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Strong Foundations

Elementary, middle school literacy

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The drum beat for altering the course that many U.S. high schools are following is quickening and growing louder. For example, at the 2005 National Educational Summit on High Schools in Washington, D.C., a spate of new reports underscored the pivotal role that high schools play in developing the intellectual capital for our country's future and how our high schools need to be transformed to fulfill that expectation. Two common threads ran through these reports:

- *Standards must be raised to enable graduates to compete in the new economy.*
- *The achievement gap must be closed for the growing number of struggling adolescent learners*.

The likelihood of being successful in "raising the bar" for high school graduates is extremely remote unless we find a way to simultaneously "raise the floor" for the middle-school students who are entering high school. This paper argues that the time and place to build a strong literacy foundation for high school excellence is the late-elementary and middle school years.

To help us better understand how to create a solid literacy foundation for high schools, we will explore three topics:

1. the magnitude and nature of the challenge
2. the core elements of a solution
3. next steps

The Magnitude and Nature of the Challenge

At least three key factors warrant making the upper-elementary and middle school grades the primary targets for improving the literacy levels for struggling adolescent learners:

1. the profile of struggling adolescent learners
2. the growing expectations that are being placed on high schools to raise the standards for all students
3. the skill set and professional preparation of most current high school teachers

Each of these factors will be discussed below.

A Profile of Struggling Adolescent Learners

Nearly 8.7 million fourth- through 12th-grade students struggle with the reading and writing tasks that are required for them to cope with the demands in their subject-matter classes (Kamil, 2003). A recently completed study of 320 struggling high school freshmen in a large urban district found that 74 percent of all ninth-grade students scored at the "unsatisfactory" or "basic" levels on the state assessment test in reading. Those in the "unsatisfactory" level were at the third percentile in decoding and word recognition and the first percentile in reading comprehension. Those at

the "basic" level were not faring much better: They were reading at the ninth percentile in decoding and word recognition and at the eighth percentile in reading comprehension (Hock, Deshler, Marquis, & Brasseur, 2005). Many adolescents report that their difficulties with reading and writing account for their decision to drop out of school (Foorman, 1998). Alarmingly, only about 70 percent of all U.S. high school students graduate. Even more noteworthy is the fact that for students of color (African-American and Hispanics), this figure drops to nearly 50 percent.

In spite of increased attention and funding directed toward children in early elementary grades, the frequently referenced "fourth-grade slump" continues to exist. Since the gap between proficient and struggling readers grows exponentially over time, the end result — as nationally mandated assessment data continue to attest — is that at-risk high school students are failing on measures of reading at epidemic rates. Predictably, students who attend schools in urban and rural low-income neighborhoods are most at risk of failing to learn to read well.

A word of caution is in order here on interpreting the student performance data cited in the myriad of educational reports being issued**.** In short, although all states are operating under a common mandate for proficiency, there is considerable variation in the rigor of the various assessments and how states define proficiency and set cut-scores. For example, the percentages of eighth-grade students who passed the state assessment in South Carolina, Wyoming, North Carolina, and Texas were 21 percent, 39 percent, 8 percent, and 88 percent, respectively. However, when a common metric is used (the National Assessment of Educational Progress), the numbers look drastically different: 24 percent of the students in South Carolina, 34 percent of the students in Wyoming, 29 percent of the students in North Carolina, and 26 percent of the students in Texas scored at the proficient level (McCombs, Kirby, Barney, Darilek, & Magee, 2005).

It is important for policymakers, parents, and educators to consider the ramifications of such differences on high school performance, as well as postsecondary education and future employment opportunities. Regardless of which assessment is used, the statistics concerning the literacy competence of adolescents in this country paint a grim picture. This picture is especially troubling when viewed in relation to the growing expectations placed on those who leave high school for either postsecondary education or the job market.

Growing Expectations

The U.S. job market is undergoing dramatic changes due, among other things, to the prominent role that computers and technology are playing in our economy. The growing presence of computerization in all sectors of the economy has affected the mix of jobs available, the way in which wages are structured, and the types of skills required of workers. On the labor market's demand side, the share of

Connecting the dots...to SIM

This article, adapted from a paper prepared for a Congressional conference on the Challenges of High School Reform (February 2006), argues that late-elementary and middle schools must establish strong literacy foundations to enable students to excel in high school.

The points made throughout have significant ties to the philosophy and research of the Center for Research on Learning and the Strategic Instruction Model. The article draws directly from current KU-CRL studies when it presents a profile of struggling adolescent learners.

The article's description of a continuum of literacy instruction reflects our recent work in developing the Content Literacy Continuum, a five-level framework that should be in place in every school and that encompasses increasingly intensive support for students. Although not mentioned specifically, Content Enhancement Routines and Learning Strategies are key players in the section on instruction.

Finally, the article's treatment of professional development incorporates new research on instructional coaching by KU-CRL's Jim Knight.

menial jobs has increased modestly, whereas the largest job growth has been in occupations requiring significant education. Specifically, it is estimated that between 2000 and 2010, more than two-thirds of all jobs will require some postsecondary education. The jobs requiring the most education and offering the highest pay are the fastest growing (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2003).

In an economy heavily influenced by computerization, the workers who are most successful are those who can engage in "expert thinking" (identifying and solving uncharted problems for which there are no rule-based solutions) and "complex communications" (interacting with others to acquire or interpret information, to explain it, or to persuade others of its implications for action) (Levy & Murnane, 2004). To perform effectively in these two domains, workers must demonstrate a command of critical information in an area *along with* an understanding of how the information is linked together and how things work. These relationships allow a person to generalize from specific cases to classes of problems — a vital skill.

These trends have very clear implications for how students spend their time in high school: *They need to be taking rigorous classes that prepare them to enter into and successfully compete in this new environment.* Although some students are well prepared to meet these challenges, large percentages of American high school graduates are not (National Governors Association, 2005). If high schools are going to be successful in raising the bar, they need to limit the amount of time and financial resources directed at teaching the fundamental literacy skills that students should have acquired *before* entering high school. In essence, highly targeted and intensive efforts need to be directed at students during their upper-elementary and middle school years.

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Letting High School Teachers Do What They Do Best

To prepare high school students to meet the growing expectations awaiting them after graduation, high school teachers need to enhance their expertise and teaching effectiveness in their subject areas. Because knowledge is exploding and the standards students are expected to meet are being raised, it is important that high school teachers who are trained in subject-matter areas (such as science and mathematics) be able to add to and reframe their existing knowledge base to provide cutting-edge knowledge to their students in a learner-friendly manner. Being able to adequately prepare the existing cadre of high school teachers to meet these expectations is a daunting task — especially when between 7 percent and 15 percent of all high school teachers in core classes are teaching out-of-field (that is, in content areas in which they have no formal certification).

It is unrealistic to expect these same teachers to acquire a sophisticated knowledge and skill set that would enable them to teach foundational reading skills to struggling readers as well as continue to hone their subject-matter expertise; yet both are critical. Being successful in teaching reading (especially to struggling learners) requires professional preparation comparable to that subject-matter teachers acquire to teach their curriculum. Education policy supporting a practice whereby subject-matter teachers assume responsibility for large numbers of struggling readers would reduce the overall ability of these teachers to raise the standards for overall student outcomes in core curriculum areas. The result would be to compromise *both* the amount and quality of subject matter taught *and* the reading instruction offered. *Thus, a long-term policy for building a strong literacy foundation for high school excellence must be grounded in strategies that address literacy problems before students arrive in high school.*

Finally, research on changing schools underscores how impervious high schools can be to school reform efforts. In a large study of change in America's classrooms during the past century, Larry Cuban (1993) concluded: "The

results of this study are unambiguous, at least on the subject of how much teacher change is possible: the potential for change in the practical pedagogy that teachers have constructed is far greater in the lower grades than in high school. Middle schools that have embraced elementary school-based approaches…are promising candidates for investment of resources" (p. 279). To that end, let us turn our attention to factors that are essential for closing the literacy gap in struggling adolescent readers *prior to* their entry into high school.

Core Elements of a Solution

A strong literacy program designed to prepare struggling readers to enter high school ready to succeed in rigorous courses is founded on three cornerstones. These cornerstones should serve as the pillars of any literacy program whose goal is to prepare struggling readers to enter high school ready to succeed in rigorous courses:

1. instruction as the linchpin
2. structures that support instruction
3. professional development for improving instruction

Instruction as the Linchpin

Without question, the main function of schools is to ensure that all students learn critical content and skills. Thus, the primary duty of administrators and teachers should be to ensure that instructional conditions that enable students to be successful are in place. Struggling students learn best when their teachers carefully select critical content or skills, use well-documented teaching practices, and do so in a coordinated fashion within and across grade levels. Regrettably, many secondary school administrators are not instructional leaders. Although many things around a school must be taken care of (facilities, staffing, busing schedules, etc.), these things must not consume more time nor be more prominent on any agenda than instruction, learning, and student progress. *Until leaders and teachers relentlessly focus on things that are core to the instructional process, student outcomes will not improve markedly* (Elmore, 2005).

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With specific relevance to literacy, to sufficiently accelerate the development of adolescents who are markedly behind in literacy skills, middle schools should put three things in place:

1. a screening system to determine the literacy profile/needs of struggling readers as they enter middle school
2. a continuum of literacy services representing differing levels of intensity and instructional focus
3. progress monitoring to measure student responsiveness to instruction

Screening system. A screening instrument should be administered as students enter middle school to identify the various reading needs that students have. At a minimum, such screening should give a basic measure of word analysis skills, fluency, and comprehension, although the latter may not be necessary since the vast majority of students will struggle with comprehension. Further, decision rules for interpreting screening results should be clearly defined and adhered to so students get assigned to the kind of instruction that best matches their needs.

Continuum of literacy instruction. Because the literacy needs of struggling adolescent readers are so diverse, the most effective literacy programs are ones that offer instruction at various levels of intensity, are comprehensive, and are well coordinated. For example, some students benefit when teachers use graphic organizers to help them master critical subject-matter content; others need learning strategies embedded in content material, explicit strategy instruction, or instruction in basic skills or even the basic language elements that are the foundation of literacy competence. The screening instrument mentioned above will help determine what level of literacy support is needed for each student (Lenz, Ehren, & Deshler, 2005).

Instruction that is especially intensive and focused is necessary for students reading several years behind grade level (at or below the third-grade level). Classes

of no more than 15 students that meet for at least one hour per day are required. A highly skilled teacher would use a combination of whole-class, small-group, and one-on-one instruction. These classes should have computer technology to provide supported reading practice, quality feedback, and error correction. The focus of instruction should be on word recognition, fluency, vocabulary, and strategies for encouraging persistence. As students master the basic skills of reading, the instructional focus needs to shift to comprehension strategies with continued emphasis on vocabulary building. Finally, it is important to provide well-supplied classroom libraries of leveled/high-interest materials that capture student interest and increase the amount of reading students do (Torgesen, 2005).

Progress monitoring. Because remedial instruction is costly (smaller class sizes, highly trained teachers, etc.), it is important to carefully monitor how responsive students are to the instruction offered and to ensure that they make sufficient progress to close the achievement gap by the time they are ready to move to high school. Measures designed to probe student performance on targeted skills should be taken at least four times per year to enable teachers to make instructional adjustments and to minimize the use of instruction that is not yielding results.

Structures that Support Instruction

For well-designed instructional programs to fully realize their potential, they must be surrounded by organizational supports. In other words, the instructional needs of students must be determined first, and then organizational supports are designed to meet those needs. As Elmore (2005) succinctly states: "The schools that succeed in changing practice are those that start with the practice and modify school structures to accommodate it" (p. 4).

The structures that support an instructional mission of dramatically improving student literacy outcomes include the following:

1. Opportunities for teachers to plan together for the purpose of coordinating instruction across classes so critical skills taught to struggling readers are reinforced and used by all teachers, thus reducing the fragmentary learning experience that most secondary students encounter.
2. Flexibility in class schedules that allow students to move from one reading class to another as soon as they meet mastery targets — even if this happens *during* a semester.

In short, when the overriding, relentless focus of schools becomes quality instruction, and student learning becomes a "cornerstone" of what drives a school, organizational and administrative structures and practices become variables that are continually adjusted to be responsive to instructional needs and ensure that the specified results are achieved.

Professional Development for Improving Instruction

Professional development that is coordinated, addresses major learning needs of students, is grounded in validated principles of adult learning, and is directly linked to the accountability system for teachers and administrators can be the single most important variable in improving student outcomes. Although significant resources are invested in professional development in most districts, many of these funds are not clearly tied to directly improving student outcomes and are not a part of the accountability system in the district (Deninger, Curtis, & McIntyre, 2005)

Increasingly, schools have made instructional coaching one of the centerpieces of their staff development program. When properly deployed, coaches are partners in the change process. They work one-on-one with teachers to make it easier to adopt the instructional methods that can make a difference to students' success. Instructional coaches are team members who help pull together and lead the right combination of school staff to reach common goals. Instructional coaching can be a highly effective strategy when it facilitates teacher learning tied to targeted student outcomes, is well coordinated, and regularly measures changes in teaching practices (Knight, in press).

Next Steps

A recent study by the Consortium on Chicago School Research used an "on-track indicator" to determine the probability that a student will graduate from high school (Allensworth & Easton, 2005). Results showed that students who stay on track (that is, earn at least five credits and have no more than

one semester F in their freshman year) are three and one-half times as likely to graduate from high school as students who do not stay on track. The study highlights how devastating freshman-year failure can be. Specifically, just one semester F decreases the likelihood of graduating from 83 percent to 60 percent; a second semester F decreases the likelihood of graduating to 44 percent; and only 31 percent of students with three semester Fs graduate.

These findings underscore the vital importance of making certain that middle school students enter high school prepared for the rigorous course demands they will face. The key to transforming students from struggling to competent learners is to put in place programs that bring a "laser-like focus" on teaching and learning.

For years, the majority of federal and state policy initiatives and resources have been directed at younger children. For example, in 2002, federal funding for Head Start was $6.7 billion, and for Title I in grades K-6 it was $10.49 billion. By comparison, federal funding for Title I programs in grades 7-12 was only $1.85 billion (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2004). Two relatively new federal initiatives, Reading First (for children in grades K-3) and Striving Readers (for students in grades 6-12), reflect a similar pattern of marked inequities in federal expenditures by granting $1.04 *billion* for Reading First versus $24.8 *million* for Striving Readers.

Striving Readers, although a relatively small investment, represents a symbolically important acknowledgment of the unique challenges faced by struggling adolescent readers in secondary schools. Given the importance of putting students on a solid foundation as they enter high school, it would be logical and reasonable for policymakers to insist that Striving Readers projects focus the majority of their efforts on upper-elementary and middle schools so we can quickly add to our knowledge base of how to better serve struggling adolescent readers before they encounter the stringent requirements of high school.

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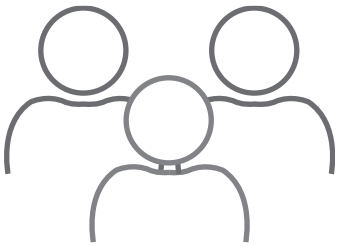
Instructional Coaching



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More information

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