

Using Student Engagement to Improve Adolescent Literacy



Congress passed the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act as a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Signed into law by President Bush in January 2002, the NCLB Act has brought many significant changes to schools nationwide. This Quick Key Action Guide was developed to assist educators and administrators in building capacity to comply with NCLB requirements that relate to increasing student engagement to improve adolescent literacy achievement.

Preparation for the worlds of work, college, and community involvement requires young people to be highly skilled in reading for understanding and in writing with clarity.

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The NCLB Act and Adolescent Literacy

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act promotes significant changes in our nation's schools. This *Quick Key Action Guide* assists educators and administrators in understanding NCLB with a specific focus on the needs of adolescent learners who are building their literacy across content areas. Examples and suggestions are included to assist education stakeholders in the consideration of reform efforts at the school, district, and state levels.

Adolescent literacy—the reading and writing skills of middle and high school students—is critical to student success in all areas of the curriculum. Preparation for the worlds of work, college, and community involvement requires young people to be highly skilled in reading for understanding and in writing with clarity. Yet, while NCLB has fostered serious consideration of the literacy learning needs of young children, less attention was initially paid to supporting adolescent literacy development.

In 2003–04, that lack of attention began to be addressed with two ambitious federal efforts. The Bush administration proposed the Striving Readers Initiative to fund development and demonstration of research-based interventions that help improve the skills of teen students who read below grade level. In addition, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Vocational and Adult Education, and the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services convened the Adolescent Literacy Research Network, which focuses on multiyear investigations into the needs of adolescent learners and the teaching environments that support them most effectively.

Over the next few years, the results of these federal efforts and similar investigations taking place in universities across the country will significantly advance our knowledge of how to address adolescent learning needs. However, educators and administrators need help now to implement the current best practices for the students in our middle and high schools. This *Quick Key Action Guide* provides ideas and resources for practices that have shown promise in the development of our adolescent readers and writers.

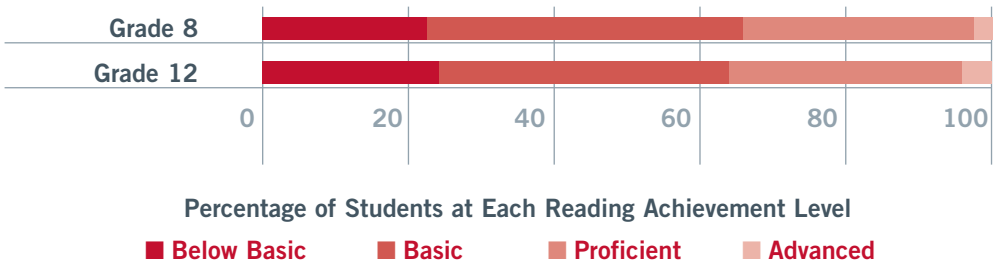
Adolescent Literacy Challenges

Literacy instruction does not end with reading success in early grades. As students move to middle and high school, new challenges emerge that can affect literacy achievement. Even for students who achieve early reading and writing success, the literacy demands of middle and high school can pose substantial challenges. Older students must be able to comprehend more complex texts; determine the meaning of obscure, unfamiliar, and technical vocabulary; use higher-order thinking skills to analyze a wide variety of literacy and expository texts and media; and develop skills for expressing their ideas by writing informative, persuasive, and creative texts. For students who enter middle and high school with compromised reading and writing skills, these challenges are even more daunting.

In 2002, the reading and writing assessments of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) were administered to the nation's students in Grades 8 and 12. NAEP used the following achievement-level definitions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003a, 2003b):

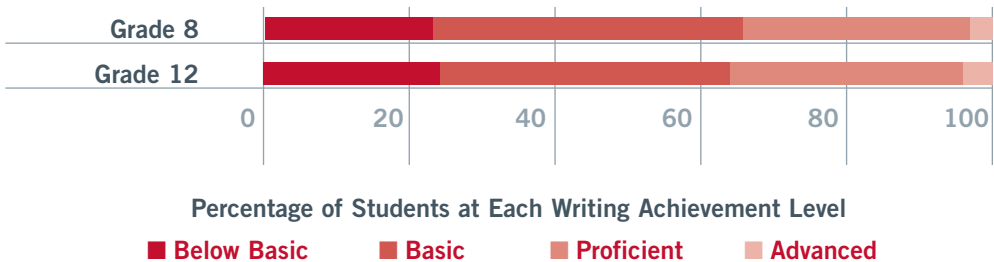
- Below Basic—Achievement that is less than partial mastery.
- Basic—Partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills that are fundamental for proficient work at each grade.
- Proficient—Solid academic performance for each grade assessed. Students reaching this level have demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter, including subject-matter knowledge, application of such knowledge to real-world situations, and analytical skills appropriate to the subject matter.
- Advanced—Superior performance.

Figure 1. NAEP Reading Achievement Levels in Grades 8 and 12



Source: National Center for Education Statistics (2003c, 2003d)

Figure 2. NAEP Writing Achievement Levels in Grades 8 and 12



Source: National Center for Education Statistics (2003e)

The 2002 NAEP data provide some provoking information about the challenges facing our students and teachers in middle and high schools:

- Approximately 68 percent of Grade 8 students and 64 percent of Grade 12 students are reading below the proficient level.
- Approximately 69 percent of Grade 8 students and 77 percent of Grade 12 students are writing below the proficient level.
- Less than 6 percent of students in Grades 8 and 12 performed at the advanced level in reading.
- Approximately 2 percent of students in Grades 8 and 12 performed at the advanced level in writing.

Given that colleges and work places both seek youth who are skilled readers and writers, these data do not bode well for the future success of the vast majority of our high school graduates.

Data are not the only source of information about the literacy challenges in our nation's schools. Interviews with educators and parents point to two factors affecting literacy achievement: student skills and student engagement. The two factors are fundamentally linked: Educators must work to build engagement levels if they hope to support students in meeting higher standards.

Why Focus on Student Engagement?

Middle and high school educators need both the skills required to teach adolescent literacy and the knowledge of the elements of student engagement. Educators who teach reading and writing skills without addressing student engagement are unlikely to yield substantial improvements. As anyone who has spent time with middle and high school students can attest, attempting to build the skills of disengaged adolescents is a futile enterprise. Whether expressed as defiant noncompliance or passive “checking out,” the student who refuses to learn will succeed in that effort.

Students who are motivated to learn, on the other hand, can succeed even in less-than-optimal environments. Students who are engaged in learning are actively seeking meaningful information that makes sense in their lives—often because they see an immediate connection to real-life experiences. As defined by Blachowicz and Ogle (2001), engagement has multiple facets including motivation and purpose.

Student engagement and the literacy practices of adults can make a difference, as shown in recent research:

- Studies show that academic achievement is associated with engagement in reading and classroom-related activities. This association is found for various racial/ethnic groups (Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, African Americans, non-Hispanic whites) and both gender groups alike (Finn, 1993).
- A recent international study of reading performance concluded that “15-year-olds whose parents have the lowest occupational status but who are highly engaged in reading achieve better reading scores than students whose parents have high or medium occupational status but who are poorly engaged in reading” (Kirsch, de Jong, LaFontaine, McQueen, Mendelovits, & Monseur, 2002, p. 106).

While educators might wish for classrooms full of students who arrive already motivated, there is in fact much that educators can do to help create student motivation and engagement. To make literacy instruction effective in the language arts classroom and across the curriculum, efforts must be made to engage adolescent learners.

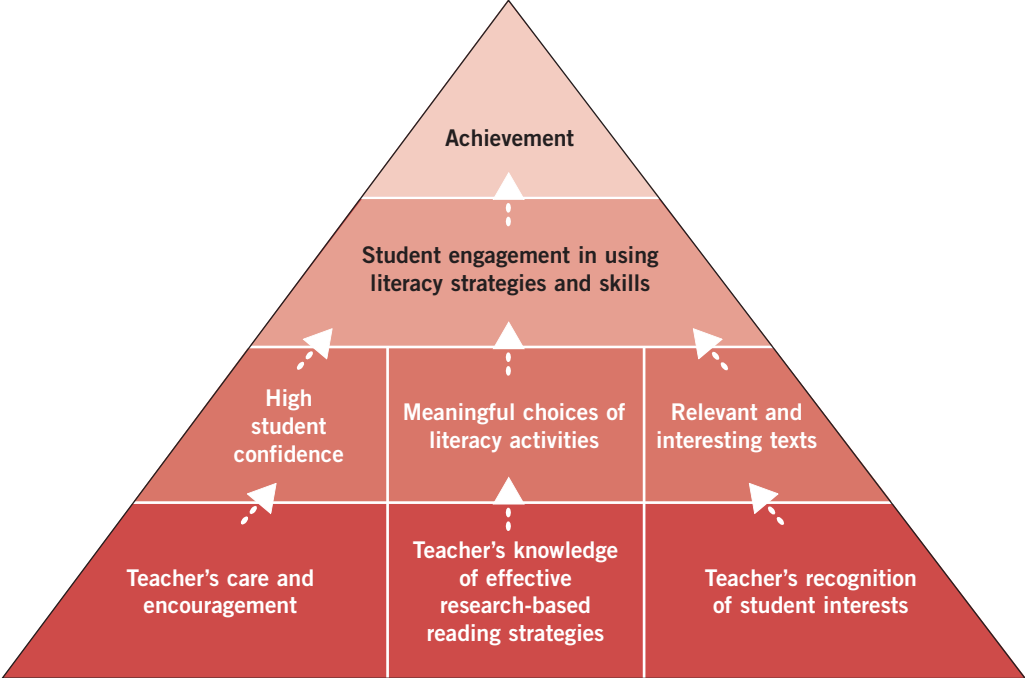
What Are the Key Elements of Student Engagement?

The words “student engagement” might conjure up images of teachers using hip hop to deliver lessons on Shakespeare. The reality is less colorful and more difficult. Following are four key elements of student engagement:

- **Student confidence.** Students with high self-efficacy—the belief that they can influence their own behavior—are more likely to engage in school-related reading than those with low self-efficacy (Alvermann, 2003). While this is true of many kinds of learners, it is especially important at the adolescent developmental stage, characterized as it is with a strong desire to avoid public failures and be seen as competent.
- **Teacher involvement.** High school teachers contribute to adolescent self-confidence when they care about them as individuals and encourage them to learn (Dillon, 1989; Dillon & Moje, 1998). The caring teacher who believes that students can succeed can have a positive Pygmalion Effect—whereby believing in potential creates potential—on adolescents.
- **Relevant and interesting texts.** Relevance of curricular materials and topics is essential to student success, requiring teachers to know about their students’ interests. While adolescents are developing the adult capacity to be motivated by extrinsic interests such as keeping a job, most require significant intrinsic interest in materials in order to persist in difficult tasks. In addition, developing literacy strategies and skills that are typically not of themselves interesting is made easier when students have a meaningful goal that requires those skills (Greenleaf, Jimenez, & Roller, 2002). For example, students may be highly motivated to learn about the characteristics of persuasive writing when engaged in an attempt to persuade school officials to relax a dress code. This type of connecting information is often not provided in classroom instruction but can make a world of difference in student engagement.
- **Choices of literacy activities.** Adolescent learners sometimes experience a world of rules and regulations imposed on them by adults who seem to not understand their world. The physical and emotional changes they experience are a further source of feelings that they have no control over in their lives. Teachers who create opportunities for students to choose among assignments and texts will find students less resistant to completing their work (Wigfield, 2004, p. 67). Students who also understand the goal of their chosen assignments and feel a sense of control over how they achieve that goal are more likely to work hard even in the face of difficulties. Teachers need to be skilled at developing a choice of assignments that balance student interests with effective research-based strategies for developing reading and writing skills.

Figure 3 illustrates the relationship among the key elements of student engagement.

Figure 3. Key Elements of Student Engagement



What Can Schools, Districts, and States Do to Improve Student Engagement?

For adolescent learners, the continuous development of literacy skills depends on factors that go beyond school texts and the traditional model of teachers as the sole disseminators of knowledge. Teachers need to be able to create an engaging learning environment, implement research-based instructional strategies, augment students' motivation to learn, and offer opportunities to use literacy skills across the curriculum (Meltzer, Smith, & Clark, 2001). Administrators and policymakers from schools, districts, and states need to deliver the resources and support teachers in the following areas:

- **Curriculum**
- **Instruction**
- **Assessments**
- **Professional development**

Each of these areas is covered in more detail within this booklet.

Curriculum

School Action Option

- Use interdisciplinary project-based curricula to support literacy learning. Projects engage adolescent learners in group-based inquiry about questions or problems of interest to them. Typical features of project-based curricula include questions anchored in real-world problems; investigations and artifact creation; collaboration among students, teachers, and community members; and the use of technological tools (Krajcik, Blumenfeld, Marx, Bass, Fredricks, & Soloway, 1998).

District Action Options

- Coordinate efforts to align reading and writing instruction across the curricula to create a coherent experience for students. Teachers in content areas other than English may not see themselves as teachers of reading and writing—and may not have the skills and knowledge needed to do so effectively. Buy-in can be created through the modeling of comprehension-building activities, which lead to increased student achievement as measured on standardized assessments. Districts need to develop both coordinated approaches to reading and writing instruction and professional development plans to build skills across the faculty so that student reading and writing in the mathematics classroom is held to standards as high as those used in the English classroom.
- Leverage funding sources to augment school libraries and connect to neighborhood libraries. Facilitate the purchase of a variety of curricular materials that are relevant for adolescent learners. Use resources supported by NCLB, such as the Improving Literacy Through School Libraries initiative (see Funding Sources and Initiatives).

State Action Options

- Change the teacher and administrator credential process so that all middle and high school educators study and develop skills in student engagement and in the teaching of reading and writing.
- Seek partnerships with universities and community-based organizations that have experience in the area of student engagement. Use their help to develop state policy that positions student engagement for attention.
- Develop support systems that can help districts plan for professional development in student engagement. This support might include identifying best practices and state resources that districts can use for planning and implementation.

Practical Example

Fenway High School in Boston seeks to organize curriculum in all grades around central themes with support of literacy instruction and engaging activities. All ninth graders take a reading and writing assessment at the beginning of their freshman year and participate in a required reading and writing workshop. Foundations of literacy courses support students' development as independent readers and writers as well as foster a community of learners. Fenway's science curriculum aims at engaging students with activities that they can relate to real-life experiences. This school, with 65 percent of its 270 students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, was named a Breakthrough High School by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (2005) because of its compelling outcomes: 91 percent student attendance rate, 90 percent annual graduation rate, and 90 percent college admission rate.

School Action Options

- Address student reading interests. Rich literacy environments encourage student engagement. Educators can help students develop their reading interests by providing multiple types of texts, such as biographies, autobiographies, digital media, and a wide variety of both narrative and expository texts. Teachers can help to direct students and build upon their existing knowledge base through the use of interest surveys and classroom dialogue. Teachers also can encourage practices of wide reading and accessibility to information at all instructional levels to increase background knowledge, including high-interest, low-readability materials such as The Why Files (whyfiles.org). Teachers can model engagement by making their own reading and writing practices evident to students. Teachers should be sure to carry books and other reading materials with them, talk about written pieces they are working on or struggling with, and be open to media that students may find more intriguing such as digital texts.
- Get students involved in their own learning by:
 - > Showing care and concern for students as individuals. That, combined with showing that teachers are invested in student reading progress, can make a difference in student achievement (Dillon, 1989; Dillon & Moje, 1998).
 - > Helping students to set goals for reading and plans for achievement. Research shows that students with reading difficulties use more comprehension strategies when clear goals for a comprehension task and feedback on the progress are offered (Schunk & Rice, 1993).
- Teach reading strategies that are engaging and motivational, including:
 - > Graphic organizers as visual tools. These tools help students recognize different organizational patterns of text across subject areas and enable them to collect, interpret, and remember information. For example, timelines help sequence events in history lessons; cause-effect charts help explain relationships in science lessons.
 - > Techniques like underlining key terms and ideas, making connections, and reciprocal teaching that entails the teacher and students taking turns assuming the role of teacher. These techniques help to keep students focused on content and application.
 - > Classroom documents created by and available to students. These documents also can engage students and promote skill building. Activities might include composing summaries for single texts and creating synthesis statements for multiple texts on specific content areas. These approaches help to ensure in-depth learning and long-term memory.

- Engage adolescent students in using literacy skills through a variety of ways:
 - > Cooperative learning approaches that include time for student sharing and discussion of what they have read, listened to, and viewed engage students in their own work and build upon previous knowledge and expertise.
 - > Effective before-reading strategies help promote active reading. Such strategies include clarifying the purpose for reading, making predictions about text, activating prior knowledge, and articulating questions about content.
 - > Teacher modeling and strategies of applying prior knowledge, self-monitoring for breaks in comprehension, and analyzing new vocabulary also can positively affect student engagement.
 - > The use of multiple texts—especially texts with conflicting points of view—can help students become more responsible for clarifying meanings, understanding and debating opinions, and making informed judgments.

District Action Options

- Integrate technology by setting up infrastructure and hardware to make computer-assisted learning possible. Building upon existing digital literacy skills helps to engage students. Organize programs to challenge and encourage teacher and student efforts to integrate technology as a tool in learning. A Learning Point Associates study on high-poverty, high-technology, and high-achieving schools found that these schools strongly emphasize technology use within the core curriculum, explicitly teach technology content, and are concerned with improving students' computer skills (Sweet, Rasher, Abromitis, & Johnson, 2004).
- Use technology to enhance student participation and collaboration by doing the following:
 - > Engage students in actual literacy activities like reading and writing with computers, which has been proven effective (Kamil, Intrator, & Kim, 2000).
 - > Promote student collaboration through the use of e-mails and instant messages for content-area projects.
 - > Allow more student-centered learning by using interactive Web sites in science lessons.

State Action Options

- Ensure sufficient funding for district technology infrastructure and libraries so that students can access a wide variety of print and electronic texts.
- Provide model exemplars of student work and teacher lesson plans that illustrate how to integrate multiple text forms into engaging and rigorous student assignments.
- Engage the business community to provide examples of the ways workers are expected to develop and use multiple text forms.

Practical Example

Memphis City School District in Tennessee has set up an office of instructional technology to work collaboratively with all schools in the district to provide training and professional development on district standard instructional software application and technology. The Memphis Teaching and Learning Academy provides staff development for teachers and the integration of technology into the curriculum. Teachers are trained to use content standards as guidelines for planning technology-based activities.

Assessments

School Action Options

- Reshape the learning context by encouraging student participation in the creation of assessments and design of rubrics. The more engaged students are in the assessment and evaluation process, the more they are able to understand the concepts upon which they are being judged. Thoughtful use of students as peer reviewers can significantly enhance student internalization of standards.
- Reshape the teaching context by providing time for teachers to meet for a review of lessons and the student work that results.
- Focus on comprehension to improve student reading skills by providing professional development for teachers of all subject areas. Student comprehension of text is one of the keys to improving student test scores and achieving adequate yearly progress.

District Action Options

- Provide expert teachers or reading specialists who can train teachers across subject areas, help them to identify student reading difficulties, assist individual struggling readers, and offer early intervention programs.
- Develop districtwide anchor assessments that teachers can use to align classroom assessments to district expectations. If district assessments also are linked to state performance expectations, they can provide the needed link between classroom work and state measures of adequate yearly progress.

State Action Option

- Review state assessments to ensure that they promote district and school practices that both challenge and engage adolescent learners. For example, state assessments might include not only tests of basic skills but also locally managed assessments of project-based learning. Student projects would be assessed locally with an audit process at the state level to ensure that local assessment results reflect high expectations.

Practice Example

Fayette County Public School District in Kentucky placed a reading specialist in all of its 11 middle schools and five high schools to help students with reading skills and to help teachers address reading needs. It saw increasing student scores on both the statewide test and other standardized tests administered by the district (Blackford, 2002).

Professional Development

School Action Option

- Allot time and resources to support teacher participation in professional development that supports the change process. Professional development that is built into the school calendar and school day provides time for sustained learning and practice of new strategies. Other ways to build upon professional practices that recognize the stress of teacher workloads include using building-based permanent substitute teachers, thoughtfully reframing teaching schedules, and paying teachers for professional development programs held in the evenings or during the summer.

District Action Option

- Provide comprehensive training for all teachers, especially content-area teachers, to learn effective, research-based instructional strategies and literacy activities. This training should be followed up with peer mentoring and coaching to address unique classroom situations and ensure the change of teacher practices.

State Action Option

- Create and support leadership academies to motivate and cultivate talented school teachers and leaders. Leadership academies can be the springboard to increase student achievement through the development of school personnel trained in effective instructional leadership skills. Leadership academies help the best teachers become instructional leaders who provide support and guidance in their respective buildings.

Practical Examples

Taylor High School in Taylor, Texas, provides time in the regular school day for departmental and grade-level meetings. Departmental meetings include staff development time at the end of each six-week interval on scheduled early dismissal days.

Boston Public School teachers have an ongoing and intensive professional development programs provided through the Collaborative Coaching and Learning initiative that aims at increasing teachers' instructional capacity on literacy strategies (Boston Plan for Excellence, 2002, 2004). In each eight-week cycle, a small group of teachers in the same school studies together a strategy from readers' or writers' workshops, observes the content coach demonstrate the strategy in the classroom, takes turns with colleagues teaching the strategy, and participates in preconference and debriefing meetings for each demonstration.

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Funding Sources and Initiatives

In alignment with the focus on adolescent literacy and achievement, a variety of new initiatives have been proposed and funded at the federal level. For the purposes of this *Quick Key*, only appropriated initiatives are included. (For more information on proposed legislation, visit www.ncrel.org/litweb/adolescent/policy.php.)

No Child Left Behind Act—Improving Literacy Through School Libraries Initiative

www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/pg7.html

This initiative seeks to improve literacy skills and academic achievement by providing students with increased access to up-to-date school library materials, a well-equipped, technologically advanced school library media center, and well-trained, professionally certified school library media specialists.

Striving Readers Initiative

www.ed.gov/programs/strivingreaders/index.html

This initiative seeks to support underachieving high school students by determining the effectiveness of intervention programs and providing for widespread dissemination of the research. This initiative was funded at \$24.8 million for fiscal year 2005.

Key Resources From Learning Point Associates

Adolescent Literacy Web Site

www.ncrel.org/litweb/adolescent/. This Web site consists of resources, tools, and information on adolescent literacy to assist practitioners, administrators, policymakers, and other stakeholders as they gather and apply knowledge of necessary elements of curriculum and instruction for adolescents.

All Students Reaching the Top: Strategies for Closing Academic Achievement Gaps

www.ncrel.org/gap/studies/thetop.htm. This report, written by members of the National Study Group for the Affirmative Development of Academic Ability, provides practical recommendations to help all students—particularly minority and low-income students—reach high levels of academic achievement.

A Bibliography of Research and Resources on Technology and Engaged Learning

www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/techbib.htm. This Web site presents research efforts and resource materials on the impact of the use of technology and electronic media on outcomes of student learning.

Everything Secondary Administrators Need to Know, But Are Afraid to Ask: Understanding the Pragmatic Adolescent Literacy Planning

www.ncrel.org/litweb/adolescent/pragmatic/adolescent.pdf. This publication outlines the elements of successful literacy instruction for adolescent students and discusses the design of effective literacy programs in middle and high schools.

Seeing Themselves as Capable and Engaged Readers: Adolescents and Re/Mediated Instruction

www.ncrel.org/litweb/readers/index.html. This publication discusses multiple research-based ideas and strategies for engaging adolescent students and includes a set of educator guidelines and adolescent views on engaging texts.

Using Multiple Texts to Teach Content

www.ncrel.org/litweb/texts/. This research-based publication provides background and strategies for the use of multiple texts to engage readers and increase critical thinking skills.

Using Technology to Enhance Literacy Instruction

www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/content/contareas/reading/li300.htm. This Pathways to School Improvement Critical Issue explores how educational technology is nudging literacy instruction beyond its oral and print-based tradition.

Using Young-Adult Literature to Enhance Comprehension in the Content Areas

www.ncrel.org/litweb/young/index.html. This paper presents ideas for the integration of young-adult literature and includes comprehension strategies and a list of novels and sources.

Additional Resources

Adolescent Literacy Resources

www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/hs/reading.html

This Web site features a listing of the Education Department's efforts in the field of adolescent literacy as well as research and evaluation reports, noteworthy practices, and additional links.

Helping Striving Readers Read at a High School Level

www.nccte.org/webcasts/description.aspx?wc=144 (video) or

www.nccte.org/videos/pdf/20040726b.pdf (speech text)

In this 2003 video from the national High School Leadership Summit, Peggy McCardle, the lead program director for the Adolescent Literacy Research Network, speaks about the progress of five literacy research projects and what teachers can do about adolescent literacy in today's classrooms.

International Reading Association

www.reading.org/resources/issues/focus_adolescent.html

This organization of literacy professionals offers publications, position statements, and online resources for those who work with adolescent learners. Its *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* gives practical, classroom-tested ideas grounded in research and theory.

Teacher's Guide to International Collaboration on the Internet

www.ed.gov/teachers/how/tech/international/index.html

This guide was developed by the U.S. Department of Education to help teachers and students to "reach out" globally. It is a helpful resource involving the use of technology (i.e., e-mail, Web site publishing, videotaping, and videoconferencing) that provides ample opportunities for interactive and engaging activities in content-area project work.

Suggested Readings

Adolescent Literacy: A Position Statement

www.reading.org/downloads/positions/ps1036_adolescent.pdf

This position statement by the International Reading Association Commission on Adolescent Literacy calls for the issue of adolescent literacy to get attention from educational policymakers, school curricula planners, and the public.

Context for Engagement and Motivation in Reading

www.readingonline.org/articles/handbook/guthrie/index.html

This article is based on a chapter of *Handbook of Reading Research: Volume III* by John Guthrie and Allan Wigfield. Guthrie focuses on engaged reading and its consequences as well as instructional contexts that foster reading engagement and motivation.

Improving Reading and Writing Skills in Language Arts Courses and Across the Curriculum

www.sreb.org/programs/hstw/publications/briefs/ResearchBrief-ReadingandWriting.pdf

Gene Bottoms and Amy Bearman give steps to help career-bound students meet the High Schools That Work reading goal in this Southern Regional Education Board research brief.

Reading for Understanding: Toward an R&D Program in Reading Comprehension

www.rand.org/publications/MR/MR1465/MR1465.pdf

This report by the RAND Reading Study Group features 14 reading experts who give strategic guidelines for a long-term research and development program supporting the improvement of reading comprehension.

Reinventing Adolescent Literacy for New Times: Perennial and Millennial Issues

www-personal.umich.edu/%7Emoje/pdf/Journal/ReinventingAdolescentLiteracyForNewTimes.pdf

Writing for the *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, authors Elizabeth Moje, Josephine Young, John Readence, and David Moore argue that there is a need for a renewed focus on the literacy learning of adolescents.

Student Engagement at School: A Sense of Belonging and Participation

www.basic-skills-observatory.co.uk/uploads/doc_uploads/774.pdf

This research report by Jon Willms for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development focuses on the results of asking 15-year-old students from 43 countries about their sense of belonging and participation at school, including student engagement and academic success.

Supporting Young Adolescents' Literacy Learning

www.reading.org/downloads/positions/ps1052_supporting.pdf

This joint position statement by the International Reading Association and the National Middle School Association claims that with good instruction, ample time, and opportunity to read across a variety of types of texts, young adolescents can become successful readers both in and out of the school setting.

Learning Point Associates developed the *Quick Key* series to assist educators, policymakers, and other stakeholders in understanding and implementing the No Child Left Behind Act. The *Quick Keys* are available online (www.ncrel.org/policy/curve/resource.htm#resources).



Look for the previous *Quick Keys*:

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“Implementing the No Child Left Behind Act:
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Quick Key 8 Action Guide

“Implementing the No Child Left Behind Act:
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