

A CRITICAL MISSION: SREB Report Urges States to Develop Comprehensive Adolescent Literacy Policies that Can Improve Reading and Writing in Secondary Schools

Improving middle and high school students' reading comprehension skills is the most important action states and schools can take to improve achievement in all subjects. So says, *A Critical Mission: Making Adolescent Reading an Immediate Priority in SREB States*, a new report from the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), which urges states to develop comprehensive adolescent literacy policies that can improve reading and writing in secondary schools.²

"We can't expect to see achievement rise in math, science, and other subjects unless students can read, write, and communicate at more advanced levels," said **Virginia Governor Tim Kaine (D), the chair of the SREB**. "Our nation's economic prosperity depends on our making progress in education."

According to the report, public schools generally do not teach reading after the elementary grades. And, unlike speaking skills, students generally do not develop the advanced reading skills on their own. As a result, far too many adolescents cannot read well enough to succeed in school and future careers while other students have not been challenged to develop the levels of literacy they will need to succeed in college and career training. It notes that while some SREB states are among the nation's leaders in improving students' reading achievement in the early grades, SREB states, and the nation as a whole, have made little improvement with students in middle and high schools.

None of the SREB member states has included reading in their academic standards for each of the subjects in high school. Because of this, few teachers have been asked to teach the reading skills that students need in each subject. According to the report, some teachers in various subjects have resisted efforts to incorporate reading instruction into their courses for fear that they will be asked to become "reading teachers." But, the report notes that asking a teacher to become a reading teacher is "distinctly different" from asking a teacher to "*help students master texts within the teacher's own field.*" It argues that subject-area teachers should not be expected to teach basic reading skills, but they can help students develop critical strategies and skills for reading texts in each subject.

The report finds that the impact of low literacy levels is far-reaching, for both individuals and states. For example, strong reading skills help adults engage more in their communities, assist their own children as learners, manage family responsibilities, and access information. For states, poor literacy levels translate into a workforce that increasingly will not compete effectively in the global economy.

In addition, states will be unlikely to raise high school and college graduation rates unless they help more students learn to read at higher levels. According to the report, students who leave eighth grade with weak reading skills quickly fall behind in high school. "More students in SREB states repeat ninth grade than any other grade, swelling ninth-grade enrollment by 14 percent in the SREB media states in 2005," the report notes. "Students who falter in ninth grade are likely to become high school dropouts." At the college level, one in four freshmen must take remedial reading classes—and few of those students earn a degree, the report finds.

Kaine led the SREB Committee to Improve Reading and Writing in Middle and High Schools, which included some of the nation's most prominent researchers and policy experts in literacy. The committee's recommendations to states on how to improve reading among older students served as the basis of the report. Its six recommendations are as follows:

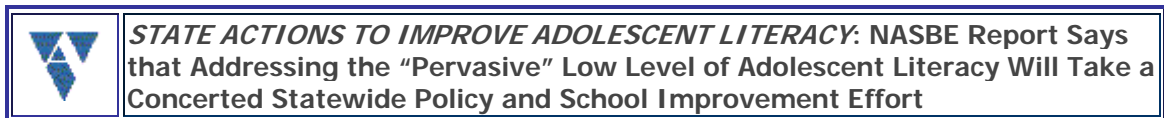
- Develop statewide policies that establish improvement in reading as the top priority in all public middle grades and high schools.
- Identify the specific reading skills students need to improve their achievement in key academic subjects.
- Change the curricula to include the reading skills identified as crucial for students in each subject.
- Help teachers share subject-specific reading strategies with students.

- Assist struggling readers so that those who are behind can catch up before they become likely high school dropouts.
- Call for state education agencies to work with local school systems across the region to make sure these changes begin to take place and that every educator knows higher reading skills are the top priority in public education.

The complete report is available at

http://www.sreb.org/publications/2009/09E01_Critical_Mission_Reading_.pdf.

2 SREB was created by southern governors and legislatures in 1948 to help leaders in education and government work cooperatively to advance education and improve the social and economic life of the region. Its member states include Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia.



A new report from the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) argues that state education leaders are “painfully aware” of the low literacy levels among large numbers of adolescents, but these leaders have experienced difficulty framing an organized response to the crisis because states and districts generally lack systemic strategies for scaling up literacy instruction as part of subject-matter learning. However, the report, *State Actions to Improve Adolescent Literacy: Results from NASBE’s State Adolescent Literacy Network*, finds that when state leaders have the opportunity to focus their efforts and collaborate with key stakeholder groups, large-scale progress can be made.

“The role of the state in bringing to scale effective literacy instruction as part of content area learning is critical,” said **Mariana Haynes, NASBE’s director of policy research**. “States need to implement strategic literacy plans that are woven into their overall vision for preparing students for a global, knowledge-based economy.”

The report notes that many states have not developed the coherent policies and structures needed to support, scale up, and sustain high-quality literacy instruction through the K–12 system. It notes that there are several reasons behind the lack of literacy instruction, but it underscores that having such instruction “necessitates having well-prepared teachers who have adequate knowledge of language and reading psychology and who can manage reading programs based on assessments of individual students’ needs.”

According to the report, the preparation of middle and high school teachers “generally focuses on content knowledge related to a teacher’s specific discipline and, at best, requires only a single generic course in reading to meet the state licensure requirements.” As a result, many teachers are not prepared to teach reading. “Without paying attention to the quality of the teaching profession and building the capacity to provide literacy instruction within content area classes, efforts to strengthen public education will continue to stall,” the report reads.

The report also argues that addressing the “pervasive” low level of adolescent literacy throughout the nation cannot be solved with extra tutoring or supplementary programs for those unable to read. Instead, it will take a concerted statewide policy and school improvement effort to “reach deep into districts to impact the instructional practices of teachers across the curriculum.”

The report is based on the lessons NASBE learned in eighteen months of work with the five states—Connecticut, Kentucky, New Hampshire, Utah, and West Virginia—that formed the State Adolescent Literacy Network. During this time, the network was remarkably successful in building state policy frameworks and capacity to improve adolescent literacy. The report identifies four key elements that the states adopted to drive improvements in literacy instruction and performance:

- adopting comprehensive literacy plans that connect reading, writing, speaking, listening, and thinking while integrating literacy instruction within subject areas;
- strengthening teacher licensure and preparation of teachers to provide research-based reading and writing throughout the curriculum;
- developing a continuum of supports and interventions for struggling readers; and
- designing policy structures and supports to drive local implementation of district- and school-wide literacy plans.

Even with these successes, NASBE acknowledges that much more work remains to be done. Moving forward, the report addresses two systems over which states exercise jurisdiction—the institutions for training educators and the accountability and assessment systems that measure school performance. It argues that states must foster partnerships with universities and districts in order to redesign teacher preparation and professional development to improve content-area literacy instruction by “grounding preparation in actual school settings and as a part of a community of practice; merging expertise within the colleges and among school, district and university staff; and providing strong clinical components.”

States must also rethink the design of accountability and assessment systems that drive what students learn and how teachers teach. In discussing the move toward higher, clearer standards, the report notes that the highest-performing nations create standards, curriculum guidance, and assessments that focus on twenty-first-century skills such as the abilities to find and organize information, communicate well in multiple formats, analyze and synthesize information, and self-monitor one’s understanding.

The complete report is available at <http://nasbe.org/index.php/file-repository?func=startdown&id=888>.

Report Examines Five (More) States’ Efforts to Improve Adolescent Literacy

Five States’ Efforts to Improve Adolescent Literacy is a new report prepared for the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) by the Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast and Islands that examines what Alabama, Florida, Kentucky, New Jersey, and Rhode Island did to promote effective adolescent literacy practices in schools and districts.

The report looks at how each state engaged key stakeholders, set rigorous goals and standards, aligned resources to support adolescent literacy goals, built educator capacity, and used data to measure progress. It also includes a case study for each state showing how state educators and policymakers tailored their policy strategies to the state’s needs.

Five States’ Efforts highlights common challenges and insights into how states used five strategies to support their adolescent literacy improvement policies. Specifically, it examines how each state 1) engaged key stakeholders to make adolescent literacy a priority; 2) set rigorous state literacy goals and standards, with other state policies aligned to support them; 3) aligned resources to support adolescent literacy goals; 4) built educator capacity to support adolescent literacy programs at state, school, and classroom levels; and 5) measured progress and used data to make decisions and provide oversight.

In addition to these challenges, representatives from each state offered two more—providing content-area instruction to support both literacy skills and content-area competencies, and scaling up adolescent literacy policies. According to the report, all five states incorporated content-area literacy into their adolescent literacy programs and content-area teachers received professional development in content-area literacy in their state. States had various strategies for scaling up adolescent literacy initiatives; Alabama, Kentucky, and New Jersey supported adolescent literacy through small-scale programs or pilots, while Florida and Rhode Island put their adolescent literacy policies into practice statewide.

The report also offers questions for further research that state policymakers need answered. Some examples include: How can reading coaches or literacy specialists best support adolescent readers?; What are the best ways to integrate reading instruction into content-area instruction?; What assessments best meet secondary teachers' and secondary students' needs?; and What are the best ways of preparing and supporting teachers to meet the needs of struggling adolescent readers?

The complete report is available at
http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/northeast/pdf/REL_2009067.pdf.

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