stop at describing a strategy—they model how the strategy works and tell students why they should use particular strategies in particular situations. Effective comprehension instruction also gives students lots of practice using new strategies with a wide range of texts. As students begin to demonstrate success at using the strategies, the teacher gradually withdraws support until students are able to use the strategies independently and flexibly.

Research has documented the effectiveness of a number of different approaches to direct instruction in comprehension strategies. For example, in reciprocal teaching, the teacher models four strategies: questioning, clarifying, predicting, and summarizing. Students then work in small groups and use the strategies with a series of texts, gradually learning to apply the strategies independently (Palincsar & Herrenkohl, 2002).

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2. Effective Instructional Principles Embedded in Content

Because of the role that reading plays in content-area learning, good instruction in middle and high school integrates comprehension instruction with content. This takes place in two ways.

First, language arts teachers should use informational and content-area texts when they teach such reading comprehension techniques as outlining. This approach improves students' ability to comprehend and learn from content-area texts (Alfassi, 2004; Beck, McKeown, Sandora, Kucan, & Worthy, 1996).

In addition, content-area teachers should provide reading comprehension instruction in their classes. A number of models and frameworks provide well-defined practices and strategies to help content-area teachers support readers of all skill levels. For example, the Strategic Instruction Model (SIM) enables teachers in all content areas to communicate complex academic content while helping to improve their students' reading abilities. Teachers use SIM routines to show students how lesson or unit content is organized and to clearly explain new concepts. The Strategic Instruction Model also provides instruction in four strategies—word identification, visual imagery, self-questioning, and paraphrasing—to help students become better readers and deal with academic tasks more effectively (Center for Research on Learning, 2001).

3. Motivation and Self-Directed Learning

Students' images of themselves as readers strongly predict both how much they read and their reading comprehension (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000).

Unfortunately, as students progress through school, their sense of competence in reading and writing often declines (Jacobs, Lanza, Osgood, Eccles, & Wigfield, 2002).

Reading instruction that promotes engagement and self-directed learning has been found to improve students' motivation, sense of competence, reading comprehension, and strategy use (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004). A simple but powerful way to engage students is to provide them with choices in their reading and learning—for example, by building independent reading time into the school day or by allowing students to select research and writing topics (Cordova & Lepper, 1996; Reynolds & Symons, 2001). Schools can

also improve both learning and motivation by teaching students to set literacy and learning goals for themselves or by letting them decide independently how to meet teachers' goals (Schunk, 2003). Such self-directed learning is even more effective when coupled with teacher feedback on goals and progress (Schunk & Rice, 1991).

4. Text-Based Collaborative Learning

In text-based collaborative (or cooperative) learning, students perform reading and writing tasks with a partner or in a small group. They may work with literature or with content-area materials, such as math word problems, scientific reports, or historical documents. Research has found that cooperative learning can improve reading comprehension and achievement across the content areas for students in the upper-elementary through high school grades, as well as for English-language learners and students with learning disabilities in inclusive settings (Klingner, Vaughn, Arguelles, Hughes, & Leftwich, 2004; Langer, 2001; NICHD, 2000).

Structural Elements That Support Effective Adolescent Literacy Instruction

1. Extended time for literacy.
2. Professional development.
3. Ongoing summative assessment of programs and students.
4. Teacher teams.
5. Leadership.
6. Comprehensive and coordinated literacy program.

Source: Biancarosa & Snow (2004).

Effective collaborative learning groups include readers of varying ability, thus providing struggling readers with peer models and helpers (Klingner & Vaughn, 2000). Another key to the effectiveness of this approach is that it encourages students to grapple with their preconceived notions in the face of their peers' alternative ideas (Guzzetti, Snyder, Glass, & Gamas, 1993). For instance, in discussing what happens to a cube of sugar when it dissolves in water, one student in a group may believe that the sugar crystals have joined irrevocably with the water molecules; another student may believe the sugar has only temporarily joined to