

# Secondary School Literacy

Narrowing the Literacy Gap in Middle and High School

## A Framework for School-Wide Intervention

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By Kevin Feldman, Director of Reading and Intervention, Sonoma County Office of Education

### he Challenge

Many educators working in today's secondary schools are aware of the lack of literacy proficiency in far too many of their students. Secondary school teachers strive to work effectively with students who often can't comprehend grade-level textbooks, engage in little pleasure reading, and have difficulty writing summaries and participating in complex oral discourse. However, there is cause for cautious optimism for older students on the literacy front. According to noted literacy scholar Louisa Moats, a great deal can be done to remedy the situation: "Poor readers can be taught if the program has all necessary components, the teacher is well prepared and supported, and the students are given time, sufficiently intensive instruction, and incentives to overcome their reading and language challenges. Given the right approach, students will buy in. In fact, they'll ask why they were allowed to go so far without being taught to read" (*When Older Students Can't Read*, 2001).

### The Solution

Although there are no shortcuts to accelerating the literacy of older struggling readers, it is possible to close the literacy gap by providing a coherent and coordinated school-wide literacy acceleration program that systematically increases the amount of *time*, *teaching*, and *practice* available to all struggling readers, based on assessed student needs rather than age, grade, ethnicity, or any other label or category. Secondary schools throughout California and across the nation are finding that if they assess all struggling students

and modify their program offerings accordingly, dramatic increases in student literacy are indeed possible.

To provide direct reading intervention and literacy acceleration for students more than one to two years below

#### Critical Variables Essential to Serious Reading Intervention:

##### Time

- Scheduled reading intervention classes for all who need them

##### Teaching

- Research-validated curricula
- Well-supported teachers

##### Practice

- Age-appropriate books students can read and want to read
- Accountability for reading and responding to what has been read

grade level, the essential process employed by virtually

### The Larger Context:

- ▶ Thirty-seven percent of fourth graders score below "basic" in overall reading skill on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NCSE, 2003).
- ▶ Only 32 percent of eighth graders are proficient readers (NCSE, 2003).
- ▶ Nationally, 21–23 percent of all adults "demonstrated skills in the lowest level of proficiency" (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education).

every successful school consists of the some version of the following fundamental steps:

1. Assess all struggling students in ways other than their grades and scores on standardized, norm-referenced tests. The idea is to use large group tests as a kind of "first cut," but not as the only assessment. Assess beyond the STAR (Standardized Testing and Reporting) and the California English Language Development Test (CELDT) to determine specific literacy needs. Group students by literacy and language level, not by age or grade.
2. Schedule the length of classes based on the severity of the needs of the students.
3. Select a research-based, validated curriculum as the program "anchor" and supplement it as student needs and progress indicate.
4. Select knowledgeable and enthusiastic teachers. Passion matters!
5. Provide high quality, curriculum-specific professional development and ongoing support to teachers. Like any other professional, they should not have to invent their tools.
6. Monitor the progress of students: accelerate them as quickly as possible and adjust their programs as required.

Let's briefly examine each element in a bit more detail:

### 1. Assessment

While most large-group assessments, along with grades, provide a very helpful "first cut" at assessment and can point to a problem, schools need to collect further critical diagnostic information to begin to understand their student's literacy problems. Any reliable, valid tool will do. Computer-based comprehension assessments, like Scholastic Reading Inventory, are particularly appropriate for middle and high schools because they require little staff time and can automatically adjust the difficulty of passages while students are being assessed, thus yielding a more accurate indicator than paper-pencil assessments.

#### Sources of helpful data:

##### For oral reading fluency

The Fluency Monitor

[www.readnaturally.com](http://www.readnaturally.com)

Benchmark Fluency Assessments

[www.edformation.com](http://www.edformation.com)

##### For comprehension

Scholastic Reading Inventory

[www.scholastic.com](http://www.scholastic.com)

Gates MacGinitie, Degree of Reading Power

[www.riverpub.com/products/group/gmrt4/home.html](http://www.riverpub.com/products/group/gmrt4/home.html)

##### In general

CELDT for all English Language Learners

[www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/el](http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/el)

The California Reading and

Literature Project

<http://csmp.ucop.edu/crlp/>

### 2. Grouping for Instruction, Time, and Scheduling

Research consistently indicates that struggling students improve much faster if taught in differentiated reading classes with peers who share similar levels of literacy and language development (Curtis & Longo, 1999). Using the program architecture described in the California's Reading/Language Arts Framework (Kame'enui & Simmons, 1999), Archer & Gleason (2000) advise

secondary schools to consider three to four distinct levels of intervention for differentiated reading support:

Intensity Level	Reading Grade Level	Instructional hours/day
Level 1	0–3.0	2–2.5
Level 2	3.0–5.0	1
Level 3	5.0–current grade *	1
Level 4	Grade 5.0–7.0 **	1

\* in middle school  
\*\* in high school

This notion of grouping students homogeneously by assessed instructional need is essential to any serious secondary-school-wide reading plan (Foorman & Torgesen, 2001). While there is no single structure that works best for all schools, some of the common approaches to redesigning the master schedule to provide credit-based reading intervention classes include one or more of the following:

- Create a school-wide reading class for ALL students, one period per day that is differentiated according to student needs (i.e. Levels 1–4).
- Redesignate a certain number of language arts classes as targeted reading intervention classes.
- Add a school-wide core class (usually combining language arts and history) where the students are grouped by their language and literacy needs and teachers adjust the content or emphasis based on those needs.
- Schedule a number of reading classes in various elective slots, ensuring that needy students are placed into the appropriate class.
- Combine any of the above options—in all cases taking care to provide students appropriate credit towards graduation.

Most schools that successfully address the reading intervention and support challenges at the secondary level report that they integrate various categorical support programs—such as special education, Title One, EL/ELD (English

Language Development)—in the effort to provide a coordinated and efficient school-wide program. In terms of pragmatics, this means that the reading classes include students across various categories, so long as they have similar instructional needs. Likewise, teachers work across categories in flexible groupings that match the skills of a teacher to the needs of the student.

#### Grouping Students— Non-Categorically

Experience in a number of districts, such as Elk Grove outside of Sacramento, California, suggests that grouping students by assessed needs—not labels like learning disabled, special education, or English language learner—offers a far more efficient structure for providing effective literacy interventions than traditional categorically driven approaches. Go to [www.calstat.org/oldmodel.html](http://www.calstat.org/oldmodel.html) for a closer look at Elk Grove.

### 3. Curriculum Matched to Student Needs

Research does not suggest that there is any single best program or curriculum package that is demonstrably superior to others; different programs and approaches work for different students. However, a number of research-based programs have been carefully aligned to meet the needs of secondary students with limited literacy abilities. The list below is not intended as the last word on effective programs. But it does reflect solid, field-tested examples of programs that support teachers teaching—and students learning!

#### Level One:

##### Students functioning approximately at non-reader–3.0 Grade Level

Level One reading programs are designed to be comprehensive language arts interventions for students far below grade level. They usually are temporary replacement programs for grade-level language arts classes and

## Intervention Level One: Resources\*

**Language!** (Sopris West)  
[www.sopriswest.com/rlink6.asp](http://www.sopriswest.com/rlink6.asp)

**The REACH System, Corrective Reading**  
(SRA/McGraw-Hill)  
[www.sraonline.com/index.php/home/curriculumsolutions/di/reachsystem/1204](http://www.sraonline.com/index.php/home/curriculumsolutions/di/reachsystem/1204)

**Fast Track Reading** (Wright Group)  
[www.wrightgroup.com/index.php/programsummar?isbn=0076034240](http://www.wrightgroup.com/index.php/programsummar?isbn=0076034240)

**READ 180** (Scholastic)  
[teacher.scholastic.com/products/read180](http://teacher.scholastic.com/products/read180)

**High Point** (Hampton-Brown; also aligned with ELD standards and approved for ELD)  
[www.hampton-brown.com/onlinecatalog/products.asp?subID=1](http://www.hampton-brown.com/onlinecatalog/products.asp?subID=1)

\* Approved by the California State Board of Education, these five intervention programs are used in California, grades 4–8. They are also viable in grades 9–12 with supplements.

require a full 2–2.5 hours per day for maximum impact. The goal of any Level One program is to accelerate students out of “reading intensive care” and back into the Core Language Arts program (usually with the support of a Level Two reading class; see below) within no more than two years.

## Intervention Level Two: Resources

**REWARDS.** Advanced decoding and fluency (Sopris West)  
[www.sopriswest.com](http://www.sopriswest.com)

**REWARDS Plus.** Applications in social studies, science (Sopris West)  
[www.sopriswest.com](http://www.sopriswest.com)

**Read Naturally.** Fluency grades 1–8  
[www.readnaturally.com](http://www.readnaturally.com)

**Soar to Success.** Comprehension, reciprocal teaching (Houghton Mifflin)  
[www.eduplace.com/intervention/soar/index.html](http://www.eduplace.com/intervention/soar/index.html)

**Systematic Instruction in Phoneme Awareness, Phonics, and Sight Words (SIPPS).** Advanced decoding (Developmental Studies Center)  
[www.devstu.org/sipps/index.html](http://www.devstu.org/sipps/index.html)

**Spellography** (Sopris West)  
[www.sopriswest.com](http://www.sopriswest.com)

For middle schools, there can be no more important an academic goal than that of sending all incoming sixth and seventh graders off to high school functioning at Level Two or higher.

### Level Two: Students functioning approximately at 3.0–5.0 Grade Level

Level Two programs can simply consist of an extended use of the Level One programs; however, it is often more effective and efficient to move students into a more targeted, supplemental intervention curriculum—depending, of course, upon their assessed needs. Level Two programs are designed to be delivered in addition to the core language arts program, usually for one hour a day.

### Level Three: Students functioning approximately at 5.0–7.0+ Grade Level

Level Three content literacy strategies consist essentially of research-based instructional strategies that are best taught in “strategic level” intervention classes as well as in the context of the general education content area curriculum. Some schools also use these programs in a learning center model or a one-semester “reading tune-up” class that is offered through the language arts department and available for all students. The power of Level Three content literacy strategies is magnified exponentially when a group of teachers, departments, interdisciplinary teams, etc. in a school all agree to consistently use a limited set of strategies that match the needs of their students and that augment the content areas they teach (e.g., agree to use 2–3 vocabulary pre-teaching or summary writing strategies consistently across the team).

### 4. & 5. Selecting Teachers and Providing Quality Support

Reading intervention, especially at Level One, while certainly rewarding, is challenging for both teachers and students. Struggling older readers inevitably come to the intervention

table with considerable attitudinal “baggage” from years of failure, frustration, and negative experiences with school in general and reading in particular. Intervention teachers need to possess knowledge, compassion, and passion if they are going to connect with adolescents who are in academic trouble. Teachers should be selected based on appropriate professional background, personal interest, and enthusiasm for the challenge. Given the intensity of the effort, it is usually advisable for any instructor to teach just one section of Level One intervention per day.

## Intervention Level Three: Resources

**REWARDS Plus.** Fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and summary writing strategies taught using social studies passages. REWARDS Plus Science is just out this fall. (Sopris West)  
[www.sopriswest.com](http://www.sopriswest.com)

**Teaching Reading in the Content Areas: If Not Me, Who?** Content literacy strategies (Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning)  
[www.mcrel.org](http://www.mcrel.org)

**Reading in the Content Areas.** Content literacy strategies (Globe Fearson)  
[plgcatalog.pearson.com/](http://plgcatalog.pearson.com/)

**Project CRISS.** Content literacy strategies  
[www.projectcriss.com](http://www.projectcriss.com)

**Skills for School Success**  
[www.curriculumassociates.com](http://www.curriculumassociates.com)

**Reading for Understanding and the Reading Apprenticeship Program** (West Ed)  
<http://www.wested.org/cs/we/view/pj/179>

Class size is another critical issue. Most successful schools have found that by integrating special education, Title One, EL support, and general education, it is possible to lower class size for the students in greatest need (i.e., Level One). While there is no magic number or absolute cutoff, most schools are finding that Level One programs work best if the class size is around 15 and Level Two in the 20–25 range. This will vary depending on such factors as

student maturity and teacher skills.

Designing and implementing high quality professional development is of the utmost importance. Keys to such plans include hands-on training with the intervention curriculum. This would include modeling and practicing strategies; analyzing classroom video footage, coaching at the classroom-level, and meeting regularly to solve problems and adjust and refine instructional approaches. It also requires strong administrative support over the long term. Schools that have invested in curriculum-specific coaches to support the adopted intervention programs have found dramatic increases in teacher skill, satisfaction, and subsequent student achievement.

## 6. Monitoring Student Progress; Program Adjustment

Using both curriculum-embedded tools and out-of-program assessments (e.g., oral fluency, SRI/DRP for comprehension), schools need to carefully monitor student progress in reading intervention programs. Doing this involves regular meetings for professional problem solving and reflection on critical questions. What is working? What is missing? What needs to be added/deleted? How can the existing program be improved?

### Summary

Providing effective, school-wide literacy intervention/support is a complex and daunting task. Along

with instructional, scheduling, and curriculum issues, there are additional components to comprehensive literacy reform: quality libraries, leveling books (e.g., Lexile, see [www.lexile.com](http://www.lexile.com)) to efficiently match student reading level and text difficulty so students are motivated to read independently in school, at home, and more.

Secondary literacy improvement is, however, an idea whose time has come. The students with literacy problems have always been with us. But it is no longer possible to believe that some students simply can't learn to read. If we are willing to do what it takes, virtually all students can develop critical literacy skills. The students deserve no less! 📖

## Additional Resources

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### Internet:

#### General

<http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/selsr/documents/readnit.pdf>  
*The California Reading Initiative and Special Education in California: Critical Ideas Focusing on Meaningful Reform* is freely downloadable. It addresses the importance of effective reading instruction, early reading intervention and prevention, assessment, access to core curriculum, and practices linked to research.

#### Instructional

<http://www.longman.com/ael/sbiningstar>  
**Shining Star** is a research-based, standards-driven ESL program designed for secondary students. Its goal is to help students make the transition into mainstream curriculum.

<http://www.spellread.com>

**Spell Read P.A.T.** (Phonological Auditory Training) Learning Systems, Inc., helps students with hearing impairments learn to read, ensuring that the compensatory techniques they sometimes develop do not affect their comprehension.

#### Instructional

[http://www.girlsandboystown.org/pros/training/education/FAME\\_program.asp](http://www.girlsandboystown.org/pros/training/education/FAME_program.asp)

**Reading is FAME** is a research-based, developmental reading program for adolescents who are reading below grade level. Designed specifically for high schools, it takes students through the different developmental stages of reading.

<http://www.beinle.com/index.html>

**Vision Basics: Basic Language and Literacy** is an instructional program for second language learners that starts at the "newcomer" level and works through transition into mainstream classrooms.

<http://www.wilsonlanguage.com>

**Wilson Language Training's** mission is to train teachers to provide direct, systematic, and multisensory instruction that allows students to trust English as a reliable language system and that enables them to become fluent, independent readers.