



ADVANCING ADOLESCENT LITERACY:

Pennsylvania's Keystones to Opportunity
Comprehensive Literacy Program

AN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

APRIL 2014



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

According to the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), commonly called the Nation's Report Card, more than 60 percent of eighth and twelfth graders read and write below the proficient level. For particular subgroups, the figures are even more disturbing: more than a third of Hispanic and African American twelfth graders, for example, read below the basic level. The federal Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy (SRCL) grant program was created to address systemic gaps in literacy instruction and development across early education and elementary, middle, and high schools. This federal support for state-level action to dramatically improve literacy outcomes comes at a time when the demands on students graduating from high school are changing radically. In order to compete with young people across the globe, U.S. students must have reading and writing proficiency that is commensurate with their international peers.

Through its federal SRCL grant, Pennsylvania provides an early road map and shows how taking comprehensive action to improve literacy instruction can benefit traditionally underserved students and boost learning outcomes while improving overall teaching. The full report* profiles the core processes and professional learning that Pennsylvania educators undertook to dramatically improve instruction and literacy achievement with a specific focus on improving standards-based literacy practices in middle and high schools.

To date, the Pennsylvania SRCL grant program, called Keystones to Opportunity (KtO): Pennsylvania's Vision for Sustainable Growth in Reading Achievement, has awarded \$36.7 million in competitive sub-grants to fifty-three districts and two charter schools to improve language and literacy using evidence-based instruction and interventions. To build professional capacity, state project leaders harnessed the network of twenty-nine regional educational service agencies that serve member school districts to model data-based decisionmaking and design professional learning around evidence-based literacy practices. It identified an optimal mix of evidence-based practices to increase teachers' effectiveness in integrating reading and writing into course work and providing students with systemic supports to ensure that all students are able to attain the competencies in the English Language Arts (ELA) state standards. The report describes five KtO baseline training modules with a focus on the implications for middle and high school teachers—Reading Apprenticeship®, Literacy Design Collaborative; Universal Design for Learning; Navigating Content with English Language Learners; and Supporting Learners with Special Needs.



*Full report available at <http://all4ed.org/reports-factsheets/advancing-adolescent-literacy-pennsylvanias-keystones-to-opportunity-comprehensive-literacy-program/>

Improving literacy achievement statewide is an immense challenge and requires disciplined investigation into what programs and practices are working and for whom and how well they are working. Statewide evaluators for this project—the Collaborative for Evaluation and Assessment Capacity at the University of Pittsburgh and SAS EVAAS for K–12—compile district demographic data, measures of student literacy achievement, and data on classroom learning environments. Positive results from the first year of KtO implementation are beginning to emerge, including increased educator capacity to connect data with evidence-based literacy practices, improvements in the quality of classroom instructional environments, and gains on achievement tests in students’ language development and reading comprehension.

Sustained attention is needed to identifying students’ specific literacy and learning needs and developing high-leverage practices to address them. Investments in comprehensive literacy initiatives afford an enormous opportunity to work toward a shared conception of effective literacy instruction, to establish points of focus for training and support, and to build a common language and repertoire of tools and practices to develop students’ literacy achievement.

The report includes a series of recommendations for policymakers at the federal, state, and local levels:

Federal policy should

- continue funding the SRCL grant program;
- expand its support for comprehensive state literacy initiatives to all states; and
- increase its investments in a research agenda to increase knowledge of literacy development and instruction for students in pre-K through grade twelve.

States should

- review their current literacy plan and develop one that vigorously implements a comprehensive birth-through-grade-twelve literacy initiative that will ensure that students have the literacy competencies to succeed in college, careers, and life.

Local education systems should

- create supportive teaching and learning conditions in middle and high schools for robust implementation of literacy plans that reflect the instructional shifts in the ELA college- and career-ready standards;
- support schools in building a collaborative culture of inquiry and data use to design high-leverage instruction and interventions to address the specific learning needs of struggling readers and writers, including English language learners and students with disabilities;
- ensure that all core content teachers share responsibility for advancing literacy within rigorous course work and provide high-quality professional learning and adequate time for instructional staff to use data and connect it to practice; and
- create student-centered learning environments that integrate research-based strategies to deepen students’ conceptual understanding by connecting critical thinking and problem-solving with strategic reading and effective writing.

Read the Alliance for Excellent Education’s full report, available at <http://all4ed.org/reports-factsheets/advancing-adolescent-literacy-pennsylvanias-keystones-to-opportunity-comprehensive-literacy-program/>.

Acknowledgments

This executive summary and the full report were written by Mariana Haynes, PhD, a senior fellow at the Alliance for Excellent Education.

*The **Alliance for Excellent Education** is a Washington, DC–based national policy and advocacy organization that works to improve national and federal education policy so that all students can achieve at high academic levels and graduate from high school ready for success in college, work, and citizenship in the twenty-first century. www.all4ed.org*

Support for this paper was provided in part by Carnegie Corporation of New York and GE Foundation. Opinions expressed are those of the Alliance and do not necessarily represent the views of Carnegie Corporation and GE Foundation.

© Alliance for Excellent Education, 2014.





ALLIANCE FOR
EXCELLENT EDUCATION