

# Center for Research on Learning Researchers Promote Adolescent Literacy

**E**ach year, roughly 5 million high school students do not read well enough to understand their textbooks. A quarter of them can't read road signs or newspapers.

Researchers at KU's Center for Research on Learning are finding that solutions to this formidable problem are complex, requiring a mix of instruction and support services that involve more than just classroom teachers.

"Reading is a language process, and it does not exist by itself," said Barbara Ehren, a research associate at the Center for Research on Learning. "You cannot treat it as a single entity instructionally."

Literacy also encompasses listening, speaking, writing, viewing and presenting.

"The connections among those processes are really what we have to pay attention to when we design instruction for students," she said. "When we want students to learn to read, we really need to pay attention to how they listen, how they speak and how they write, as well. The reality is that if we really want to deal with reading, we have to deal with literacy."

Toward that end, CRL has developed the Content Literacy Continuum, a framework that describes five levels of literacy

support that should be in place in every high school. It considers both student needs and the realities of high schools.

"The continuum emphasizes how important it is to infuse literacy instruction throughout the high school curriculum," said Mike Hock, CRL's associate director of administration. "It emphasizes that a host of high school teachers with different types of expertise will be required to meet the needs of these adolescents who have not developed the literacy skills they need to learn and succeed."

Deficits in literacy skills can be compounded by the fact that many content teachers—those who teach science or social studies, for example—at the high school level believe students should have been taught these skills in earlier grades. These teachers are not prepared to teach reading, writing and the other literacy skills their students may need.

Unfortunately, even adolescents who were successful readers in elementary school may struggle in middle and high school because reading demands change.

"Their textbooks may have unfamiliar features and structures," Hock said. "Adolescent readers must be able to read narrative or informational texts, which they didn't encounter in

## For Parents

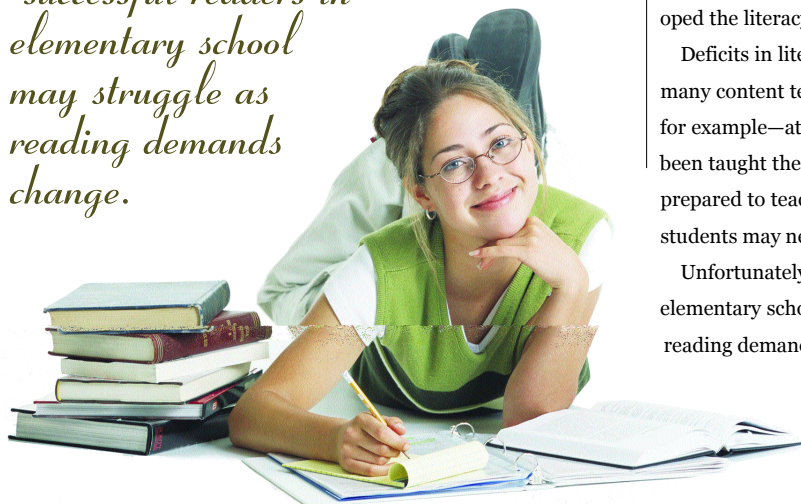
### What to look for in your adolescent's school experience:

- Does the school provide directed reading instruction for all adolescents?
- Does reading instruction meet the need of high, average and below-average achievers?
- Does the reading program provide continuous evaluation and feedback?
- Are there continuing opportunities for reading instruction and discussion?

### Hints and tips for families with adolescents:

- Provide a positive model for reading.
- Ensure that a variety of interesting and high-quality reading materials are available.
- Create a culture at home that emphasizes a positive attitude toward and a value for reading.
- Set an expectation and provide encouragement for reading.
- Stay involved in the academic life of your child.

*Even adolescents who were successful readers in elementary school may struggle as reading demands change.*



# Levels of the Content Literacy Curriculum

What should all high school reading programs include? According to the KU Center for Research on Learning, the following levels of literacy support should be in place in every high school to ensure today's students are prepared to succeed.

| level 1  | level 2   | level 3   | level 4   | level 5   |
|--|---|---|---|---|
| Ensuring mastery of critical content in all subject area classes.  | Weaving learning strategies within rigorous general education classes.  | Supporting mastery of learning strategies for targeted students.  | Developing intensive instructional options for students who lack foundational skills.   | Developing intensive clinical options for language interventions.   |
| Subject-matter teachers use tools such as graphic organizers and other instructional tactics to promote understanding and mastery of content for all students. | Teachers incorporate selected learning strategies into their content-based instruction. An example of this is the Paraphrasing Strategy, a set of specific steps to follow when paraphrasing reading materials. | Students with literacy problems receive specialized, intensive instruction from someone other than the subject-matter teacher (such as a special education teacher, study skills teacher or resource room teacher). | Students learn content literacy skills through specialized, direct and intensive instruction from reading specialists and special education teachers. | Students with underlying language disorders receive individual or small-group language therapy from speech pathologists in collaboration with other support personnel teaching literacy skills. |

elementary school. Adolescents are expected to comprehend increasingly difficult material and may lack knowledge of specific reading strategies for comprehension. Complex, subject-specific vocabulary can hinder reading fluency and comprehension."

In the past year, CRL was invited to participate in a series of national workshops concentrating on the challenges of adolescent literacy. Its Strategic Instruction Model was chosen as an example of a research-validated literacy program that works.

"During the past decade, much of the literacy research has focused on preschool and primary grades," Hock said. "The lessons learned there may provide a viable blueprint for teaching adolescents how to improve their reading proficiency."

Hock and his colleagues would like research on adolescent literacy to be given as high a priority in this decade as early reading was during the 1990s.

"The reality is that 15-year-olds struggling with reading typically pose challenges that are different from those of 5-year-olds just beginning to read," he said.

Current legislation—such as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, with its emphasis on reading instruction in the primary grades—holds promise for students of the future.

"We hope that over time, because of No Child Left Behind and other initiatives, no adolescents will arrive at high school ill-prepared in foundational literacy skills," he said. "In the meantime, our work must respond to the unique needs of adolescent readers if we are to prepare them to successfully navigate the ever-increasing literacy demands of our information-driven society." 🍎

*This article was contributed by Julie Tollefson, communications director for the Center for Research on Learning in the School of Education.*

**The Center for Research on Learning** is an internationally recognized research and development organization that works to solve problems that limit individuals, quality of life and their ability to learn and perform in school, work, home and the community. Since its inception in 1978, the Center has completed more than \$60 million worth of contracted research. Its products have touched the lives of hundreds of thousands of teachers, students and adults with disabilities in the United States and several other countries.