ALLIANCE FOR EXCELLENT EDUCATION

PolicyBrief

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Confronting the Crisis:
Federal Investments in State Birth-Through-Grade-Twelve Literacy Education

Introduction

The majority of students leave high school without the advanced reading and writing skills needed to succeed in college and a career. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), more than 60 percent of twelfth-grade students scored below the proficient level in reading achievement, and 27 percent scored below the basic level in reading, which means these lowest-performing high school seniors do not even have partial mastery of the appropriate grade-level knowledge and skills.[1] Many other students who struggle to read and write well make up a substantial portion of the 1.2 million students who leave high school without a diploma each year.[2] The costs to the individual and the nation are staggering; just one class of dropouts will mean an estimated $154 billion in lost wages and earnings over their working lifetime.[3]

As technology advances and the American economy becomes increasingly knowledge based, students need higher literacy skills to understand written texts, use information to solve problems, and write effectively. Between 1973 and the present, the share of jobs in the U.S. economy requiring postsecondary education has increased from 28 percent to 60 percent.[4] Unfortunately, during this same period, the literacy performance of seventeen-year-olds on the NAEP flatlined.[5] Based on projections of the skill levels needed in rapidly expanding occupations, Georgetown University economist Anthony Carnevale and his colleagues project that over the next few years, the United States will be short nearly 3 million workers with the necessary analytic and technical skills to fill these jobs.[6] (See graphs on the next page.)

Other nations, in contrast, have made notable improvements in literacy achievement by focusing on their lowest-performing students. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which every three years administers the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in reading to fifteen-year-olds in thirty-four nations, examines policy reforms of education systems in relation to the outcomes they produce.[7] While the United States's average scores in reading were essentially unchanged between 2000 and 2009,[8] thirteen countries from a variety of starting points and with different cultural contexts made significant improvements in student reading achievement.[9] Most of these countries can attribute those gains to substantially reducing the number of students scoring below the PISA baseline reading proficiency.

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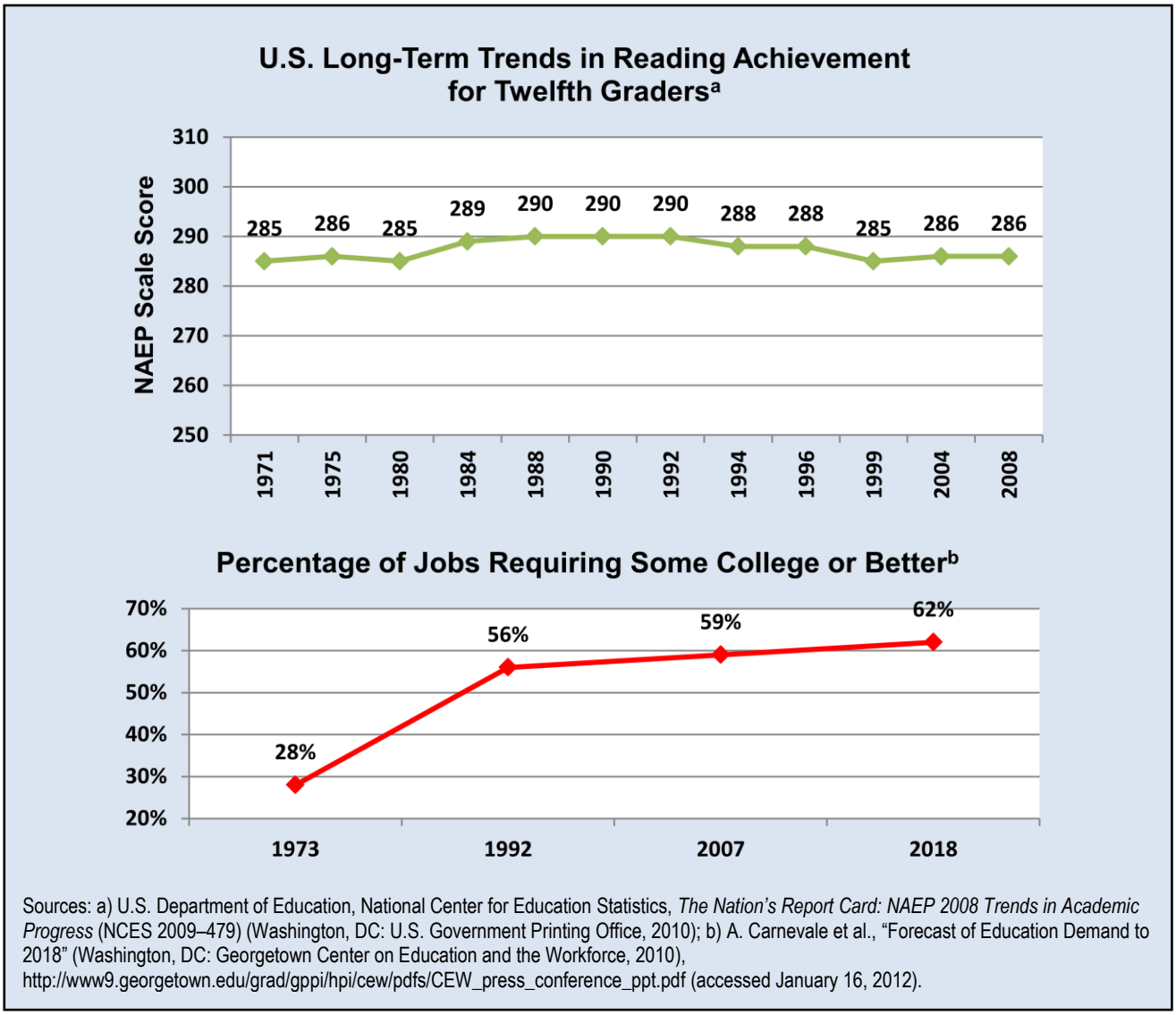


Sources: a) U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *The Nation's Report Card: NAEP 2008 Trends in Academic Progress* (NCES 2009–479) (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2010); b) A. Carnevale et al., "Forecast of Education Demand to 2018" (Washington, DC: Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce, 2010), http://www9.georgetown.edu/grad/gppi/hpi/cew/pdfs/CEW_press_conference_ppt.pdf (accessed January 16, 2012).

These results underline that poor literacy skills are not an inevitable consequence of low income. Nations such as Chile, Portugal, Poland, and Germany adopted comprehensive policies that set ambitious expectations for literacy achievement, aligned curricula, and instructional systems, and focused on the acquisition of complex, higher-order thinking skills. Economists estimate that increasing U.S. PISA scores by 25 points over twenty years would yield a $41 trillion increase in the nation's gross domestic product (GDP) over the next four decades—based on the earning power of a generation of young Americans with the requisite high-level literacy skills.[10]

In a global economy with rapid technological advances, some form of postsecondary education in the United States has become a basic requirement to attain the necessary knowledge and skills for academic and career pursuits. Unfortunately, low-level reading and writing skills seriously constrain graduates' options in selecting a pathway to a sustainable future. In *Reading Between the Lines*, ACT finds that students with greater literacy skills in high school had better achievement in math, science, and social studies on measures of college readiness. In addition, regardless of gender, racial group, or income status, the complexity of what students read turns out to be a major factor in their ability to handle credit-bearing courses in college. Students achieving the benchmark score or

higher in reading on the ACT college-readiness test were more likely to earn a C or better in an introductory, credit-bearing course in U.S. history or psychology. Unfortunately, of the 1.6 million 2011 high school graduates who took the ACT test, only one in four met or exceeded the college-readiness benchmarks in all four academic areas—English, reading, mathematics, and science.[11]

Furthermore, estimates of the proportion of college students under the age of twenty-five who need remedial courses show that about 44 percent of all students at public two-year institutions and 27 percent of all students at public four-year institutions enrolled in a remedial course.[12] Remedial education at the postsecondary level costs the nation an estimated $3.6 billion annually.[13] Additionally, students who enroll in a remedial reading course are more than three times less likely to earn a bachelor's degree within eight years than are students who take no remedial education courses.[14]

States are embracing college and career readiness as their major education reform goal. To succeed, policy leaders will have to confront the enormity of the college/career-readiness gap and redress long-standing shortcomings in the nation's high schools. Simply stated, the United States has no choice but to develop an outstanding education system to ensure that graduates have the advanced literacy skills—the ability to read and write proficiently using print and digital media—that are essential to succeed in a competitive, twenty-first-century economy and workplace.

This policy brief describes two state-led initiatives—the English language arts (ELA) common core state standards, and comprehensive state literacy plans—with regard to both their necessity and the body of evidence supporting their widespread implementation. This brief examines central elements that promise to create a new infrastructure for literacy development and education across the age spans. It concludes with a set of policy recommendations for federal action to invest fully in states' efforts to catalyze nationwide improvements in literacy achievement.

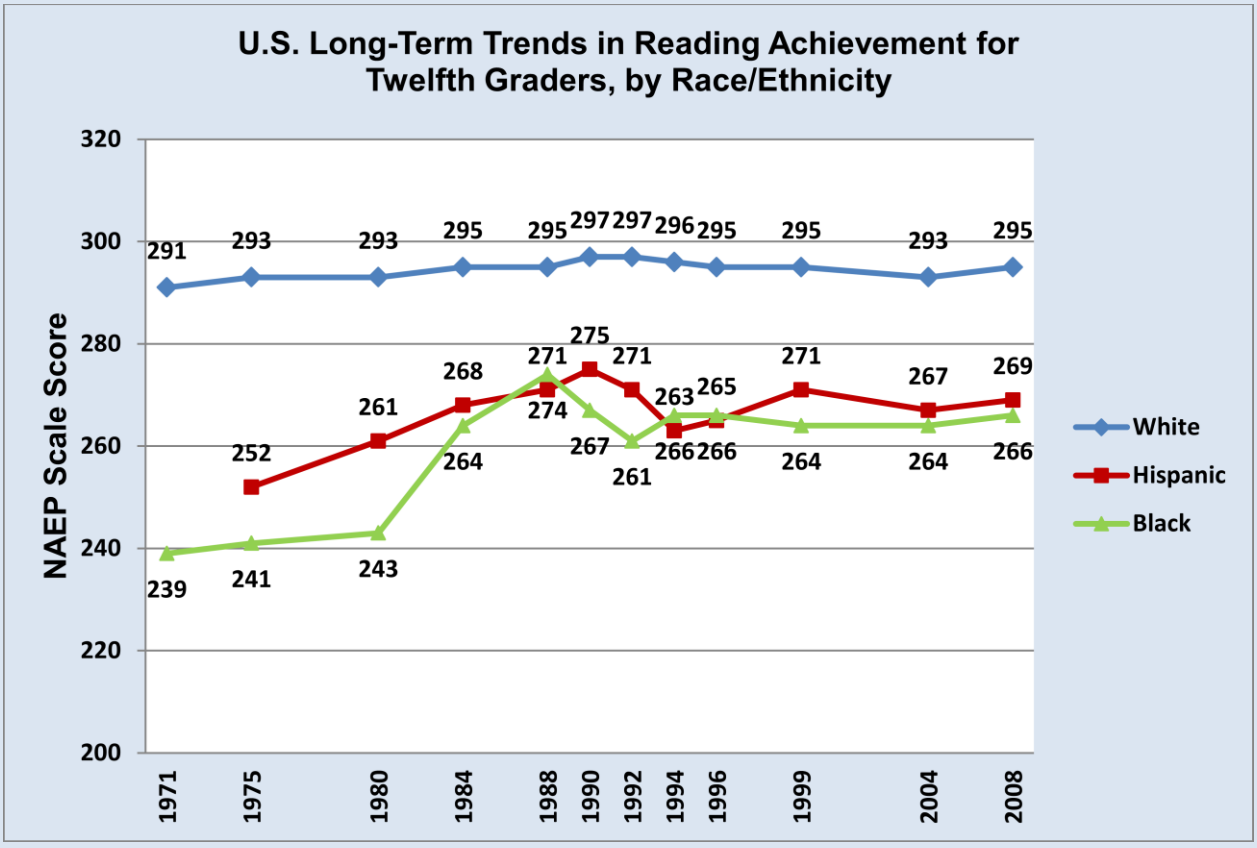
Lack of High-Level Literacy Instruction

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 literacy development beginning in the earliest years and extending through high school. During the past decade, however, major federal and state investments have centered on early literacy rather than content-area reading in middle and high schools. Even though concerted investment in K–3 reading produced the highest achievement in reading for fourth-grade students in thirty-three years,[15] it has proved insufficient to inoculate against failure in the upper grades or to reduce achievement gaps among low-income and minority students. Although the 2011 NAEP shows that the lowest-performing students are improving in grades four and eight to some degree, the improvement is too slow and not widespread enough.[16]

In the Alliance for Excellent Education report *Reading Next—A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy*, Biancarosa and Snow conclude 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.[17] However, the traditional secondary model of instruction, segmented into subjects with distinct curricular requirements, presents a major barrier to systemic improvements in students' literacy skills. The challenge is to connect the teaching of reading and writing to the core academic

areas as a key part of the broader effort to build the deep content knowledge and communication skills needed for a wide range of postsecondary environments.

In addition, emerging challenges as well as long-standing shortcomings in education systems and practices in the United States have contributed to the persistent gaps in literacy achievement based on race, income, and geography. Between 1980 and 2009, the number of English language learners (ELLs) more than doubled, from 4.7 million (10 percent of the school-age population) to 11.2 million (21 percent).[18] Given the increased diversity in students, many secondary schools tend to reduce cognitive demands in courses because of the broad range of their students' reading and writing skills. In fact, a number of studies show a steady downward trend across grades in the complexity of reading texts since 1962.[19]



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *The Nation's Report Card: NAEP 2008 Trends in Academic Progress* (NCES 2009–479) (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2010).

English Language Arts Common Core State Standards

The good news is that in recent years a number of state-led initiatives have been launched to dramatically improve students' literacy achievement across the grade spans. Forty-six states and the District of Columbia have adopted internationally benchmarked common core state standards, encompassing 90 percent of public school students. The ELA standards emphasize a progression of increasingly complex informational text coupled with task demands to develop sophisticated understandings and well-reasoned oral and written arguments. The standards are structured to

facilitate deeper learning through the application of reading, writing, listening, and speaking to history, social studies, and science.

These rigorous literacy standards, which integrate reading and writing into the fabric of content-area learning, can powerfully affect the quality of secondary education, but challenges remain. For one, their adoption requires a significant shift on the part of educators, students, and parents in understanding the advanced literacy skills high school students need in order to be college and career ready. Even more so, their implementation demands aggressive state and district action to develop system-level strategies to interweave literacy development across the curriculum.

Defining Learning Goals and Task Performance

The ELA standards identify a coherent progression of the key cross-disciplinary literacy skills that should be integrated into academic and career-oriented courses. These expectations require a major transformation in the instructional core within high school classes from English and mathematics to science and social science. The lack of integration of explicit reading and writing skills as part of specific disciplines is primarily responsible for the feeble progress in improving college readiness, even among high school students who have completed the prescribed and recommended courses.[20] The broad content coverage that is the traditional way of teaching high school subjects is not sufficient for students to acquire the analytic literacy skills essential to becoming self-directed, lifelong learners. Moreover, the developers of the ELA standards insist that instruction in reading, writing, speaking, and listening should be a shared responsibility within the schools, recognizing that dramatic improvements in literacy instruction and performance at scale are unlikely without the creation of a strong, visible, transparent common culture of instructional practice.[21]

Improving students' high-end literacy skills as part of their course work is key to reducing dropout rates, increasing deeper learning, and preparing them for postsecondary education. The act of reading and writing within content areas expands students' conceptual understanding while improving their abilities to read informational text, communicate effectively, and write persuasively. Yet high schools vary considerably in the degree to which reading and writing are incorporated into all students' course work. According to a national survey of writing practices at the high school level, students were rarely asked to complete writing assignments involving analysis and interpretation; assignments requiring more than a single paragraph occurred less than once a month in half of all high school classes.[22] Elaine Allensworth and John Easton, researchers at the Consortium on Chicago School Research, stress, "Figuring out how to help students do better in their courses and receive higher grades will simultaneously push students to higher levels of achievement (including student test scores) and keep more students in school."[23]

In a similar vein, Richard Elmore, professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, contends, "the real accountability system is in the tasks that students are asked to do."[24] They must know what they are expected to do, how they are expected to do it, and what knowledge and skills they need in order to learn the tasks. If task predicts performance, then educators must collectively develop high-quality student assignments and the success criteria that establish the demands for completing a project or product based on interrelated reading, writing, and thinking skills. Students become active learners through opportunities to process and organize information in relation to personally relevant learning goals. High-level learning fosters the dispositions students need to plan and complete a learning task; gauge their understanding and progress; and determine where, when, and how to apply effective reading and writing strategies.

New forms of classroom performance tasks shift the focus from the teacher to the learner by increasing the amount of time students read and write within disciplines and making explicit the goals of instruction and how students' work will be evaluated. Accordingly, high school classes become more relevant—students understand why they are doing something and why it is important. They are more inclined to engage in challenging work and meaningful application of knowledge through print forms and technology-enhanced tasks. Moreover, ensuring consistency in literacy demands across the curriculum will enable teachers to develop the pedagogical practices to evaluate particular aspects of students' work and teach critical reading and writing skills.

High-performing education systems develop performance frameworks—backward mapping from college-readiness standards to vertically aligned skill progressions—in order to connect curriculum tightly with the reciprocal skills of reading and writing across grade levels. They embed rich, authentic tasks as part of demanding projects to bridge content-area learning with high-level communication and thinking skills, calibrate well-defined criteria for student work and course grades, and transform and improve the quality of teacher/student interactions. Students engage in collaborative and independent inquiry to conduct research, pose questions, gather evidence, and write about and present their findings. Extensive exhibitions, electronic portfolios, or annual projects provide students with multiple opportunities to synthesize complex material and demonstrate proficiency in using and producing print and digital media.[25]

Exemplary high schools use performance-based learning within a "culture of revision."[26] This provides students who initially are unable to demonstrate proficiency on their first attempt with the opportunity to both practice and improve important literacy skills and raise their course grades. Many of these high schools use technology to increase the amount of relevant instructional time and provide new ways for learners to practice, make connections, and apply their knowledge and literacy skills. In addition, digital tools can enable a shift from norm-based educational decisionmaking—identification of what works for most students most of the time—to understanding what is needed by the individual student to improve reading and writing achievement.[27]

Applied technologies can empower teachers and students by providing a more modularized curriculum that is tightly connected to both content and performance standards for literacy. High-quality digital tools can provide teachers and students with formative analyses of learning and literacy development based on detailed learning measures and captured within a learning management system. The access to information collected in real time supports ongoing diagnosis and feedback to tailor the nature and pace of instruction. Students can exercise greater control over their own learning as well as their options for how to demonstrate mastery of deep literacy skills that are personally relevant, more diverse, and directly connected to producing evidence of individual learning.

Connecting Teaching Practice to New Expectations for Literacy Performance

Increasing students' reading and writing performance requires a substantial shift in teaching practice, particularly in secondary schools, where the quality of professional development has failed to keep pace with the enormous changes in the student population and the diversity of their learning needs. Data from multiple sources shows an overall pattern of poorly designed and implemented professional improvement practices even in states where policies on staff development exist. In 2004, more than 60 percent of U.S. teachers responding to the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) reported that they had not had even one day of training in supporting the learning of special education students or ELLs during the previous three years.[28] The 2008 SASS data shows further decline in the percentage of teachers receiving more than eight hours of training in teaching ELLs in a three-year period—from 36 percent in 2004 to 20 percent in 2008.[29]

Middle and high school subject-area teachers need extensive training and support to interact with students in ways that deepen students' understanding of a subject area by connecting thinking and understanding with strategic reading and effective writing. High school teachers often assume that students will acquire these high-level literacy skills on their own. Moreover, most schools are not organized to cultivate a shared culture of practice that infuses literacy across course work in ways that are relevant and meaningful to students. Biancarosa and Snow state, "Often in today's schools one teacher has no idea what another is teaching; this is particularly true in high schools. The vision for an effective literacy program recognizes that creating fluent and proficient readers and writers is a very complex task and requires that teachers coordinate their instruction to reinforce important strategies and concepts."[30]

The point is not that content-area teachers should become reading and writing teachers, but rather that they should emphasize the reading and writing practices that are specific to their subjects.[31] The challenge is to identify and decompose high-leverage practices; find consensus on the most important teaching tasks; and develop, support, and assess teachers' ability to use these tasks effectively.[32] Teachers need to know how to execute aspects of accomplished teaching skillfully that yield the desired reading and writing outcomes. These include evaluating what students already know and do in relation to skill targets and progressions; breaking down difficult tasks into manageable segments; facilitating productive discussions; providing meaningful and appropriate feedback; and explicitly modeling reading, writing, and thinking strategies.

High school students routinely report that they do not take their studies seriously, feel disengaged in the classroom, and are alienated from school. Schools spent the last decade calibrating their practices to a system that was focused on moving a few more students each year over a low, fixed, bar on state tests. The resulting entrenched approaches to teaching subject matter, low-level task assignments, and inconsequential teacher-student interactions all contribute to adolescents' growing disengagement with school after grade five.[33]

Furthermore, while the number of beginning teachers has steadily increased over the past twenty years, so has the workforce turnover, resulting in a significant drop in teacher experience.[34] In 1987–88, the modal, or most common experience level, was fifteen years; by 2008, the typical teacher was in his or her first year of teaching.[35] Improving students' reading and writing skills rests squarely on greatly enhancing the professional competence of educators; for that task, states and districts must reshape their role and the strategies at their disposal to improve teaching.

Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy Program

The good news is that a second major state initiative was launched to catalyze systemic improvements in literacy achievement. In 2010, Congress authorized the Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy (SRCL) program—a robust state-led initiative to improve literacy development and education across early education, elementary schools, and middle and high schools. To date, the SRCL program—the only targeted federal funding stream for state birth-through-grade-twelve programs—supports the formation of a state literacy team made up of experts and relevant stakeholders tasked with developing comprehensive state plans. Forty-eight states received formula funding from the U.S. Department of Education to form state literacy teams and craft comprehensive plans to create seamless literacy development and education systems across the age spans.

Building on the planning phase, in 2011 a competitive grant process awarded a total of $183 million in discretionary grants to Georgia, Louisiana, Montana, Nevada, Pennsylvania, and Texas to implement their respective plans. These targeted initiatives boost implementation of the new ELA standards by fostering the individual and collective responsibility of educators for improving students' literacy achievement through research-based literacy instruction and interventions. States that received competitive funding will award sub-grants to local school districts to provide students with explicit, systematic, and developmentally appropriate instruction in reading and writing, including vocabulary development, reading comprehension, and the use of diverse texts. The intent is to position literacy as a cornerstone of other state efforts such as advancing college and career readiness, improving educator effectiveness, turning around low-performing schools, and providing support systems for ELLs and students with disabilities.

The SRCL program stresses improving educator effectiveness as a priority. Improving the quality and impact of teacher-student interactions within high school course work depends on a solid understanding of exactly what constitutes effective teaching. Teachers and school leaders need an explicit and common language and a lens for their practice. Deborah Ball, dean of the School of Education at the University of Michigan, says, "With a practice-focused curriculum for learning to teach reading and writing skills, prospective and practicing teachers would learn to use high-leverage practices to teach high-leverage content, much of it derived from the common core state standards."[36] The overall aim is to couple teachers' skill development tightly with research-based instructional practices that lead to improvements in reading and writing achievement.

Essential to the success of the SRCL program are effective models of professional learning—job embedded, ongoing, and research based—which provide teachers with expertise in literacy instruction specific to a particular setting. Teachers need extended opportunities to observe, receive feedback, and reflect with others on how to interact with students in ways that deepen their understanding of a subject area by connecting thinking and understanding with strategic reading and effective writing. Teachers work in teams with responsibility for implementing multiple instructional elements in a consistent and coordinated way. Furthermore, research by the former National Staff Development Council, now known as Learning Forward, shows that the extent of professional development matters. Intensive professional development for an average of forty-nine hours a year boosted student achievement by approximately 21 percentile points, whereas limited time for professional development—ranging from five to fourteen hours total—showed no statistically significant effect on student learning.[37]

Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy (SRCL) Program's 2011 Grantees

Through a competitive process, the SRCL program's six state grantees provide sub-grants to local education agencies (LEAs) to implement the state's literacy plan. State plans share common elements such as leadership, assessment, and data analysis; standards-based instruction; design of effective instructional frameworks; and the use of multi-tiered systems of support.

Georgia ($26,055,704): Consistent with the state literacy plan, the grant will build an infrastructure to provide evidence-based, vertically articulated professional learning for administrators, teachers, and parents. LEAs will provide continuous teacher collaboration and ensure that teachers use data to enact tiered instruction to meet student needs. Technology applications will provide computer-adaptive testing; support for student engagement with high-quality digital texts; data analyses and reporting; and state technical assistance.

Louisiana ($28,950,693): The state plan provides detailed guidance on implementing and sustaining a replicable model of literacy instruction built on research-based best practices and modeled after the state's highly successful K–12 literacy pilot. LEAs must use a feeder system to implement a continuum of literacy instruction from birth through twelfth grade. Technology is woven into every component to enhance student engagement, provide prototypes for literacy instruction, increase teacher effectiveness, and support data-based decisionmaking.

Montana ($7,720,180): The program is designed to improve literacy outcomes and close achievement gaps through sub-grants to sites serving low-income students, American Indian students, students with disabilities, and ELLs. The state established implementation teams and contracted with an external, independent evaluator to ensure that comprehensive, effective literacy instruction, based on evidence and ongoing data analysis, will be effectively implemented.

Nevada ($14,475,391): The state plan builds on current state initiatives and supports broad collaboration to build district and school capacity to examine research, align instruction with standards, and use formative and summative assessments. During the five-year grant period, the Nevada Department of Education anticipates awarding sub-grants that will provide approximately 400,000 Pre-K–12 students and 22,000 teachers with statewide, intensive, individualized, cross-discipline literacy instruction as well as diverse professional development activities, training, technical assistance, networking, and peer coaching and support.

Pennsylvania ($38,601,043): Sub-grants will support alignment of literacy instruction and state improvement initiatives and the use of Bernhardt's Multiple Measures Data logic model to create a culture of data-driven decisionmaking. Through the application of digital technology and Universal Design for Learning (UDL), teachers will receive real-time data and technology tools that can provide multiple pathways to express and represent information as well as creative options for developing literacy persistence, stamina, and motivation.

Texas ($67,551,826): Local implementation utilizes a Literacy Line model—a vertical collaborative among feeder-pattern campuses that includes pre-K, elementary, middle, and high schools. The goal is to align instruction and programs for literacy development and ease key transitions for students across their entire learning career. Each Literacy Line must implement the Texas State Literacy Plan; meet regularly; develop a cohesive, vertical, data-informed plan; and form an online professional learning community to foster communication and coordination.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, "Striving Readers Preparing for the Future: Spring Meeting and APR Webinar," *Readers' Register: Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy (SRCL)* 1, no. 2 (2011); U.S. Department of Education, "Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy Program," http://www2.ed.gov/programs/strivingreaders-literacy/awards.html (accessed February 17, 2012).

Through the SRCL program, states are beginning to put into place instructional delivery and teacher development systems to ensure that the quality and depth of assigned student work is consistent with the ELA state standards. States are building capacity by creating educator networks to support peer-to-peer learning on implementation issues and to solve problems of practice. Literacy and

subject-area specialists have begun to translate the standards into practice by creating instructional frameworks and tools that integrate literacy into course work, providing prototypes for student literacy tasks, and delivering access through online platforms. In addition, scaling up effective literacy instruction requires states to work with postsecondary institutions to: (1) align literacy expectations and benchmarks that signal college and career readiness; (2) share responsibility for reducing remediation rates and for improving college completion; and (3) strengthen teacher preparation and licensure to ensure that teachers are competent in delivering effective literacy instruction.

Implementation of these models must contain concrete ways that district and schools will address the ELA state standards, data-based decisionmaking, professional learning, and differentiated instruction to target literacy challenges. Capacity-building measures focus on training district and school leaders and teachers to use high-quality and timely data to improve instructional practices, policies, and literacy achievement. Leadership is critical in setting the conditions for improving literacy instruction as part of content-area learning. School leaders establish literacy teams, focus on challenging literacy goals and changing instructional practice, instill collective responsibility for reading and writing proficiency, and create structures for teacher collaboration.

Increasingly, districts and schools are using technology to increase students' access to rich digital content and to provide timely feedback essential to accelerating improvements in reading and writing. The application of the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL)—a framework based on cognitive and learning sciences—is an important aspect to effectively using technology.[38] UDL reduces learning barriers by customizing learning opportunities based on specific and up-to-date knowledge of students' skill targets and progressions. These design features allow students to access content in a variety of forms and express what they know through different means.

The SRCL scale-up program, established to ensure that all students receive high-quality literacy instruction, warrants careful evaluation on a national scale. Much can be learned about which literacy elements are effective by attending to the challenges and variations in how states and districts weave literacy instruction throughout the curriculum and implement interventions in different contexts. Combining action with research can contribute to a greater understanding of the factors that impact the implementation and effectiveness of literacy education within and across districts and states.

Federal Policy Recommendations

Students' needs and the nation's economic well-being demand immediate action. Pervasive low literacy achievement will erode the social and economic well-being not just of particular locales or populations, but also of the nation as a whole. Large-scale survey data shows that direct measures of literacy appear to have a significant impact on per capita gross domestic product, productivity, and economic growth well after schooling has been completed.[39] At least 93 million adults function at low literacy levels that inhibit their ability to succeed in college or the workforce.[40]

It is time for the federal government to partner with all states in fully investing in comprehensive literacy plans to ensure that every student graduates from high school with the advanced skills necessary for postsecondary success. First, although Congress passed an appropriations bill to provide $160 million for the SRCL program in Fiscal Year (FY) 2012, only the six states currently awarded will receive continuation funds for district-level sub-grants. While existing SRCL program

grantees require renewed funding, the remaining states urgently need support to implement their birth-through-grade-twelve literacy plans in districts and schools. Funding for this program should be restored to no less than the $250 million originally provided to the program in FY 2010.[41]

Second, the pending reauthorization of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), currently known as No Child Left Behind, offers the best opportunity to provide the means for states to implement a seamless system of literacy development and education in early childhood, elementary, and secondary levels. The Literacy Education for All, Results for the Nation Act (LEARN Act) (S. 2740 and H.R. 4037), introduced into both houses of the 112th Congress, will provide much-needed federal support for robust, state-led efforts to strengthen literacy. ESEA reauthorization should incorporate the LEARN Act, which allocates resources across elementary, middle, and high schools, which will ensure that all U.S. students receive the support they need to graduate from high school college and career ready. The Senate's proposed reauthorization of ESEA incorporates this critical language, and the House proposal should as well.

In addition, federal policymakers should support the following recommendations:

- **Support the voluntary, state-led movement to adopt college- and career-ready English language arts (ELA) standards and aligned assessments** to ensure that students receive a consistent, high-quality education. ESEA reauthorization should reinforce the hard work already under way in states to better prepare students for the demands of college and a changing workforce. The majority of states are in the process of making complementary changes in curriculum, instruction, assessment, and teacher professional development. At the same time, most states report that finding adequate resources to support all of the activities necessary to implement them is a major challenge.[42]

  The federal government should encourage the transition to rigorous standards and aligned rich assessments for college and career readiness. The federal government should maintain its commitment to helping states cover the costs of training educators and developing and implementing high-quality assessments that measure the full range of college- and career-ready standards. Federal funding for next-generation standards and assessments should be maintained.

- **Enhance the role of states in improving literacy instruction** by supporting the implementation of state-led comprehensive literacy plans for students from birth through grade twelve. Additionally, federal grant making can encourage states and districts to develop actionable plans for improving content-area literacy instruction as the foundation of secondary school reform efforts. Federal funding should enhance state capacity to improve literacy instruction by (1) supporting state literacy teams; (2) fostering promising innovative practices and the effective use of technology to improve reading and writing, especially for students performing below grade level; and (3) providing high-quality, research-based professional development. Technology-based learning and assessment systems can generate data and feedback to continuously improve students' reading and writing performance throughout the grade spans.

  While historically there has been a disparity in funding across the age span, the federal government should ensure that there is an equitable investment for middle and high school students that is targeted toward those students who are several years behind grade level, as well as whole-school initiatives to support explicit literacy instruction across the content areas.

- **Support and invest in increasing the quality of teacher education and professional development** to ensure that teachers acquire the competencies to provide literacy instruction aligned to the ELA standards. Teacher education and professional development providers should be held accountable for the competency of teachers in providing standards-based literacy instruction within content-area learning.

  Federal policy should support highly effective professional training in literacy instruction for new and practicing teachers along with the application of technology to connect teachers to the tools, resources, and expertise needed to provide effective literacy instruction. States should be encouraged to revise accountability policies for educating and licensing teachers and school leaders to ensure that they have the knowledge and skills to provide schoolwide, evidence-based reading and writing instruction throughout the grade spans.

- **Invest in ongoing research and evaluation** to promote better understanding of adolescent literacy and the factors that impact the implementation and effectiveness of literacy programs. Federal policymakers could support a research agenda to build on the knowledge base about literacy development, evidence-based instruction, and the application of Universal Design for Learning and innovative technologies to increase students' access to rich digital content and advance literacy achievement.

  In particular, the number of studies on the literacy and adolescent language of minority students is limited. The Institute of Education Sciences could conduct studies to provide more definitive guidance on programs for English language learners, identify evidence-based instructional strategies, and evaluate approaches for improving teaching effectiveness.

Conclusion

The federal government has joined with states to begin addressing the urgent need to dramatically improve the literacy achievement for all children and young adults in the United States. Incorporating high-level literacy skills in course work requires better student-adult interactions, the best available pedagogy, and deeper engagement with challenging content, empowered and enhanced through digital media. The press to improve the student's literacy achievement affords an enormous opportunity to reboot the system and place the individual learner at the center of the high school experience. More than ever, it is time to build on these initial efforts toward the goal of developing statewide comprehensive birth-through-grade-twelve literacy initiatives essential to ensuring that all young people graduate with the advanced skills that are essential for success in the modern world.

This brief was written by Mariana Haynes, PhD, a senior fellow at the Alliance for Excellent Education.

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Endnotes

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