

## **A Comprehensive Approach to Literacy Development from Birth to Grade 12: Recommendations for a State's Comprehensive Literacy Plan**

This fall, the US Department of Education (ED) provided each state with the opportunity to receive a formula grant through the new *Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy* (SRCL) program, in order to develop a literacy plan. These plans are due on February 1, 2011. Later that month, ED will solicit proposals for competitive funding to advance literacy skills, including pre-literacy skills, reading, and writing, for students from birth through grade 12, including limited-English-proficient students and students with disabilities.

The attached policy brief summarizes the major research findings and suggests the literacy components that states may want to consider as they develop their comprehensive literacy plans as well as an SRCL proposal. Education leaders recognize that literacy development must begin at birth and continue throughout secondary school. Key components of literacy development summarized below and in greater detail on page 4 include a focus on the acceleration of literacy development for the two-thirds of middle and high school students who struggle to read and to learn as well as family engagement strategies that begin at birth and continue throughout a child's academic career.

Augmented by SRCL funding, statewide efforts to address these literacy components can help LEAs and schools to implement reading strategies that will lead to academic success, as well as help facilitate the transition to the new ELA Common Core State Standards.

Scholastic has been a leader in children's literacy development for 90 years with practical, classroom-tested programs and services that reach 80% of the nation's primary and secondary schools. Scholastic has over 10 years of experience in 50 states, partnering in over 15,000 classrooms to implement our research-based reading intervention program that has been included in the What Works Clearinghouse. We routinely engage the best reading researchers to not only inform our work, but also the practices and interventions used by teachers throughout the country. This work has provided us a unique insight into what is needed and what is effective with respect to the critical components of literacy development.

### **Summary of Critical Components of a Comprehensive Literacy Plan**

- Implementing proven, research-based interventions;
- Employing adaptive technology as a critical strategy for differentiated learning and the acceleration of literacy development among struggling readers;
- Promoting the creation of literacy-rich environments in schools, in communities and in students' homes;
- Developing 21<sup>st</sup> Century literacy skills in all students that align with internationally benchmarked, college and career-ready standards;
- Building the capacity to deliver professional development to school leaders, formal and informal educators in school and in community-based programs;

- Using data to target individualized instruction; and
- Empowering parents and family members to help their children succeed in school through family engagement strategies that focus on literacy development.

## The Literacy Gaps among Children of all Ages and Grade Levels

*Literacy is the ability to understand and clearly communicate information and ideas – by others and to others – and to form thoughts using reason and analysis. Strong reading and writing skills are foundational to being fully literate and are essential to socio-economic success.<sup>1</sup>*

### In Early Childhood

Before a child enters preschool, it is critical to educate adult family members and caregivers about learning and development, in order for them to engage in both social and cognitive development activities at home and later, to become partners with the school in their children's education. At the onset of formal education, students in early childhood programs must be engaged in emergent literacy development - experimentation and play with letter-writing and with "reading" or storytelling through a book's pictures. Language and literacy development should be integrated into a curriculum that builds on children's eagerness to understand their world and closes the gap between children of poverty and their more affluent peers. Emergent literacy skills form the foundation for a child's literacy success.

Yet, today one out of every three children comes to the first day of kindergarten without the requisite skills for success.<sup>2</sup> Those young learners who come from homes relying on public assistance will start school having heard 32 million fewer words than their peers living in households with professional parents.<sup>3</sup>

### In the Early Grades

It is also important that students who are already enrolled in our nation's schools and are struggling with reading and writing not fall through the cracks. Although the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data show fourth graders reading at record levels, only 33 percent are proficient nationwide. There is still much to accomplish.

In the early elementary grades, strategies that build necessary cognitive skills and knowledge, including alphabetic awareness and rich language development, must be taught. As they progress in school, students need to learn to read by unlocking the code with all forms of text that matters and increasing their vocabulary and knowledge, in order to learn more challenging curriculum. Comprehension strategies must begin early so that words have meaning and make sense to the developing reader.

### In Middle and High School

We now know that students who are taught to read and write by the third grade, continue to need explicit literacy instruction to read and write with the skill level necessary for the rigorous curriculum of middle and high school. Reading and writing instruction at the secondary school level enables students to tackle the increasingly difficult text required in the

<sup>1</sup> National Institute for Literacy, <http://www.nifl.gov>

<sup>2</sup> Rock, D. & Pollack, J. (2002) early childhood longitudinal study – *Psychometric Report for Kindergarten Through 1<sup>st</sup> Grade*. U.S. Department of Education, NCES.

<sup>3</sup> Hart, B. & Risley, T.R. (1995). *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American children*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

content areas. Additionally, data show that many American students leave elementary school without highly proficient reading skills; many only possess skills at the most basic levels.<sup>4</sup> That fact coupled with the lack of literacy instruction in the upper grades, has resulted in the failure to improve the literacy achievement of eighth through 12<sup>th</sup> graders. Middle and high school students who are poor readers continue a process of slow disengagement that too often results in defeat, with more than 7,000 students dropping out of high school every day.<sup>5</sup> According to the Alliance for Excellent Education, more than half of America's secondary students struggle to read and learn their course materials.<sup>6</sup>

*The 2009 NAEP reading assessment revealed that only 38 percent of the nation's 12<sup>th</sup> graders were performing at or above proficiency.*

Developing strong literacy skills is a cradle to college/career process which is critical to our nation's economic and social development. The vast number of young Americans with low literacy skills that fail to graduate from high school presents staggering consequences for our nation and for the youth themselves. Without improvements in high school graduation rates during the next decade, our nation's economy will lose \$3 trillion in wages.<sup>8</sup> In fact, according to the U.S. Department of Labor, young people who fail to graduate from high school will be faced with a greater likelihood of low-wage employment, unemployment, poor health and marginal social and civic engagement; in essence, they are denied the opportunity to reach their full potential. For one-third of the U.S. high school students who do make it to college, research shows that they are not prepared for success in entry-level college writing classes.<sup>9</sup> According to the Strong American Schools report *Diploma to Nowhere*, "Well over one-third of all college students need remedial courses in order to acquire basic academic skills."<sup>10</sup>

### **Meeting Higher Standards and Closing the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Literacy Skills Gap**

The Common Core State Standards for ELA which many states have adopted make it clear that the development of strong literacy skills is not the sole responsibility of K-3 teachers, but rather part of the continuum of teaching and learning from birth to grade 12. Critical to the success of these new standards and students' ability to meet them will be for teachers at all grade levels and across disciplines to have the knowledge and capacity to reinforce literacy across the curriculum.

Today, all students must develop the skills not only to decode language and interpret meaning but also to apply literacy skills across content areas and new media. The ability to read and write multiple forms of text and integrate them with prior understanding is a hallmark of 21<sup>st</sup> Century literacy and these skills are embedded in the Common Core State Standards for ELA. Students must be able to communicate and collaborate across cultures, to use information effectively and to create content in social, political and cultural contexts. Possessing these 21<sup>st</sup> Century literacy skills will prepare high school graduates for the global economy and empower them to solve environmental, economic and social problems and advance the quality of life.

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<sup>4</sup> National Assessment of Educational Progress, The Nation's Report Card, <http://nationsreportcard.gov/>.

<sup>5</sup> Alliance for Excellent Education, *The High Cost of High School Dropouts: What the Nation Pays for Inadequate High Schools*, October 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Alliance for Excellent Education, *Who's Counted? Who's Counting? Understanding High School Graduation Rates*, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> National Assessment of Educational Progress, The Nation's Report Card, Grade 12 Reading and Mathematics 2009: National and Pilot State Results, 2009. <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/main2009/2011455.pdf>, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Alliance for Excellent Education, *The High Cost of High School Dropouts: What the Nation Pays for Inadequate High Schools*, October 2007.

<sup>9</sup> ACT, *Crisis at the Core: Preparing All Students for College and Work* (Iowa City, IA: Author, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> Strong American Schools, *Diploma to Nowhere*, 2008.

Jobs that require college and higher level literacy skills will generate about 46 percent of all job growth between 2004 and 2014.<sup>11</sup> Our nation's 25 fastest growing professions require high literacy skills,<sup>12</sup> and yet employers report that more than half of today's high school graduates do not demonstrate the skills necessary for success.<sup>13</sup> According to the National Urban League's report, *Mobilizing Communities: The Literacy Demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, "Beyond school, the literacy demands of all professions and specializations... require specific literacies, but the literacy skills of large numbers of American workers are insufficient to meet the increasingly strenuous reading, writing, speaking, and thinking demands of available jobs – including "blue collar" jobs in the technical, service, and manufacturing sectors. A large percentage of adolescents and adults who are seeking to enter the workforce, retrain for new careers due to a changing economy, or pursue higher education, find that poor literacy skills severely limit their options."<sup>14</sup>

The nation's economic and social viability – and, in fact, the very sustainability of our democracy – depends on addressing these literacy gaps. We need to implement proven strategies and invest resources in systemic ways. First, students who are reading significantly below grade level need intervention to accelerate their literacy acquisition. Second, we have to use proven and innovative methods to develop 21<sup>st</sup> Century literacy skills - that are aligned with internationally benchmarked/ Common Core State Standards - in *all* students, for our nation to realize the potential of this young generation.

## **An Unprecedented Opportunity to Raise Achievement**

Every state has schools where education leaders have successfully overcome the challenge of closing literacy gaps and decreasing dropout rates. The Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy program (SRCL) challenges states to leverage the accomplishments of the "best of the best" schools to improve student achievement across their districts and states and meet. Investments in research and innovative programs are supporting efforts to accelerate literacy development for struggling readers. By looking closely at what is working in the schools where students are demonstrating high levels of literacy proficiency, district superintendents can begin to work with principals to scale these models throughout the school district. By delineating effective strategies for accelerating literacy development for the lowest achieving students, education leaders can ensure that these students are placed on a path for success and, ultimately, graduation.

## **Critical Components of a Comprehensive Literacy Plan**

### **Assess Literacy Skills and Use Data to Inform Instruction and Drive Student Improvement**

- Use state data to determine school buildings with the greatest need for improved achievement and estimate length of treatment for planning process;
- Develop diagnostic tools – including formative assessments – that schools can use to identify struggling readers, provide them with appropriate support, keep track of their progress and adjust instruction to meet individual students' needs;
- Regularly measure progress at the individual, classroom, school, district and state level; and

<sup>11</sup> Irwin Kirsch, Henry Braun, Kentaro Yamamoto, and Andrew Sum, *America's Perfect Storm: Three Forces Changing Our Nation's Future* (Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service, 2007). Available at: [http://www.ets.org/Media/Education\\_Topics/pdf/AmericasPerfectStorm.pdf](http://www.ets.org/Media/Education_Topics/pdf/AmericasPerfectStorm.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> P.E. Barton, *What Jobs Require: Literacy, Education and Training, 1940-2006*. (Washington, D.C: Educational Testing Service, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> Council on Competitiveness, *Competitiveness Index: Where American Stands* (Washington, D.C.: Author, 2007).

<sup>14</sup> National Urban League/Center for Resource Management, Carnegie Foundation. *Mobilizing Communities to Support the Literacy Development of Urban Youth*. [http://www.carnegie.org/literacy/pdf/NUL\\_Literacy\\_WhitePaper.pdf](http://www.carnegie.org/literacy/pdf/NUL_Literacy_WhitePaper.pdf)

- Empower students and parents with easy access to data on students' learning and strategies that link to growth.

### **Increase Teacher and Leader Effectiveness to Support Literacy Development**

- Develop a plan to help school leaders articulate a vision for literacy improvement at all levels and grades;
- Support middle and high school teachers' ability to teach literacy through job embedded-professional development for reading intervention instructors;
- Continue literacy development beyond the early years/grades through high school. A focus on grades 4 through 8 will ensure students are "high school ready". Secondary school teachers must receive professional development that enables them to provide explicit instruction to develop comprehension, build academic language, use diverse texts, write with clear purpose and critical reasoning;<sup>15</sup>
- In middle and high school content areas, teachers should integrate disciplinary literacy skills (reading/writing lab reports, interpreting historical documents and across new media) to ensure that students are college and career ready; and
- Use data to target professional development necessary for teachers and school leaders to support literacy growth within intervention classrooms.

### **Implement Research-Based Literacy Intervention for Struggling Students**

- Target evidenced-based interventions that will enable students who are reading significantly below grade level – including English language learners and special education students – make rapid progress in reading.

### **Utilize Technology as an Important Tool to Help all Students Build Literacy Skills and in Intervention Programs Targeted at Special Education, English Language Learners and Struggling Readers**

- Leverage adaptive technology to collect and report data; and
- Employ software that continually adjusts the level of instruction based on student performance.

### **Develop a Culture of Literacy: School, Home and Community**

- Put school-wide literacy initiatives at the core of any school turnaround model;
- Provide students with access to print-rich environments (in books and digital formats) where children live, learn and play, giving students at all income levels the opportunity to practice and develop the habits of mind of good readers;
- Engage and empower families in their children's literacy development; and
- Increase time on task and leverage federal and state resources to extend the learning day for literacy development for struggling readers.

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Alliance for Excellent Education, comments submitted to the US Department of Education regarding the Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy grant competition, 2010.

## **Embed 21<sup>st</sup> Century Literacy Skills into Curriculum Aligned to Common Core State Standards**

- Integrate reading selections that emphasize the development of interdisciplinary knowledge in English, Reading, Language Arts, History, Science, Geography and the Arts;
- Teach reading and writing in multiple forms of text;
- Provoke critical thinking and discussion through both literary and informational and expository text; and
- Enable students to analyze, synthesize and evaluate information, data and multiple points of view – the literacy skills critical for 21<sup>st</sup> Century learners.

## **Conclusion**

This is a time of unprecedented educational challenge and opportunity for states, school districts, and our nation's students. We are faced with the critical need to improve literacy skills from birth through graduation to ensure our students are prepared for success in a 21<sup>st</sup> Century global economy. The Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy program offers states the opportunity to inspire the collaboration and innovation necessary to improve all schools and put all students on the path for success in school, the workplace and society.