

memorandum

Date: 10.21.08 | **To:** Woodrow Wilson Foundation | **From:** REL West at WestEd
Re: Research-based practices for supporting struggling readers

Request >>

What does the literature say about research-based instructional practices in literacy for supporting struggling adolescent readers?

Requestor: Woodrow Wilson Foundation

Response

Our online search found three particularly helpful reports on this topic. Two of them are comprehensive reviews of the literature on research-based practices for supporting adolescent literacy, and the third is a white paper written by a scholar on adolescent literacy. Collectively, the reports identify six instructional practices that, when used in combination, make a positive difference for struggling adolescent readers. These practices are introduced below. This memo concludes with an important note about the context of the secondary school classroom and how adolescent academic literacy instruction fits into it, touching upon the complexity of adolescent literacy instruction.

Effective instructional practices for adolescent literacy

The most current research on effective literacy instruction for adolescents indicates that a combination of the following instructional practices makes a difference for struggling readers:

- 1. Within the content-area curriculum, teachers provide explicit instruction (i.e., modeling, guided practice, independent practice) of comprehension strategies and content-specific vocabulary;** students practice the strategies and vocabulary by working with the texts of that content area. Strategies are not taught as isolated lessons apart from the content.
 - Studies have identified a number of effective comprehension strategies, including KWL (i.e., What I know, What I want to know, What I learned), summarizing, question generating, paraphrasing, drawing inferences, graphic organizers, reciprocal teaching, think-alouds, and structured note taking. But researchers believe that the practice aspects of explicit instruction (i.e., guided and independent practice) are most powerful in helping students effectively incorporate the strategies into their everyday reading of content. Through guided practice, content-area teachers support students to actively use the strategies (e.g., teacher provides graphic organizer, asks students to generate questions while reading, asks students to write about what they don't understand). Students then practice using the strategies independently with multiple texts.
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- 2. Students regularly read from a variety of texts and genres**, including those from the Internet and hypermedia, and learn to read them from a critical literacy perspective, that is, questioning and challenging the text.
 - The research supports students spending instructional time reading, learning how to approach the different types of text that are found within a specific subject area, and understanding how to analyze and challenge the author of a text. Strategies that simultaneously support reading and content understanding include paired reading, peer conferencing, jigsaw groups to discuss several readings on one topic, rereading with a different purpose, connecting text with other media, and, when effectively implemented, sustained silent reading.
- 3. Literacy instruction has an emphasis on thinking, involving a combination of cognitive strategies** for developing higher-order thinking skills **and metacognitive strategies** for monitoring comprehension.
 - Research strongly supports the instruction of cognitive strategies that require students to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate text, as well as metacognitive strategies that enable students to monitor their reading process and problem solve (i.e., figure it out) when they don't understand something they are reading.
- 4. The classroom is student-centered to support higher-level literacy tasks and to position students to do the work of reading**, with purposeful scaffolding from the teacher. Students in small or whole groups are at the center of extended discussions about the meaning and interpretation of text.
 - Research indicates that a discussion-based approach to reading comprehension, in which students, together, critically analyze and build a deeper understanding of the text, is effective in helping students move beyond the literal meaning of a text to interpreting the text. These high-quality discussions are sustained, engaging, and student-driven rather than teacher-driven.
- 5. Teachers who communicate high expectations for their struggling readers engender greater student motivation and engagement, making their literacy instruction more effective.**
 - Research shows that when content-area teachers believe all students can learn to read in their particular content area, their students are more likely to comprehend what they are reading, because a teacher's high expectations motivate students, who then become more engaged with the text.
- 6. Struggling readers are provided intensive and individualized interventions through trained specialists.**
 - To support students whose needs cannot be met by the classroom teacher alone, research supports providing intensive interventions to accelerate literacy development, beginning with an initial screening to identify students in need and followed by diagnostic tests to determine literacy weaknesses of individual students.

The scope and purpose of this memo limits our opportunity to describe what each of these instructional practices can look like in the classroom; however, specific steps and helpful considerations for implementing these practices can be found under "How to Carry Out the Recommendation" in [*Improving Adolescent Literacy: Effective Classroom and Intervention Practices: A Practice Guide*](#).¹

A note about the context of the high school subject-area classroom and effective literacy instruction

One important theme emerging from the body of research on adolescent literacy is that the efficacy of any one specific strategy is dependent on teachers' pedagogical approach in the classroom. For example, a high school classroom that supports literacy learning will have adolescents who are motivated to learn, engaged actively in the curriculum, valued for the academic strengths they bring, taught both the background knowledge and strategies they need to access the text, and expected to do the work of reading with support. In such classrooms, content-area teachers understand that they are the best resource for teaching their students how to read the text of the given content area, and these teachers are supported in learning how to teach secondary literacy through professional development.

Research shows that professional development aimed at providing content-area teachers with instructional strategies to meet the literacy needs of their students in their respective disciplines supports improved student performance. This is especially important since content-area teachers are often experts of their discipline, but not in teaching the literacy skills required in their discipline.

The three resources that informed this memo are:

- Alvermann, D. E. (2001). [Effective Literacy Instruction for Adolescents](#).² This white paper was commissioned by the National Reading Conference to argue the importance and necessity of literacy instruction for secondary students.
- Kamil, M. L., et al. (2008). [Improving Adolescent Literacy: Effective Classroom and Intervention Practices: A Practice Guide](#).³ Written by a panel of reading experts brought together by the US Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences, this practice guide offers five broad recommendations based on an analysis of the research, suggestions for carrying out each recommendation, and potential roadblocks and solutions to anticipate when planning to implement.
- Meltzer, J., et al. (2002). [Adolescent Literacy Resources: Linking Research and Practice](#).⁴ This book reviews 24 resources (e.g., books, research reports, articles) focused on a secondary literacy program, study, or instructional approach; for each one, it provides a detailed summary of the resource, in addition to its implications in five areas: instruction, curriculum/program, structure/system, professional development, and assessment.

Other resources that may be of interest:

[Quick Key 10 Action Guide: Using Student Engagement to Improve Adolescent Literacy](#).⁵ (2005) Learning Point Associates.

This guide discusses the important role that student engagement plays in any effective adolescent literacy instruction, describes the key elements of student engagement, and provides specific actions in the areas of curriculum, instruction, assessments, and professional development.

[Adolescent Literacy and the Achievement Gap: What Do We Know and Where Do We Go From Here?](#)⁶ (2003). Snow, C. E. & Biancarosa, G.

This report discusses the challenges related to closing the achievement gap in adolescent literacy, includes a description of a sample of 12 literacy programs or instructional approaches aimed at advancing students' literacy abilities, and describes the collaborative efforts of public and private funding sources to address the issue.

["Evaluating the interventions for struggling adolescent readers."](#)⁷ (November 2006). *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* vol. 50, issue 3. Fisher, D. & Ivey, G.

This article describes research-based principles that high school educators and administrators may use for developing and evaluating instructional frameworks for literacy intervention programs.

[Reading for Understanding: A Guide to Improving Reading in Middle and High School Classrooms.](#)⁸ (1999). Schoenbach, R., Greenleaf, C., Cziko, C., & Hurwitz, L.

This teacher-friendly book describes the research-based *Reading Apprenticeship* framework, in which literacy instruction in content-area classrooms is designed around the personal, cognitive, knowledge, and social dimensions, and the metacognitive conversation. It also includes examples of how teachers use research-based strategies to support the content reading in their classrooms.

Sources and methods used for this memo:

We conducted Google Scholar and ProQuest searches using the terms: best practices, instructional practices, research, literacy, strategies, struggling readers, adolescents, and adolescent literacy. After reviewing about 20 reports, we identified three resources as the basis for development of this memo: two are comprehensive reports that review the research literature on instructional practices in secondary literacy, and the third is a white paper, written by a scholar on adolescent literacy, that argues for the need for academic literacy instruction and cites numerous studies and their findings.

Endnotes

- 1 http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practiceguides/adlit_pg_082608.pdf
- 2 <http://www.nrconline.org/publications/alverwhite2.pdf>
- 3 http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practiceguides/adlit_pg_082608.pdf
- 4 http://www.alliance.brown.edu/pubs/adlit/alr_lrp.pdf
- 5 <http://www.ncrel.org/litweb/adolescent/qkey10/qkey10.pdf>
- 6 <http://www.ode.state.or.us/teachlearn/subjects/elarts/reading/literacy/summerinstitute/resources/carnegieadolescentliteracyreport.pdf>
- 7 <http://www.sccoe.k12.ca.us/depts/ell/elac/0207/EvalInterventions.pdf>
- 8 <http://www.josseybass.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-0787950459.html>

This memorandum is one in a series of quick-turnaround responses to specific questions posed by educators and policymakers in the Western region (Arizona, California, Nevada, Utah), which is served by the Western Regional Educational Laboratory (REL), REL West at WestEd. This response was prepared under a contract with the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences (IES), Contract ED-06-CO-0014, by REL West administered by WestEd. The content of the response does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IES or the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.
