

Feature Article: No Child Left Behind and Adolescent Literacy

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Improving literacy in high school is a key component underlying the vision of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. Studies show that American students are reading and comprehending below expected levels. As measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a majority of 8th- and 12th-grade students read below the proficient level and the data are more distressing for minority students (Grigg, Daane, Jin, & Campbell, 2003). A 2004 report from RAND indicates that fewer than half of all students reach proficiency standards for reading on either state assessments or NAEP (McCombs, Kirby, Barney, Darilek, & Magee, 2004). We know that literacy skills are the foundation of student learning in all academic areas. These are key to improving achievement for secondary students and ensuring success in college and the workplace. The research base on struggling adolescent readers may not be as large as that for younger readers, but there are many evidence-based practices that can be readily adopted by states as they address this critical national issue.

This article provides a brief overview of the NCLB requirements as they relate to high school and adolescent literacy, the available research on adolescent literacy, and the implications of research findings for states in addressing adolescent literacy needs in the region.

No Child Left Behind and High Schools, From the National High School Center

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) comprises the federal government's major K–12 education programs, including Title I. Every five years, Congress re-examines the law as part of the required reauthorization process. In its current legislative iteration, ESEA is recognized as NCLB, which President Bush signed in 2002. Though NCLB is primarily focused on Grades K–8, the following requirements apply to the high school level:

- States must set adequate yearly progress (AYP) objectives to ensure that 100 percent of high school students achieve at proficient levels by spring 2014.
- States must include high school graduation rates in the AYP objectives for high schools.
- States must comply with the understanding of graduation rates and may no longer include recipients of general educational development certificates or alternative diplomas in their graduation rates.
- All high school teachers who teach core subjects should have met the state's "highly qualified" requirement by the end of the 2005–06 school year.
- All students must be tested at least once in Grades 10–12 in the subjects of reading and mathematics and in science beginning in 2007–08.

Academic Achievement

Each of these requirements plays an important role for states, districts, and schools in planning comprehensive education improvement efforts and setting academic achievement goals for all secondary students; however, meeting AYP is among the most significant accountability requirements of NCLB. States use the following five indicators to determine AYP: (1) the percentage of students who are proficient in reading; (2) the percentage of students who are proficient in mathematics; (3) the percentage of students who participate in reading assessments; (4) the percentage of students who participate in mathematics assessments; and (5) at least one other academic indicator at each school level, which is the graduation rate for high school.

If a high school fails to meet the objectives in these areas, NCLB requires states to implement a series of increasingly progressive action steps. If AYP objectives are not met for two consecutive years, the high school is identified as needing improvement and must develop a two-year turn-around plan. If the high school does not meet AYP for three consecutive years, the school remains in school improvement status, and the district must offer public choice as well as supplemental educational services for low-income students. After four consecutive years, the district must take corrective action to improve the school (while continuing public choice and supplemental services), and if it extends to a fifth year, the school must be restructured. Part of the national challenge in addressing AYP is that there are no consistent definitions of academic proficiency or a common way to measure it across states, given that each state is responsible for establishing its own content standards, performance standards, and assessments.

Two of the five AYP indicators focus directly on literacy. This is consistent with the recognition of the importance of literacy skills at every grade level that underlies the vision of NCLB, especially at the secondary level (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007a). Being able to read and write are necessary competencies for high school students to ensure success in college and work.

Whether literacy standards and assessments are currently aligned with college and workplace demands is another question, but many states are making headway in this area. In fact, at the beginning of the year, Wisconsin became the 27th state to join Achieve's American Diploma Project (ADP) network (see http://dpi.wi.gov/eis/pdf/dpi2007_08.pdf). This initiative supports the alignment of high school standards and assessments with the knowledge and skills required for success after high school. The process brings together postsecondary, business, and K–12 leaders to define core English and mathematics knowledge and skills. Undergoing this type of state review is an important step toward improving instruction in key content areas such as literacy. Wisconsin officially launched its initiative at the end of May and has established respective leadership and design teams. The state also conducts this work in concert with another national initiative, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills. The partnership encourages schools, districts, and states to advocate for the integration of 21st century skills into education. Wisconsin is only one of six states with which the partnership is working regarding standards integration.

Literacy development remains fundamental to the success of education reform and NCLB. The administration's current reauthorization proposal, titled *Building on Results: A Blueprint for*

Strengthening the No Child Left Behind Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2007), and other legislative proposals include a continued focus to strengthen the federal commitment in addressing this critical area of learning and to close the achievement gaps.

Graduation Rate

Another key indicator of AYP is the graduation rate. At the high school level, states are required to use graduation rates as the fifth academic indicator. Schools can establish their own baselines, targets, and goals for progress, so high school graduation rates vary substantially by state. Although all states have signed on to participate in the National Governors Association's Graduation Rate Compact to implement a common accurate graduation rate, it will take time (and the development of longitudinal data systems) to reach this goal. As an interim measure, the U.S. Department of Education introduced the Average Freshman Graduation Rate (AFGR). This rate provides some standardization on a national basis but does not include student transfers in and out of high school. Both Illinois and Wisconsin AFGR rates—80.3 percent (for 2003–04) and 85.8 percent (for 2002–03) respectively—are above the national average of 74.3 percent (Seastrom, Hoffman, Chapman, & Stillwell, 2007). For meeting AYP, 75 percent is the current average graduation rate target objective outlined in states' AYP plans to the U.S. Department of Education (Klemick, 2007). Clearly, both Wisconsin and Illinois are on track in fulfilling this requirement.

Increasing graduation rates as one of the requirements of NCLB will involve a variety of strategies to keep students on track and in school. About 7,000 students drop out of high school every day (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007b). Poor literacy skills are consistently associated with higher dropout rates as well as delinquency and unemployment (National Association of State Boards of Education [NASBE], 2006). Students who do not have sufficient literacy skills are not able to keep up with their high school courses and have trouble meeting performance standards. Those struggling students are 20 times more likely to drop out of high school (Carnevale, 2001). To help keep those adolescent students engaged and increase the likelihood they will graduate on time, it will be important to target resources and support for them as well as to those high schools most in need, especially in the critical area of literacy.

Adolescent Literacy

Literacy skills are the foundation of student learning in all academic areas and are required for students to show what they know and can do on standardized tests, yet a majority of 8th- and 12th-grade students read below the proficient level and the data are more discouraging for minority students. We know that improving students' literacy skills can bring about improvements in academic achievement across all content areas, increase students' self-efficacy, and motivate them to engage in academic challenges.

National attention finally seems to be turning toward adolescents and the difficulties many high school students have in reading, writing, listening, and speaking critically—essentially engaging in the full range of behaviors and exercising the habits of mind that enable them to experience accomplishments in school and foster postsecondary success. Mastering these skills, along with computer literacy, is a reasonable expectation as an outcome of students' high school

experiences, yet mastery seems to elude many—even some who graduate from high school. Reports, such as the ACT’s (2006) *Reading Between the Lines: What the ACT Reveals About College Readiness in Reading*, provide harsh information on the crisis in adolescent literacy and detail the essential skills that so many adolescents seem to lack. Organizations such as ACT and the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB) (see http://www.nagb.org/release/12_gr_commission_rpt.pdf) persuasively argue that adolescents need the same high level of literacy skills for success in college and postsecondary entry into the workforce.

Two components of the NCLB requirements are particularly relevant when issues of adolescent literacy are considered. Indeed, they pose conundrums that need to be addressed when considering challenges presented by adolescent learners who are still struggling with reading.

Conundrum 1: Who Will Teach Reading?

The first requirement—that all teachers of core high school subjects should have attained their state’s “highly qualified” status by the end of the 2005–06 school year—is an important statement about the factors that contribute to high school success. Students deserve well-trained teachers who stay current in their fields and who know how to teach their chosen areas. There is no similar legislation about the importance of having specialists who are “highly qualified” to help struggling readers in high schools with high rates of failure on standardized tests or high dropout rates. Being able to help struggling readers requires specialized knowledge; in many secondary schools, however, even the English teachers have not studied reading instructional methods well enough to know what to do to teach students who read considerably below grade level. Certainly few, if any, teachers in other core content areas have been prepared to differentiate their instruction to meet the needs of students who struggle with literacy. Many teachers of core content areas would argue that helping students with reading problems is not part of their job description (Heller & Greenleaf, 2007).

Furthermore, research on differences in text structures across disciplines and their accompanying reading challenges strongly suggests that proficient reading is not a generic skill that, once learned, can be applied in countless settings—including reading, science, history, or mathematics texts, or great works of literature. The implication of this research is that a single, generic course or professional development session on “teaching reading in the content areas” will not provide content-area teachers with the skills they need to help struggling readers make sense out of the textbooks and primary sources that are required in their classes but that each text type has a distinct structure and way of presenting information (American Institutes for Research, 2007). The *Reading Framework for the 2009 National Assessment for Educational Progress* (American Institutes for Research, 2007) explains differences in cognitive activities involved in reading narratives and expository text and poetry and suggests the kinds of questioning that teachers can use to stimulate comprehension in each text type.

Clearly, solving the problems of adolescents who struggle with reading is not as simple as some would claim. The problems cannot be solved by mandating that “every teacher is a teacher of reading,” who, after some professional development, will be able to weave reading instruction into content area teaching. Suggesting that this will happen is an unrealistic solution to problems

that for many students originated in much earlier grades. Specialized help from a trained reading specialist who is knowledgeable about both adolescents' development and the demands of content area reading is essential if students are going to obtain skills that have previously eluded them (Salinger, in press).

A middle ground exists between requiring every teacher to teach reading and providing funding for reading specialists at every high school. This middle ground is reached when all teachers, regardless of their content area, begin to understand and grapple directly with the enormity of the adolescent literacy problems their students present and when they receive support in meeting students' needs. State education agencies nationwide are beginning to acknowledge the extent of the adolescent literacy problem, and many are, like Wisconsin, trying to build momentum around possible solutions. For example, state education agencies (SEAs) can enlist the collaboration of state chapters of professional associations to communicate with members about the importance of recognizing the extent of the problem and working together to find solutions within their local school contexts. Likewise, SEAs can encourage local education agencies (LEAs) to include strategies for meeting the needs of struggling readers in their professional development offerings in ways that encourage dialogue among teachers about becoming part of the solution. They can also encourage interest and support for addressing the problems among other stakeholders, such as business leaders and civic groups. This model—wide stakeholder engagement—was the foundation of the highly successful Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI). Educators and noneducators at the state level were galvanized around literacy issues in ways that gradually extended through to teachers and school-level administrators. The major vehicles for change in Alabama were intensive professional development for teachers and ongoing coaching on ways to integrate reading strategies into content area instruction. Even though much of the ARI focus turned to early reading, secondary administrators and teachers kept their discussions moving forward locally and brought about positive instructional change (Bacevich & Salinger, 2006).

Conundrum 2: How Will Teachers Prepare Struggling Readers for Annual Testing?

While educators and policymakers continue to search for solutions to the problems of adolescent struggling readers, these students must participate in annual testing in Grades 10 through 12 to measure their achievement in reading, mathematics, and now science. In many states, these tests are high stakes in nature because they determine eligibility for graduation with an academic diploma. The cruel reality of this mandate is that many adolescents cannot read well enough to pass the reading test, and their reading deficiencies may make it difficult for them to demonstrate what they know and can do in mathematics and science.

An interesting component of the requirement for annual testing is that there are no requirements to dig deeper into the causes of students' mediocre or failing performance on standardized tests. Unlike the Kindergarten to Grade 3 Reading First program, there is often no mandate that secondary school students who fail the required annual tests be given some form of diagnostic tests to determine the underlying causes of their problems. Most standardized tests give only one composite score for reading or at best subscores for comprehension and vocabulary. It is usually just the composite score that is required for accountability purposes. These scores give only a "rough cut" to distinguish between strong and weak readers; they don't provide actionable information that LEAs and schools can use to determine how to help their struggling readers.

SEAs can point out the limitations of composite scores to districts and schools and strongly encourage them to think proactively about gathering diagnostic information about students whose scores fall below a particular cut point.

In some cases, diagnostic procedures may be as simple as asking a student to read aloud and asking a few questions about the text. This is the core procedure for an informal reading inventory, and it can provide preliminary information about whether there are decoding, vocabulary, or comprehension deficits. More formal, normed group and individually administered diagnostic reading assessments are also available. Some can be administered relatively quickly and still yield a detailed profile of strengths and weaknesses.

An individual profile is needed because adolescents struggle with reading for many reasons. Some may have severe deficits in basic skills such as decoding; others may have weak vocabularies and lack skills needed to find the meanings of unfamiliar words; some may lack adequate background knowledge to understand new material presented in print; or some may read at the literal level but lack more sophisticated skills such as making inferences or evaluating text. Some may not be able to differentiate their reading skills according to the kind of text (e.g., narrative, expository, textbooks) they have to read.

Determining the kind of support that students need is important for many reasons, one of which is cost. Structured, commercial intervention programs are readily available; however, their prices are often high in terms of licensing fees (for software), materials, teacher professional development, and suggested teacher-student ratios, and not all students with low test scores necessarily need a structured, intense intervention.

Students who don't need intense intervention often show real improvement from a course that includes instruction in higher order thinking; understanding different kinds of text; and basic study reading skills such as skimming, scanning, and previewing. They may even need direct instruction on strategies for reading standardized tests. These skills are often second nature to students who read well, enjoy school, and do well on tests. High-achieving students have learned these skills on their own through wide and deep reading, but many students are less savvy about reading. A course that teaches these necessary skills could easily be offered as an elective or a required course, and students who seem to be struggling academically because of marginal reading skills could be strongly encouraged to take it.

Getting a fuller understanding of what test scores communicate about students' needs can be a good starting point for professional development for all teachers. As mentioned above, asking subject experts to become "reading-in-the-content-areas" teachers may not be nearly as effective as engaging these teachers in discussions about students' needs and strategies to increase their ability to grasp what teachers try to present. Content area teachers are more receptive to suggestions about how to introduce vocabulary or checking on and building background knowledge prior to instruction than they are to a blanket mandate to "teach reading." They can recognize the importance of these key aspects of their subjects for all students, not just those who struggle to read. Equally, encouraging them to incorporate graphic organizers and other study aids into their instruction expands their pedagogy in ways that can have immediate impact on all students because they are just good, solid pedagogical tools.

Conclusion

NCLB contains many features that help focus attention on adolescents and especially on the issues faced by teachers who attempt to meet the needs of adolescents who struggle with reading. Meeting the needs of these students will take creativity and flexibility at the state, district, and school levels because they are a diverse group with needs that differ widely. There is no simple or quick solution to their problems, not even the often repeated suggestion that content area teachers be charged with teaching reading as well as mathematics, science, history, or literature; however, addressing their literacy needs and helping them improve their skills are essential goals. Even though high schools traditionally do not have specialists to work with these students, they will still be measured by the same standardized tests that assess their more literate peers.

Raising expectations to meet the goal of preparing students for postsecondary and workplace demands is one key strategy that states can undertake to improve adolescent literacy, as Wisconsin is doing with its combined ADP and Partnership for 21st Century Skills initiative. Another is establishing an adolescent literacy task force or panel to help inform the development of a statewide initiative. As states undertake the challenges that Wisconsin is facing in establishing its literacy task force and laying out an agenda for adolescent literacy, however, they need to be mindful of the complex needs of many stakeholders as they communicate the significance and urgency of the issue: certainly the districts and schools who are held to AYP requirements but also content-area teachers who have chosen specialties in which to devote time and energy, and the students who have somehow failed to develop the full range of literacy skills needed for success. Finding a way to bring together these two groups—teachers and students—as well as other key stakeholders to meet common goals in increasing literacy skills is one of the real challenges states face in implementing and meeting the requirements of NCLB.

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