



## Preventing and Treating Adolescent Reading Failure

### The Problem

In late 2004, a national report, *Reading Next*, documented the problems of adolescent reading failure. Central to the problem is the consistent finding that, “Almost 70% of students entering 9th grade and 60% of 12th graders can be considered as reading below grade level.” The suggestion that fewer 12th graders are failing is an unfortunate statistical illusion because many of the adolescent reading failures have dropped out by 12th grade and are not tested. The most optimistic view of the long-term achievement trends is that the last four years of high school

have not addressed the needs of the 70% of students who “struggle in some manner and require differentiated instruction in reading.”

For the lower 40% of at-risk students, including those in special education and those in poverty-impacted settings, the gap between these at-risk students and their peers continues to widen with each grade level. The special education community, charged with designing and implementing IEP reading goals, faces a reality in which the achievement scores of the lower 40% of students are, at best, unchanging across grades, and in many cases, may be going backwards.

## The Context

High school special educators face major “context” or “infrastructure” problems. This context includes: (a) the core curriculum, (b) the role assignments and the training of high school administrators and content area teachers, and (c) the typical instructional time allocations of high school students. This context may not support the needs of the student failing in reading. Indeed, this typical context often systematically defeats what the research recommends for the “struggling reader.” The *Reading Next* report (October, 2004) states that none of The Fifteen Key Elements of Effective Adolescent Literacy Programs are likely to effect much change if the typical high school infrastructure remains intact.

## The Times are Changing

The last five years have generated major changes in direction for all high school teachers and administrators. The changes have been associated with federal and state NCLB accountability legislation, federal IDEA legislation, court decisions, and the synthesis of a growing research literature base. These changes have generated the following trends.

**Trend 1: Regulatory compliance and individual student outcomes.** A focus on the format of IEPs, and associated regulatory personnel participation and timeline requirements, provided an important basis for evaluating special education programs. Increasingly, all high school programs for all students are being evaluated by standardized measures of student outcomes. The increased emphasis on individual academic achievement student outcomes and the associated Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) measures has increased the focus on special education instructional practices by school administrators, school boards, state and federal agencies, and parents of students receiving special education services. This change, from an emphasis on compliance to an emphasis on student outcomes, has been welcomed by many high school special educators who had questioned the instructional relevance of much of the “paperwork” associated with the earlier time-consuming

emphases on compliance with regulations. While paperwork is still required, the links between the paperwork and student needs and parental priorities are far stronger.

**Trend 2: Transition and academic curriculum priorities.** The role descriptions of high school special educators focused on preparing the student with disabilities to make the transition to the vocational and social challenges of adult life. In many cases, literacy achievement goals and transition goals competed for teacher and student time.



The research referenced in the *Reading Next* report has documented the changes in the prerequisites needed for vocational and social survival. Kay, in 2003, noted that, “The less literate students find it difficult to obtain rewarding employment and are effectively prevented from drawing on the power of education to improve and enrich their lives.” The increased emphasis on Information Age job skills and the increased importance of the internet for vocational and social survival reduced conflicts between high school literacy achievement goals and transition goals directed at vocational and social survival.

A valid high school curriculum required for all students now requires mastery of general and job-specific literacy skills. These societal trends require changes in high school special education pre-service and in-service priorities. For the high school special education teacher, the removal of major conflicts between transition and academic literacy student goals should be welcome.

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### **Trend 3: The elementary and secondary curricula.**

The past emphasis on elementary school reading instruction is being replaced by a more long-term K-12 emphasis on reading instruction. A 2003 adolescent literacy report from the Alliance for Education stated:

While great attention has been paid to increasing early childhood education opportunities and reaching the national goal of making sure every child can read by the 3rd grade, little has been done to confront the real and growing problem: hundreds of thousands of high school students can barely read on the eve of their high school graduation.

As noted earlier, the core curriculum and the staffing of high schools are often inconsistent with the needs of students failing in reading. This is a pervasive problem that extends to most English speaking countries. In a recent research report (2005) in the *British Journal of Special Education*, it was suggested that, "It is a mistake to believe that secondary school English programs designed for those who can already read, spell and write, are effective for pupils with literacy difficulties."

Despite the lack of a supportive instructional infrastructure in high schools, there is much in the research to provide confidence in targeted changes in high school literacy instruction. In January 2005, an Alliance for Excellent Education Report stated,

"The notion that it is too late to teach students to read well in high school is rapidly losing ground. In fact, research on the literacy development of adolescents reveals the opposite: Literacy skills of low-performing adolescent readers can improve significantly with intensive, comprehensive instruction. Combined with focused learning time, students also need expert teachers who model effective reading strategies and provide direct instruction to students across all subject areas."

For the elementary school, the research and Reading First state and federal legislation have provided clear directions for both the curriculum content and the teaching methods. There are five clearly documented essentials, namely, phonetic awareness instruction, phonics instruction, fluency instruction, vocabulary instruction, and text comprehension instruction. We now know that these five essentials are K-12 essentials, not just K-3 requirements. Certainly the essentials that

are emphasized will change based on individual, skill-specific diagnoses and ongoing formative and summative evaluations. High school special educators encounter a significant number of students performing at the 3rd grade level. Many of these students have stayed



at this 3rd grade level since elementary school. One common reason for the initial lack of progress was a failure to receive timely, explicit, direct instruction in phonemic awareness in the K-1 grades. In many cases the student problems were compounded by later instructional alternatives such as the rote memorization of "sight words." These ineffective alternatives countered and replaced a more effective emphasis on phonemic awareness and the decoding and comprehension instruction that should have followed the mastery of phonemic awareness. The fact that the student lacks a gateway skill, such as phonemic awareness, provides an instructional priority, regardless of grade level.

The research findings of the past five years, starting with the *Congressional National Reading Panel Report* (2002), questioned the pessimism often associated with high school instruction for failing and struggling readers.

### **Recommendations for Effective Adolescent Literacy Instruction**

To counter the pessimism often associated with high school instruction for failing and struggling readers, the *Reading Next* report (October, 2004) identified the

following Fifteen Elements of Effective Adolescent Literacy Programs.

**1. Direct, explicit comprehension instruction**, which is instruction in the strategies and processes that proficient readers use to understand why they read, including summarizing, keeping track of one's own understanding, and a host of other practices.

**2. Effective instructional principles embedded in content**, including language arts teachers using content-area texts and content-area teachers providing instruction and practice in reading and writing skills specific to their subject area.

**3. Motivation and self-directed learning**, which includes building motivation to read and learn and providing students with the instruction and supports needed for independent learning tasks they will face after graduation.

**4. Text-based collaborative learning**, which involves students interacting with one another around a variety of texts.

**5. Strategic tutoring**, which provides students with intense individualized reading, writing, and content instruction as needed.

**6. Diverse texts**, which are texts at a variety of difficulty levels and on a variety of topics.

**7. Intensive writing**, including instruction connected to the kinds of writing tasks students will have to perform well in high school and beyond.

**8. A technology component**, which includes technology as a tool for and a topic of literacy instruction.

**9. Ongoing formative assessment of students**, which is informal, often daily assessment of how students are progressing under current instructional practices.

**10. Extended time for literacy**, which includes approximately two to four hours of literacy instruction and practice that takes place in language arts and content-area classes.

**11. Professional development** that is both long term and ongoing.

**12. Ongoing summative assessment of students and programs**, which is more formal and provides data that are reported for accountability and research purposes.

**13. Teacher teams**, which are interdisciplinary teams that meet regularly to discuss students and align instruction.

**14. Leadership**, which can come from principals and teachers who have a solid understanding of how to teach reading and writing to the full array of students present in schools.

**15. A comprehensive and coordinated literacy program**, which is interdisciplinary and interdepartmental and may even coordinate with out-of-school organizations and the local community.

## Conclusion: Where To Now?

For education, the landscape for the prevention and treatment of adolescent literacy failure is changing quickly. For example, the information we now have on high school dropouts lacks validity and instructional relevance. Clarification of who dropped out, and why, at building, district, and state levels is a major unknown and a major concern for special educators planning to prevent and treat academic failure.

Staying up with policy, practices, and research findings to inform adolescent literacy instruction will involve a major challenge for the informational literacy skills of teachers and administrators. Perhaps the best starting point would be the web-related resources of the Alliance for Excellent Education ([www.all4ed.org](http://www.all4ed.org)). This site provides the two excellent documents: The Reading Next National Report, released in October 2004, and a related earlier report: *Adolescence and Literacy: Reading for the 21st Century*, released in November 2003. This site also provides monthly informational releases for teachers and administrators on instructional practices as well as research summaries and changes in policy and legislation.

The special education community and the Alliance for Excellent Education share a similar focus. This focus is on America's six million most at-risk secondary school students—those in the lowest achievement quartile—who are likely to leave school without a diploma or to graduate unprepared for a productive future. ■

