

From State Policy to Classroom Practice: Improving Literacy Instruction for All Students

by Mariana Haynes



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A. The Problem of Low Literacy Levels

The scope of the problem of low literacy levels among many young adults in our nation is staggering. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), approximately two-thirds of 8th and 12th graders read below the *Proficient* level. About 29 percent of 12th-grade public school students scored below the *Basic* level on the NAEP 2005 reading assessment—a figure that excludes the large number of students who drop out of high school prior to 12th grade and who characteristically have limited reading skills. The performance of 8th graders is just as disappointing, with students performing substantially below grade level, demonstrating only miniscule to partial mastery of the prerequisite knowledge and skills fundamental for success in their respective grades.¹

Recent trend analysis of the NAEP data is even more alarming: 2005 scores for most 12th graders were lower than those in 1992; the percentage of 12th-grade students performing at or above *Basic* decreased from 80 percent in 1992 to 73 percent in 2005 and the percentage of students performing at or above the *Proficient* level decreased from 40 to 35 percent over

the same period. Overall 8th-grade scores, while slightly higher than they were in 1992, have declined by two points since 2002.

For minority students, the NAEP figures are even more disturbing: only 11 percent of African Americans, 14 percent of Hispanics, and 18 percent of American Indians are reading at or above the *Proficient* level compared to 37 percent of white 8th graders. Overall, nearly half of African American and Hispanic 8th graders read below *Basic* level, and it is estimated that about half of the incoming 9th graders in urban, high-poverty schools read three years or more below grade level.

Nor is NAEP the only yardstick showing these problems. A 2004 report from RAND Education, which identifies major challenges states and districts have in meeting No Child Left Behind (NCLB) achievement goals, found that fewer

than half of all students reach proficiency standards for reading on state assessments (or on NAEP assessments, for that matter).

In addition, the profound implications for the future well-being of students from different cultural and racial backgrounds, as well as for low-income whites, cannot be understated. The tragic consequences of low student achievement levels for both individuals and society are well documented. Poor academic skills are consistently linked with higher dropout rates, entrance into the juvenile justice system, and unemployment. Indeed, one-third of all juvenile offenders read below the 4th-grade level and about two-thirds of prison inmates are high school dropouts. The overall figures cited above are disconcerting enough, but the truly disastrous outcomes for portions of the student population segmented by race, ethnicity, and income level

Dr. Mariana Haynes directs the State Adolescent Literacy Network at the National Association of State Boards of Education. With support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Adolescent Literacy Network is helping states develop comprehensive plans to improve reading instruction for middle and high school students. More information is available online at www.nasbe.org/Adolescent_Literacy/.

reverberate throughout our national education system—and economy.²

Amid these discouraging statistics, there have been some promising signs of progress in the field of literacy research. Policymakers who recall the “reading wars” of the 1990s may be surprised to learn that there has been a remarkable convergence among researchers about what constitutes effective reading instruction, particularly with regard to teaching adolescent literacy skills. Unfortunately, there remains a huge gap between these proven practices and their widespread adoption by educators, where what has remained unchanged in too many secondary schools and classrooms is the nature of teaching reading itself. States can no longer afford to neglect taking to scale those practices that are well-documented and that have been demonstrated to be effective.

Given the scope and seriousness of the problem, state policymakers must become more engaged in developing and overseeing comprehensive literacy policies that address the reading needs of students from kindergarten through high school. In recent years, states have begun to promote policies and practices in support of a new approach to the education of adolescents—particularly ones that transform teaching practice to include literacy instruction as part of rigorous content area learning. But despite decades of research on how students learn through explicit strategy instruction and active engagement, efforts at system-wide improvements in teaching have fallen short. Efforts have more commonly been made at the margins, while most secondary

Table 1. NAEP 2005 Grade 8 Data: Percentage Achieving at Each Level

Race/Ethnicity	< Basic	Basic	Proficient	Advanced
White	19	43	34	3
African American	49	40	11	*
Latino	45	41	13	1
Asian/Pacific Islander	21	40	34	5
American Indian/ Alaskan Eskimo	39	43	17	1
All	27	42	28	3

* Rounds to zero

schools remain impervious to significant change.

It is clear, then, that if we are to leave no child—from whatever subgroup—behind, no future worker behind, and ultimately, if we don’t want our country to be left behind, we must move forward with concerted, comprehensive efforts to significantly improve the literacy of all students.

B. Effective Literacy Instruction

Today, states and districts are boosting requirements for high school graduation to meet the economic realities of the 21st century. Accordingly, students in middle and high school must grapple with more demanding curricula and subject matter texts that are expository, dense, and full of new and difficult vocabulary. They are expected to locate and paraphrase information from lengthy, complex passages and connect interrelated ideas dealing with literature, social studies, science, and math.

In order to meet these new requirements, middle and high schools must incorporate an instructional improvements system that includes a view of what constitutes quality instruction that is shared by all staff, ongoing feedback on teaching and learning, diagnostic performance data, and explicit curriculum and evaluation tools. Moreover, transforming middle and high school content learning will require policymakers and administrators to attend closely to what we know about:

- The importance of student engagement and motivation in literacy development;
- Integrating specific literacy strategies throughout all content areas to maximize learning;
- The interconnectedness of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and thinking;
- Using data to identify student needs and adjusting instruction accordingly; and

- Implementing research-based literacy strategies for teaching and learning.

The research is clear that when teachers across content areas help students use reading comprehension strategies (such as summarizing, generating questions, and using semantic and graphic organizers), student learning improves substantially. Studies show that explicitly teaching these strategies requires students to actively process information and connect new learning with prior concepts and experiences. Unfortunately, while new statewide standards lean heavily on literacy requirements in asking students to analyze and explain content material, they don't generally reflect the specific literacy skills students must have to deal with grade-level content material. Traditional classroom practices that center on lecture and seatwork fail to provide the explicit teaching and active engagement students need to expand linguistic and semantic concepts and to develop skills in applying comprehension strategies.

There are several reasons behind this lack of literacy instruction, but one thing is abundantly clear: such instruction necessitates having well-prepared teachers who have adequate knowledge of language and reading psychology and can manage reading programs based on assessment of individual students' needs. Teachers need extensive training and guidance to identify which skills to emphasize and how to teach them to specific children. Yet recent studies and surveys of teacher knowledge about reading development and difficulties show that many teachers are not prepared to teach reading. And despite the

importance and complexity of reading, universities and licensing programs have seriously underestimated the literacy knowledge and training teachers need.

C. Traditional Teaching Practice Resistant to Change

The chasm between the research on the best instructional practices to promote literacy and the teaching that actually goes on in classroom has dire consequences for students at all levels. As a literacy report from the Education Alliance at Brown University states, "Despite what we know, there is a large breach between research and practice—and a marked reluctance on the part of many middle and high schools to focus on literacy support at the district, school, or even departmental level. And, therefore, despite the urgency, there is limited understanding of how to bring these effective literacy strategies to life in the content-area classroom in ways that will make a positive difference for students."

The gap between what we know and what we do in terms of effective instruction has persisted despite massive investments in school improvement efforts over the past several decades.³ The education system writ large continues to be characterized as "loosely coupled" (that is, what actually goes on in classrooms is still significantly removed from education administration and policy), rendering teaching practice in many schoolrooms as mostly resistant to change. A recent analysis of data on public school teachers' perceived influence on curricular and instructional matters collected in Schools and Staffing

Surveys (1987-88 and 1999-2000) showed that while curriculum tends to be standardized at the state and school levels, how it is taught within classrooms continues to vary widely.⁴

In like fashion, a recent RAND study on the implementation of comprehensive school reform models found limited differences in actual practices between schools that used different models and between model and non-model schools.⁵ Doug Reeves, director of the Center for Performance Assessment, describes the results of more than 1,500 classroom observations that showed low rates of active student engagement in learning, low rates of teachers using assessments to help tailor instruction for individual students, and little feedback to student responses. At the same time, there were high rates for teachers lecturing and assigning worksheets. Although thousands of additional classroom observations have been conducted over time, the researchers noted little change in the nature of teaching practice.⁶

Michael Fullan, professor of policy studies at the University of Toronto, writes about the lack of focus in reform efforts on what specifically needs to be improved in instructional practice in order to make a significant difference in student learning. He cites studies of reform efforts in three major cities that allocated decentralized resources and authority to schools to implement ambitious, instructional plans. What the case-study evaluators found was that districts were unable to change and improve teaching practices on a large scale. One of the problems in the reform plans, according to Fullan, was that "instructional goals were more often articulated in terms

of student outcomes or achievement levels than in terms of instructional quality, that is, *what the schools do* to help students achieve.”⁷

In 2006, Porter and Snipes examined the implementation of another set of reform strategies targeted at district and school leadership—coaching, evidence-based decision-making at all levels, and networks and collaboration—and found that the intensity of the reforms tended to wane the closer they got to the classroom. They found no substantial association between the focal strategy and student achievement.⁸ The “theory of action” behind the reforms addressed the establishment of goals for improving student achievement and reducing achievement gaps, but failed to translate into specific instructional practices aimed at improving classroom teaching and learning.

The lesson for policymakers and other school reformers is clear—if we want significant improvements in student learning in general and adolescent literacy in particular, there must be real change at the center of instruction: the interactions of students and teachers around the content to be learned.⁹ Reforms must have a clear, intentional focus on ensuring that students are engaged in high-quality content, producing high-quality work, and learning from and teaching each other. Research has made clear that standards-based reforms will fail if they do not significantly affect the quality of classroom instruction. Accordingly, the design of structural and systemic supports for teachers and schools must leverage improvements in the instructional core of middle and high schools.

D. Implementing a Comprehensive, State-Local Approach to Improving Literacy Instruction

So how can states and districts exercise policy levers and leadership to generate real improvements in literacy instruction as part of school-wide content area learning in secondary schools?

- **First**, as noted earlier, there is remarkable convergence among researchers about what constitutes effective reading instruction, particularly with regard to teaching adolescent literacy skills. Biancarosa and Snow, in their report *Reading Next*, concluded that “...enough is already known about adolescent literacy—both the nature of the problems of struggling readers and the types of interventions and approaches to address these needs—in order to act immediately on a broad scale.”¹⁰ State policymakers must become well-grounded in the issues—what is at stake, the research base in literacy instruction, and the roles that must be played at all levels including the state, districts, schools, teachers, and higher education. It is critical to secure agreements from these stakeholders about what is worth achieving, and set in motion those policies and practices that will enable people to learn what they must do to improve how teachers and students learn and apply literacy skills to content area learning.

- **Second**, states must craft comprehensive literacy plans that provide all students with reading and writing instruction across the curriculum, as well as a continuum of supports and interventions for struggling readers. In order to ensure

sound implementation and sustainability, policymakers must craft regulations and guidance that motivates a coordinated response from districts and schools. Such initiatives must generate the capacity to change organizational culture within schools and instructional practice within classrooms. These efforts should be grounded upon clear, research-based premises about instruction in middle and high schools that produces high student performance. Policy and guidance should offer an explicit picture of what teaching and learning should look like for administrators, teachers, students, and parents. Clear guidance on instructional practices will serve two purposes: first, to improve practice and second, to create learning organizations committed to continuous improvement of professional practice and student learning. At each level, the roles and responsibilities of key players must contribute to enhancing the capacity and performance of others (e.g., states for districts, superintendents for principals, principals for teachers, and teachers for students).¹¹

- **Third**, states must take a comprehensive approach to ensure that the training and supports for teachers improves the quality of key dimensions of instruction that are linked with improving literacy achievement and content learning. This means states must strategically attend to: 1) alignment of content standards, curricula, and assessments; 2) use of formative assessment to identify student needs and monitor the efficacy of instruction; 3) use of research-based literacy support strategies in all content areas; 4) quality professional

development and supports; and 5) design of organizational structures and leadership capacities to sustain and enact these elements strategically. At the same time, state agencies and district offices need to deal individually with schools and classrooms based on their performance and capacity, thus providing greater supervision, training, and supports to the schools and teachers who most need assistance.

Changing teaching practice calls for refining the infrastructure for instructional improvements. This infrastructure includes defining anchor or essential standards, aligned assessments to support instruction, core curriculum and model lessons, recommended materials, embedded training, support from external partners, and tools.¹² In her book *Transforming High School Teaching and Learning: A District-wide Design*, Judy Wurtzel from the Aspen Institute discusses the need to manage instruction more intently in ways that compliment a robust vision of teacher professionalism. She starts from the premise that teacher professionalism is essentially about individual and collective efforts to improve student achievement and implies cultivating a “body of specialized knowledge and agreed upon standards of practice and specific protocols for performance.”¹³ It requires direct observation of practice, modeling, analysis, and feedback as a routine feature of the work of schools.

In order to scale effective instructional practices, states have focused on the district role and how it contributes to generating a culture and capacity to ensure real instructional improvements across

classrooms and schools. A number of large urban districts have begun to leverage change by managing instruction more explicitly—that is, taking deliberate steps to align common curriculum and instructional materials, using formative and benchmark assessments, and providing

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professional development and instructional leadership around a shared set of instructional practices.

Districts such as Boston, New York City, and San Diego have posted gains by creating aligned systems focused on instructional improvements. It appears beneficial to use a managed-instruction approach that provides a “high support” environment, which generally requires bolstering the district’s capacity to effectively support struggling readers, teachers, and schools. Gains in student achievement appears to be attributable in part to reducing teacher autonomy by prescribing standards, assessments, and core curriculum instructional materials, along with

closely aligned professional development on specific instructional strategies. This instructional core (infrastructure) manages instruction much more systematically by anchoring essential standards, ensuring adequate instructional time, and by using instructional materials and activities that are not only grounded in research on effective practice, but that are informed by individual students’ knowledge and background.¹⁴ Such approaches require high-capacity reform models, intervention teams, external agents, strong district and school leadership, monitoring the achievement of every student, and skilled teachers in every classroom.¹⁵

Some states have begun crafting literacy initiatives that focus on capacity-building across state, district, and school levels in order to drive real improvements in classroom teaching practice. Absolutely essential to the success of any effort to improve the literacy levels of adolescents is ensuring that all teachers have the necessary preparation and supports to provide literacy instruction. We must invest in our teachers as professionals by upgrading teacher preparation curricula, professional training, and tools for specialized literacy instruction in the disciplines and in technology.

Teachers will need skills to incorporate various teaching formats, including: direct instruction; small, intentionally constructed groups; one-on-one work with students; independent work; and cooperative instruction. They must help students understand and use specific strategies and graphic and advanced organizers to

make sense and meaning of content and reading material. The teachers should assign students activities that probe a deeper understanding and integration of written materials and require revision and reflection as essential to mastering content and high-level literacy skills.

State literacy plans should include guidance for districts and schools on providing time, resources, and tools to build the capacity of educators to:

- Identify struggling readers early and provide a continuum of interventions and supports;
- Infuse literacy instruction throughout the curriculum;
- Ensure the necessary training and supports to help teachers gain the knowledge and skills to provide effective, content-based literacy instruction; and
- Provide resources and dedicated staff at district and school levels.

For example, beginning in 1998, Alabama launched the Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI), which is primarily a teacher training effort to achieve grade-level reading for every student in grades K-12. The state provides training to thousands of teachers and principals in partnership with colleges of teacher education. A key component of ARI includes supporting leadership teams and teachers by providing on-site access to literacy coaches who must have in-depth knowledge of literacy and writing processes as well as successful experiences as teachers. The state funds a range of supports and training to: integrate literacy instruction in content domains;

establish organizational structures to provide highly specialized instruction for struggling readers; administer screening, progress monitoring, and diagnostic assessments as needed; work with leadership teams to train and support school-wide literacy programs; and build the capacity of district offices and leadership to design and implement local initiatives.¹⁶

Alabama has also focused on strengthening its relationship with district central offices as the more direct source of support, professional development, and local mandates. The state coordinates with district personnel to ensure the quality of implementing school-wide literacy programs. Through the state agency and regional coaches, individual schools receive differentiated supports in the form of on-site visits, joint planning with schools to identify and serve struggling readers, and follow-up meetings to target staff development needs.

In like fashion, the Rhode Island Board of Regents for Elementary and Secondary Education adopted regulations that require school districts to identify students who fail to attain proficiency on the state assessment subtests; diagnostically assess each of these students; describe the mechanisms in place to identify and support students in need of literacy support; and describe the methods by which students who are reading below grade level will attain at least grade-level abilities in school improvement and district plans. Each middle and high school must have specific programs in place to provide support to students below proficiency in literacy that include:

- School-wide emphasis on literacy across the curriculum for all students;
- Targeted programming for students identified as more than one year below proficiency through the use of “ramp-up” or other specific interventions; and
- Intensive programming through Personal Literacy Plans (PLPs) for students who are more than two years below proficiency, administered by a reading specialist.

Every two years, districts are required to evaluate the effectiveness of their literacy program based on student performance.¹⁷

E. State Action Steps to Improve Adolescent Literacy

1. Develop coordinated state leadership to set the vision and ensure coherence of goals for improving adolescent literacy statewide.

Strong state leadership is necessary to enlist the multiple constituencies needed for framing a vision and setting the public agenda. States will need to find common ground among the reading experts, administrators, and practitioners who will implement state policies and the key players who can deliver the political, financial, and social capital. In addition to state and local boards of education, planning must include governors, legislatures, members of the business community, professional associations, universities, and most importantly, the professions, particularly teachers.

People support what helps them and what they help create—and they resist what they don’t understand or value. States must work closely with their teachers and administrators to identify the needs of struggling readers and to identify solutions that are viable for districts and schools.

Recommended Actions:

- Engage stakeholders and policymakers in a collaborative process to build the knowledge base about the research and issues related to adolescent literacy, including the roles that must be played by the state, district, practitioners, and higher education;
- Envision strategic statewide efforts to define and achieve literacy goals for middle and high school students that include addressing system-wide elements and to foster a culture of shared accountability for improving literacy levels;
- Exercise state board authority over school improvement and accountability to set priorities for the state department of education in integrating adolescent literacy as part of district and school improvement efforts;
- Ensure that the adolescent issue is on the state board of education agenda;
- Build public awareness and widespread advocacy for improving adolescent literacy, creating a sense of urgency in addressing the issue; and
- Cultivate a vision of teacher professionalism that supports instructional improvement and

defines clear expectations for instructional practices grounded in research on effective literacy instruction.

2. Design a state literacy plan that builds instructional capacity and sustains continuous improvements in adolescent literacy.

State policies should address building district capacity to help teachers and leaders work collaboratively to pursue viable solutions to advance the literacy levels of adolescents. It begins with districts and schools designing coherent literacy plans that can provide teachers and school leaders with the tools, resources, and training to provide literacy instruction within content area teaching. It embodies planned system-wide elements that have been shown to be effective in studies of high performing districts, including: creating a climate of urgency regarding improving reading achievement; fostering a culture of shared accountability for student learning; designing the central office as a support and service organization for schools; providing a high level of resources devoted to professional development on research-based practices; and equipping leaders to exercise data-driven instructional leadership.¹⁸ Districts and schools should design comprehensive programs and supports based on detailed information on students’ needs. State policies should also develop accountability and oversight mechanisms to ensure that programs are implemented effectively and result in improving students’ reading skills and content learning.

Recommended Actions:

- Dedicate staff within the state education agency to lead state

literacy initiatives, advocate that state and local systems and other stakeholders take this issue seriously, provide information to educators and policymakers, and ensure coordination with state education improvement goals and interventions in low-performing schools;

- Engage key policymakers and constituencies in a task force to frame the problem, design a policy agenda, and build public support and political commitments for robust and long-term funding;
- Strategically use data to identify student needs, design cohesive policies, and evaluate the quality of implementation and impact; and
- Conduct program evaluations to refine and revise literacy plans and guide implementation.

3. Create literacy standards for students and teachers—raising literacy expectations across the curriculum for all students in all grades.

It is essential to develop state standards that reflect developmental literacy skills and to design curricula and instruction grounded in the research about effective practice. While the majority of states now have standards that meet our common core criteria, policymakers must ensure that literacy expectations across the content areas are sufficiently rigorous—something called into question by the significant gap that exists in some states between how many students are meeting state reading standards versus how many of those same

Moving from Standards to Practice

Translating student standards into pedagogical practice is challenging work. But while teachers need adequate supports to make improvements in classroom practice based on (or aligned with) standards, dangers reside in over-prescribing and scripting lessons in ways that cramp professional discretion. Lessons must be adapted for students at different levels of knowledge and mastery and in response to whether learning is occurring. Instruction must be continuously monitored and adjusted as needed based on the constant interaction of the student, the subject matter, and the teacher.

Experts in curriculum and instruction recommend culling the essential learnings or elements from standards and designing lessons that provide a framework for pedagogical practice, student activities, and benchmarking learning. States and districts can provide model high-quality lessons that serve as curricular units and teaching strategies shown to be effective through research or learned from successful peers. Specialists suggest creating common lessons for each content area and grade level that all teachers must teach. These are short and use only about 10-20 percent of total instructional time, but define both the content to be taught and specific instructional practices tailored to the content area (e.g., cooperative small group learning, use of advance organizers to introduce content, how to model “think alouds” of text material). Such lessons target elements in content areas that pose the greatest difficulty and contribute most to the achievement gap, such as specific vocabulary and terminology. These are embedded in larger units of study, provide a map on how to make meaning of content, include formative assessments, and identify ways to expand the lesson.¹⁹

students are reaching proficiency on NAEP exams.

States should set standards that address: 1) the skills and knowledge adolescent learners need to complete rigorous middle and high school curricula and 2) corollary teacher standards for teachers that define the competencies they need to incorporate literacy instruction throughout the curriculum. States can play an important role in developing curriculum frameworks, common lessons, aligned diagnostic and formative assessments, and tools to support specific classroom instructional practices.

Districts need to craft an instructional infrastructure that draws upon the expertise of teachers and offers opportunities for coordinated efforts to standardize elements of work (e.g.,

collaborative scoring of writing). Using teachers’ skills to solve common problems helps shore up their commitment to making real changes in classroom practice. Collaborative construction of the instructional infrastructure provides continuity of high-quality teaching across classrooms while allowing teachers and students to have a voice in what is taught and how it is taught.

Recommended Actions:

- Fully articulate literacy standards for students and teachers that embed literacy instruction within content area learning and drive improvements in teacher preparation and professional development;
- Develop partnerships among teachers, administrators, higher

education, and district leaders to create a coherent, well-defined K-12 continuum for reading development with recommended materials, planning guides, model lessons, and tools;

- Shift the state role to providing technical assistance on research-based curriculum, instruction, and assessment rather than on compliance; and
- Establish a professional development curriculum in collaboration with districts that is based on effective literacy instruction.

4. Ensure comprehensive assessment and alignment with anchor literacy standards and core curricula.

The story of adolescent literacy begins with data—good data based on multiple indicators that can answer a range of essential questions for different purposes. States typically collect summative data based on state assessments and high school exit exams that can be used to evaluate overall district and school reading achievement. The data can also be used to compare relative performance by different units of analysis such as school, district, or subgroup (race and ethnicity, language, gender, disability, and income level).

The state must also develop a comprehensive assessment system that is aligned to the anchor literacy standards and that includes formal

assessments, interim benchmark tests, and ongoing formative assessments embedded in classroom tests and activities, as well as student work. State and regional agencies should also provide additional tools such as protocols, rubrics, curriculum materials, technology, and data systems to help teachers engage students interest and effort, grade and analyze student work, make use of student data, observe other teachers, and expand instructional strategies.

Recommended Actions:

- Develop guidance that incorporates formative, embedded diagnostic, and adaptive assessments in order to identify

the instructional needs of adolescent learners;

- Develop measures and tools to monitor progress using formative measures or benchmarks towards achieving standards (e.g., classroom assessments, interim progress tests aligned to standards, tools that use technology, and item banks);
- Ensure that teachers and administrators have timely data, effective protocols, and training to assess literacy performance and adjust instruction according to students' needs; and

State Data Systems

An integral component of any adolescent literacy initiative is the strategic use of data to identify student needs, design cohesive policies, and evaluate implementation and impact. Simply looking at summative data based on state or district tests grossly underestimates the complexity of literacy performance and leads to the development of policies that do not meet the needs of failing students. Summative data masks improved performance over time, the unique literacy challenges of individual students, and fails to provide teachers with the timely data they need to tailor instruction to meet each student's needs. Adolescent literacy assessment systems must include multiple indicators of student performance based on both formative and summative assessments.

Assessments should:

- Identify at-risk students;
- Provide detailed performance data on student strengths and weaknesses;
- Be frequent enough to track improvement over time and provide teachers with the data they need to tailor instruction to student needs over the course of the school year; and
- Provide timely evaluation data to inform school, district, and state decisions.

It is critical to couple any assessment program with a quality data-management system that encourages the use of data to guide instruction and decision-making. Only when a system is easy to use, both in terms of data input and retrieval, will it be effective. The system should foster the use of data by tailoring the information provided to the audience, whether it be teachers, school-, district-, or state-level leaders; it is important to consider the degree of utility for each stakeholder group. Similarly, state leaders need to provide training and supports on how to administer assessments and use data effectively. Professional development efforts for teachers should focus on using test data to differentiate instruction.

Source: Education Commission of the States, *Comprehensive State Literacy Policy: A Guide for Policymakers*, 2002.

- Encourage partnerships with external organizations to develop robust formative assessment practices.

5. Provide flexibility and supports at the district level to localize the initiative.

Begin with a flexible model that reflects a broad and solid research base and that can be responsive to different content areas and local conditions. Redesigning standard practice in middle and high schools is no easy task. It requires leveraging policies to ensure that districts focus on equipping and supporting schools to infuse research-based instructional practices as part of a school-wide focus.

Moreover, states must provide districts and schools with funding, supports, and resources. School-wide literacy initiatives require sufficient funds to provide schools and teachers with the necessary resources and supports to differentiate instruction for students across abilities and grades. There are numerous implications for resource-related decisions on staffing, time, instructional organization, assessments, curriculum, textbooks and materials, and professional development. It is largely impossible for schools to implement school-wide literacy interventions without the funding and resources to go beyond day-to-day operations. Moreover, states must target additional funds and resources to high-poverty districts and schools where large numbers of students struggle with foundational literacy.

Recommended Actions:

- Be attentive to local, state, and national policy environments

related to reading and devise a template that can be used for literacy planning that aligns to state standards, assessments, and other requirements for school improvement;

- Build district capacity to help teachers and leaders work collaboratively to pursue viable solutions to advance the literacy levels of adolescent learners;
- Require coherent district and school literacy plans and supports based on detailed information on students' needs;
- Equip district and school staff with the tools, data-systems, and resources to implement literacy programs and supports;
- Mentor and connect with district and school leaders responsible for local implementation with clear focus on transforming teaching practice across content areas; and
- Develop accountability and oversight mechanisms to ensure that programs are implemented effectively and result in improving students' reading skills and content learning.

6. Invest in teachers by ensuring that they have the preparation, professional development, and supports to provide effective, content-based literacy instruction.

Teachers must have considerable knowledge to use research-based literacy strategies in content-area instruction. Far too often, they have been left too much on their own to do the difficult work of developing curriculum, assessments, and other

tools to improve instruction or the district has taken a top-down, prescriptive approach that has been met with resistance.

States must address the critical role of teacher preparation programs in providing prospective teachers with a rigorous, research-based curriculum and opportunities to practice a range of predefined skills and knowledge in working partnerships between higher education and local school districts. Although revised standards may reflect sophisticated literacy skills inherent in mastering content standard, states typically need to do much more to ensure that content teachers understand the textual demands of their subjects and have the ongoing supports to build literacy skills appropriate to the requirements of the discipline.

Recommended Actions:

- Examine how well state policies on content standards, teacher preparation, professional development, and certification ensure that teachers have the knowledge and skills to improve adolescent literacy by:
 1. Assessing how schools of education design adolescent literacy courses to help support an increasing number of struggling readers in secondary schools;
 2. Ensuring that teacher preparation and professional development are aligned to teacher standards and competencies for literacy instruction;
 3. Examining the design of teacher preparation programs to ensure that colleges of education and colleges of arts and sciences collaborate in preparing teachers;

4. Ensuring that teacher preparation includes content area literacy, merges expertise across colleges (education; arts and sciences), and provides strong clinical components;
 5. Promoting partnerships between universities and districts as part of preparation and ongoing professional development; and
 6. Ensuring that teachers receive appropriate preparation to lead and participate in middle and high school literacy teams.
- Provide guidance on the framework and tools for instructional improvement that makes teachers central actors in shaping and carrying out instructional improvement.
 - Ensure participation in embedded professional development in literacy instruction that is specific to content areas and grounded in research.
 - Provide guidance on ongoing training and supports that include coaching, classroom observation, and continuous learning to improve teachers' skills in providing literacy instruction, using student data to improve instruction, and increasing students' motivation and engagement.
 - Promote teacher induction and mentors to cultivate common instructional practices along with the curriculum and assessment tools needed to develop professional capacities.

F. From Policy to Practice: Driving Instructional Improvements in the Classroom

A central theme of this issue brief is that for state literacy policies and programs to be effective, they must lead to actual instructional changes in the classroom. To accomplish this, leaders must be very conscious of how each policy and action ultimately works to improve teaching. The chart beginning below details the actions that must be taken at all the key levels—state, district, school, and classroom—in order to impact instructional practices and help students improve their reading skills. It is organized around five action areas: Planning, Quality of Teaching, Use of Data, Instructional Infrastructure, and Accountability.

Improving Literacy Instruction: Moving from State Policy to Classroom Practice

State	District	School	Classroom
Planning			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lead a collaborative process to build knowledge base and set vision to improve literacy as part of district and school improvement. - Design a state literacy plan that builds instructional capacity to improve adolescent literacy while providing flexibility to localize the initiative. - Dedicate staff within the state education agency to focus on adolescent literacy. - Build public awareness and advocacy for literacy initiative. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Design a comprehensive literacy plan to provide research-based reading and writing instruction throughout the curriculum beginning in the early grades and continuing through high school. - Develop a coordinated K-12 continuum of literacy development, including setting goals and standards and ensuring alignment with curricula and assessments. - Ensure that all students have access to highly trained teachers, resources, and organizational supports to advance literacy throughout the curriculum. - Dedicate staff within the local education agency to focus on adolescent literacy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Implement school-wide literacy initiatives as part of school improvement planning that includes content area literacy instruction and a continuum of support for all students. - Diagnose problems early and provide timely, differentiated levels of research-based literacy instruction for struggling readers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide effective, research-based interventions to infuse reading and writing instruction across the curriculum. - Use methods for providing content area literacy instruction and intensifying interventions as needed for struggling readers.

State	District	School	Classroom
Quality of Teaching			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fully articulate literacy standards that embed literacy instruction within content area learning. - Invest in teachers by ensuring that preparation and professional development provide teachers with knowledge and skills to improve adolescent literacy. - Examine design of preparation programs to ensure teachers receive training in content area literacy and methods to intervene with struggling readers. - Provide guidance on ongoing training, instructional tools, and supports for teachers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ensure that teachers have the preparation and professional development to provide effective, content-based literacy instruction. - Outline the elements of high quality professional development to provide all staff with research-based curriculum and opportunities to practice specific literacy instruction skills. - Ensure leadership teams, support personnel, coaches, curriculum specialists, and teachers have ongoing training in literacy instruction. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide intensive (including embedded) training that provides teachers with clear direction on how to use research-based practices within their different content areas. - Create opportunities for peer observation, demonstration lessons, curriculum and lesson planning, dialogue, and coaching to improve literacy instruction. - Organize training and coaching resources around teams of teachers in the same content area. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Explicitly link reading and writing instruction with content instruction. - Emphasize deep conceptual understanding through reading instruction. - Provide explicit instruction in vocabulary and in the application of reading comprehension strategies. - Continuously and systematically engage students in whole class and small group discussions of challenging content and literature. - Create connections within and across lessons, reinforcing vocabulary and conceptual development across multiple texts and contexts.
Use of Data			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Design robust longitudinal data systems to track individual student performance. - Strategically use data to identify areas of need, design cohesive policies, and evaluate the impact of the literacy initiative on students' performance. - Equip districts and schools with the data-systems and tools to implement literacy programs and supports. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use a data-management system that provides high utility for multiple purposes including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generating frequent, timely data to track improvement over time and benchmark instruction for all students; • Providing detailed performance data on student strengths and weaknesses; • Identifying at-risk students; • Linking information about the instruction, services, and resources students receive and their outcomes; and • Providing timely evaluation data to inform school and district decisions. - Evaluate quality of implementation and impact of district programs on students' literacy performance and content learning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Identify the data that will be collected to achieve ongoing progress monitoring of schools. - Administer screening, progress monitoring, outcome assessments, and diagnostic testing frequently. - Use diagnostic and formative assessments to provide supports and interventions to accelerate the progress of struggling readers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Measure and analyze student literacy performance and content area achievement to inform instruction and identify struggling readers. - Use assessment data regularly to monitor progress and guide reading instruction and professional development.

State	District	School	Classroom
Instructional Infrastructure			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Design instructional infrastructure to support coordinated literacy instruction in all grades in collaboration with practitioners and higher education. - Articulate rigorous student literacy standards and curriculum frameworks for content area literacy instruction. - Develop a K-12 continuum for reading development with recommended materials, planning guides, and model lessons. - Provide guidance and tools that include aligned diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments, curriculum frameworks, and tools to support research-based instructional practice. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ensure committed leadership to implementing school-wide literacy initiatives. - Be creative in the use of local monies to provide the resources, training, and supports to achieve targeted literacy goals. - Develop anchor standards and aligned core curriculum and assessments to support instruction grounded in research on effective practice. - Ensure that schools have the flexibility and incentives to design organizational structures and schedules to differentiate literacy instruction in accord with individual students' needs. - Ensure that schools have the range of instructional materials, multimedia materials, diverse texts, and resources needed to improve students' literacy skills. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide schools with funding, supports, and resources needed to achieve literacy goals for all students. - Provide extended blocks of time for reading instruction and for weekly professional development opportunities. - Form reading leadership teams to design literacy instruction in content areas and for struggling readers. - Promote teacher leadership in designing, evaluating, and improving instructional tools and practices. - Provide teachers and schools with consistent support from dedicated, specialized staff that provide support at the school level. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide methods for supplying classroom supports and intensifying interventions for individual students. - Provide feedback, models, and tools to integrate text comprehension strategies and writing instruction across the curriculum. - Train administrators in evaluating teachers on content area literacy instruction.
Accountability			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ensure ongoing oversight and monitoring to hold districts and schools accountable for improving adolescent literacy performance. - Require coherent district and school literacy plans based on detailed information on students' needs. - Evaluate the impact of literacy initiatives and refine based on multiple indicators of literacy performance. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide sufficient guidance and oversight to ensure strong implementation of comprehensive literacy programs. - Institutionalize teaching practice through summer institutes, ongoing training, access to higher education, school administrators, coaches, and regional trainings; and align the recertification process with professional development. - Build networks for cross-classroom, cross-school, and cross-district learning and partner with higher education, community, and external organizations. - Examine literacy performance data to refine district literacy plans. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Create professional community and ongoing training and supports on effective strategies that emphasize collective responsibility and collegiality. - Link performance evaluations of principals, coaches, and teachers to instructional practice and student achievement in reading. - Use school and classroom literacy performance results to improve school-wide literacy instruction and target supports for individual students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Support and monitor implementation of reading instruction, assessment expectations, and student literacy performance. - Use assessment data to refine instruction and programs.

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NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF
STATE BOARDS OF EDUCATION

277 South Washington Street
Suite 100
Alexandria, Virginia 22314
703.684.4000

