



Research Brief

Literacy across the High School Curriculum

Question: How can principals and teachers launch a school-wide program to promote high levels of student literacy across the curriculum?

Summary of Findings:

Susan Black, writing in the *American School Boards Journal* (April, 2005), points out the scope of the literacy problem in American high schools:

The number of poor readers in the nation's schools is staggering: According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, 8.7 million fourth- through 12th-graders read below grade level. Eighth-graders don't fare well either. Close to 70 percent read below the proficient level, and 25 percent fail to read at the most basic level.

The literacy gap is even wider for minority students, those with learning disabilities, and those whose first language is not English. Almost half of African-American and Hispanic eighth-graders, for example, read below the basic level.

She adds that the problems persist beyond the schoolhouse door, as well. Most of the nation's high school drop outs, and a vast majority of those who encounter the juvenile or adult justice systems, suffer from low levels of literacy, with its accompanying poor school performance and diminished future.

Reading Next, a 2004 report to the Carnegie Corporation of New York by Gina Biancarosa and Catherine Snow, describes these research-based classroom practices that have been linked to improved literacy achievement among high school students:

- Provide direct, explicit instruction in reading comprehension, such as summarizing and discussing texts with others.
- Teach students reading and writing skills specific to subjects such as science and math.
- Motivate students to become self-directed and independent readers.
- Encourage students to work collaboratively, using text materials at different levels and on a variety of topics.
- Individualize reading, writing, and content instruction for students who need extra help.
- Include more writing in daily lessons.
- Add technology, such as well-designed computer tutorials, to help struggling readers.
- Assess students continuously and use information to monitor and adjust lessons and assignments.
- Infuse literacy development into all classes, not only English and language arts.
- Train teachers to teach literacy development well.
- Use data to inform literacy policies and practices.
- Organize interdisciplinary teacher teams that focus on literacy in daily lessons.



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Judith Langer's, five-year study of English programs found major differences between effective adolescent literacy programs and ineffective ones. Successful programs, Langer found, use six instructional practices:

1. Teach students using a variety of activities, including independent lessons, exercises, and drills; lessons involving reading and writing about new concepts and information; and lessons in which students apply new learning in class discussions.
2. Prepare students for tests by emphasizing the knowledge on which they'll be assessed, and integrate test preparation into daily lessons instead of giving students separate drills.
3. Incorporate students' real-life experiences both in and out of school into daily lessons.
4. Give students critical reading and writing strategies they need to succeed on daily lessons and homework assignments.
5. Provide time for students to read broadly on topics of interest, explore texts from many points of view, and conduct their own research.
6. Foster collaborative learning by placing students in well-chosen groups. Prompt students to raise questions, discuss ideas, and "bump minds" with one another.

These principles help give shape to the basic infrastructure for a school-wide literacy program at the high school level. Additional resources, listed below, provide guidance to high school principals and their professional staff as they plan and develop comprehensive literacy learning and achievement programs for all of their students.

Online Resources:

Integrating Reading and Writing Across the High School Curriculum

Teaching Middle High School Students to Read and Write Well: Six Features of Effective Instruction by Judith Langer

<http://cela.albany.edu/publication/brochure/guidelines.pdf>

This excellent publication from the National Research Center on English Learning and Achievement outlines six foundational strategies for effective teaching of reading and writing at the high school level. It's a superb overview for principals, and the place to start to get a handle on the issues.

Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy.

<http://www.all4ed.org/publications/ReadingNext/ReadingNext.pdf>

This report to the Carnegie Corporation offers a comprehensive overview of the research-based elements of an effective literacy instruction, including the 15 key elements of an effective program for high school students.



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Florida Literacy and Reading Excellence Center (FLaRE)

http://flare.ucf.edu/FLaRE_Online_Resources.htm

The FLaRE Center at the University of Central Florida offers links to dozens of online resources for educators at all levels.

Reaching our Reading Goals

http://www.sedl.org/pubs/sedl-letter/v17n01/SEDLLetter_v17n01.pdf

This newsletter from the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory offers insights about how to reach NCLB reading standards at all levels, K-12, and provides specific advice for principals on school wide reading initiatives.

Exemplary Reading Programs in Illinois Public Schools

<http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/isbe/isbeprof.htm>

This analysis from the North Central Regional Education Laboratory describes three profiles of exemplary reading instruction in Illinois' high schools.

Literacy Matters

<http://www.literacymatters.org/content/readandwrite/reading.htm>

Housed at the Educational Development Corporation, this project offers teachers, students and parents specific strategies to improve reading among middle and high school students.

North Central Regional Education Laboratory: Adolescent Literacy

<http://www.ncrel.org/litweb/adolescent/>

This collection is intended to help practitioners, administrators, policymakers, and other stakeholders gather and apply knowledge of necessary elements of curriculum and instruction for adolescents with the goal of helping all students achieve success.

Reaching the Older Reader by Susan Black

<http://www.asbj.com/2005/04/0405research.html>

This accessible article from the *American School Boards Journal* (April, 2005), provides an excellent overview of the issues and research findings on adolescent literacy. It is a great resource for beginning the conversation about reading achievement among high school faculty.

Greece (NY) Central School District

<http://www.greece.k12.ny.us/instruction/ela/6-12/Reading/Reading%20Strategies/reading%20strategies%20index.htm>

This excellent district site provides helpful strategies to help students interact with text material more effectively.



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Teaching Today: Reading Skills

<http://www.glencoe.com/sec/teachingtoday/tiparchive.phtml/7>

From Glencoe Publishers, a collection of strategies and downloadable materials for teaching important reading skills and approaches to high schools students.

Writing Across the Curriculum

<http://712educators.about.com/cs/writingresources/a/writing.htm>

Melissa Kelly's helpful compendium of resources for high school teachers and principals shows how to use specific, writing improvement approaches in content classrooms.

Teaching that Makes Sense

<http://www.ttms.org/index.htm>

Website of educational consultant Steve Peha offers excellent materials on writing across the curriculum, from theory and research to practical tips for teachers and principals.

Using Literature to Teach Geography in High Schools

<http://www.ericdigests.org/1996-4/high.htm>

This ERIC Digest provides a very specific example of how literacy instruction can be integrated with another high school subject area.

Developing Teaching Teams to Integrate the Curriculum

<http://www.writingproject.org/cs/nwpp/print/nwpr/337>

This National Writing Project site shows principals how to create high school teaching teams to integrate all subject matter, including literacy.

Writing Across the Curriculum: High School Teachers' Handbook

<http://www.ncpublicschools.org/curriculum/languagearts/resources/writing/002overview.html>

This very practical resource from the North Carolina Department of Education illustrates how to get started in integrating literacy into the high school curriculum.

Writing To Learn, Learning To Write: Revisiting Writing Across the Curriculum

<http://www.nwrel.org/request/2004dec/preface.html>

This helpful publication from the Northwest Regional Education Laboratory illustrates school wide approaches to writing across the curriculum.

Encouraging Writing Achievement: Writing Across the Curriculum

<http://www.ericdigests.org/pre-9218/across.htm>

This ERIC Digest provides a rationale and specific approaches for integrating writing at the high school level. It contains a very complete reference list.



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