

# Informed Choices FOR Struggling Adolescent Readers

**A Research-Based Guide  
to Instructional Programs  
and Practices**

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Commissioned by Carnegie Corporation of New York

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## INTRODUCTION

*Gina Biancarosa, Marnie Nair, Donald D. Deshler,  
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**A**MONG MIDDLE AND SECONDARY school administrators and teachers, there has long been great concern about adolescent literacy, as well as frustration at the lack of attention, information, and resources being directed at this very real concern. We hope the discussion here will make it clear not only that this concern is well-placed but also that the struggles many adolescent readers face are serious. Many adolescents fail and/or drop out of school because of their inability to read in school. Others stay in school and even appear to meet current standards only to find that their literacy skills do not meet the demands placed on them when they enter college or the workforce. Addressing the needs of these struggling readers is by no means a simple task. The reading “profile” of a school and even of students within that school can differ dramatically based on the school’s context, which makes addressing the needs of struggling readers a complex task and highlights the need to individually tailor a reading program to meet the particular needs of each setting.

This book is our attempt to arm educators with information and resources for addressing adolescent literacy within their own contexts. We hope this book will speak to your concerns whether your role is that of teacher, specialist, principal, or district administrator. Wherever you serve your students, be it a rural, suburban, or urban locale, the *process* you must go through to enact effective change in adolescent literacy achievement is much the same. At the same time, because the students you serve are unique, the *program* you develop will be unique. This book attempts to provide you with insight into the process in order to enable you to choose wisely among the extremely wide array of instructional programs currently available.

### **Getting the Lay of the Land: The Condition of Adolescent Literacy**

In any adolescent literacy effort, it pays to be mindful not only of your local context but also of the larger national picture. Too often educators work in isolation from one another, not knowing that their colleagues in very different places are facing similar challenges or that they may have discovered some very effective

means for dealing with those challenges. We begin by considering adolescent literacy achievement broadly and then consider the ramifications of poor literacy.

Poor literacy skills are all too common in America's schools, with students in schools in both urban and rural low-income neighborhoods most at risk of failing to learn to read well. While there has been increased attention given to reading instruction in the last few years, accompanied by a louder call for standards-based learning, testing, and funding, currently most of the attention and resources have been focused on the reading needs of learners through grade 3.

Meanwhile, the well-documented "reading slump" that occurs in U.S. schools after fourth grade persists (Chall & Jacobs, 2003; Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990). Since the gap between proficient and struggling readers increases over time (Stanovich, 1986), the end result—as nationally mandated assessment data continue to attest—is that at-risk high school students across the United States are failing on measures of reading at epidemic rates (Perie, Grigg, & Donahue, 2005).

Comparing the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading results for 4th-, 8th-, and 12th-grade levels with those from 1992 reveal that although the percentage of students scoring proficient has significantly improved among 4th graders, the percentage of 8th and 12th graders scoring proficient has remained stagnant (Donahue, Voelkl, Campbell, & Mazzeo, 1999; Perie, Grigg, et al., 2005; Perie, Moran, & Lutkus, 2005). Despite improvements in 4th-grade proficiency rates, 70% of students entering the 5th and 9th grades in 2005 are reading below grade level (Perie, Grigg, et al., 2005). In fact, both dropouts and high school graduates are demonstrating significantly worse reading skills than 10 years ago (Kutner, Greenberg, & Baer, 2006).

In the U.S. capital in 2005, only 11% of eighth-grade students were found to be proficient readers (Perie, Grigg, et al., 2005). In 2004, in approximately 20% of Orleans Parish, Louisiana, schools, not a single eighth-grade student passed the state English Language Arts exam in 2004, and in another 57% of these schools less than 10% of students passed the same exam (LEAP for the 21st Century, n.d.). In 2005, in California, only 20% of students were proficient readers by the eighth grade (Perie, Grigg, et al., 2005). While poor literacy skills are more acute in some locales than in others, across the United States it is youths living in poverty who are most at risk of failing to learn to read well, and these statistics reflect the performance of adolescents living in poverty across the country. Even so, poor literacy skills are found in every corner of U.S. society.

Today, graduation rates range from 89% in New Jersey to 53% in South Carolina (Greene & Winters, 2005), with a disproportionate number of the students who drop out being poor and of color (Orfield, 2004). In general, students entering ninth grade in the lowest 25% of achievement are 20 times more likely to drop out than their higher performing peers (Carnevale, 2001). It should not be surprising then that some 30% of students drop out (Greene & Winters, 2005).

Of those students who do graduate from high school, approximately 32% are not ready for college-level English composition courses (ACT, 2005) and approximately 40% lack the literacy skills employers seek (Achieve, 2005). Moreover, the data reveal geographic and racial disparities in preparedness for higher education (Greene & Winters, 2005). About 38% of students in the northeast region of the country (Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Vermont) graduate prepared for college, but the northeast also shows the greatest disparity in preparedness between white students (44% prepared) and Hispanic students (12% prepared). Students in the central region of the country (Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin) have the lowest average rate of preparedness (31%) and the largest disparity between white students (35%) and African American students (15%). However, on average, half as many Hispanic and African American students graduate from high school prepared for college. With both college professors and employers reporting nearly equal dissatisfaction with the literacy skills of high school graduates (Achieve, 2005), we have strong evidence that similar numbers of high school graduates are unprepared to meet the literacy demands of the workplace.

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## **The Real-World Demands for Advanced Literacy**

Even youth who have successfully navigated the U.S. K–12 education system clearly have no guarantee that they will be able to perform competitively in higher education or employment. Community colleges and even four-year institutions find themselves unable to keep up with the demand for remedial reading and writing courses, yet students who need these courses and are unable to complete them are less likely to complete a vocational program at a community college and even less likely to go on to graduate from a four-year program (Bettinger & Long, 2005).

This fact is even more alarming when you consider that between 1973 and 1998 alone, the percentage of workers who were high school dropouts fell by at least half, whereas the percentage of workers with some college or a college degree more than doubled—not only in skilled blue-collar, clerical, and related professions but also in less-skilled blue-collar, service, and related professions (Carnevale, 2001). Not surprisingly, as the demand for unskilled labor has decreased, unemployment has increased at the fastest pace for those with low educational attainment (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2000, Tables 2.4, 2.5, & 3.1).

The end result is that the 70% of high school students who manage to graduate from high school (Greene & Winters, 2005) often find themselves unprepared to compete for the more lucrative jobs that require not only

postsecondary education but an ongoing ability to read in order to keep abreast of new developments in a rapidly changing global economy (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; Levy & Murnane, 2004; OECD, 2000).

More worrisome still, the abysmal performance of America's adolescents is not due to inflated or unreasonable standards. International comparisons have found that U.S. 11th-grade students rank close to the bottom and behind Philippine, Indonesian, and Brazilian students (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). Moreover, U.S. dropouts rank lower than dropouts in most industrialized nations, performing comparably only with Chile, Poland, Portugal, and Slovenia (OECD, 2000). In addition, the range between the highest and lowest literacy levels in America is much wider than in almost any other nation, whether or not education is taken into account (OECD, 2000).

Certainly, poor literacy skills have far-reaching consequences in the lives of individual students. A large percentage of young dropouts are unemployed. Many end up in prison. The relatively small proportion who do find work can expect to make significantly less than their counterparts who do graduate from high school (Barton, 2005; OECD, 2000; Orfield, 2004). In 2002, the national average income for those dropouts who did find employment was only US\$18,800 per year (Orfield, 2004).

Students who do graduate from high school but are not prepared to complete college are often screened out of employment on the basis of low literacy skills (Achieve, 2005), and those who do find employment will earn on average US\$20,000 a year less than their counterparts with a bachelor's degree (Day & Newburger, 2002). Considering that this disparity has grown yearly over the past 25 years and that an increasingly technology-driven workplace demands more literacy skills than ever before, the economic impact for failing to learn to read well only heightens the need to address this pressing issue.

## **How This Book Can Help**

Much of what we report in the preceding sections will not be news to educators who work daily with adolescents. We want to encourage you that the tide seems to be turning: The larger educational community seems to be responding to the needs of the adolescent reader. This is evidenced by policymakers and educational researchers who are increasingly turning their attention to addressing the needs of the struggling adolescent reader. Our purpose in writing this book is twofold.

The first purpose in writing this book is to offer an overview of what the latest research in adolescent literacy has shown to work best. We believe this overview will provide critical background information, not only for those who are responsible for making literacy curriculum choices for students but also for

those who may be specialists in subjects other than reading and want to better understand both the reading process and their struggling students.

The second purpose is to offer information to educators about specific literacy programs. In response to heavy demand, the availability of resources, programs, and curriculum that can be implemented in the classroom is growing by the day. This is a mixed blessing to the extent that with this increase comes a great deal of variability in the type and quality of programs available.

As such, the book is divided into two parts. Part I takes you through the process, from understanding the nature of adolescent literacy to considering the costs of instructional changes, while Part II provides a directory of adolescent literacy curriculum and programming options. We hope that this information will generate new insights and enable educators to make informed choices when attempting to address adolescent literacy, and this book has been structured to maximize this likelihood.

Although challenges will naturally differ from school to school, district to district, and even state to state, we believe strongly that a common base of understanding about the nature of adolescent literacy and the variation in adolescents' struggles with literacy is required to effect positive and lasting change. These are the topics of Chapter 1. We also assert that good adolescent literacy instruction, and especially good intervention, attends not just to a checklist of elements but to the specific needs and challenges of the local context. Chapter 2 reviews the potential content of adolescent literacy instruction and Chapter 3 the characteristics and supports of effective adolescent literacy instruction. In addition, we try to provide you with a way to plan for the real costs of any program you choose and how decisions about implementation can affect those costs. Thus, Chapter 4 estimates the costs of three very different programs for several different implementations, both actual and ideal. Finally, effective change should be guided by an appreciation for how instructional change requires organizational change and how you can look for the signs of readiness in your school. Consequently, Chapter 5 delves into the distinct challenges of making change—especially as it relates to implementing a new literacy program—in middle and high schools.

Part II contains a directory of adolescent literacy programs. The directory listings are preceded by a brief review of the process by which we located and checked our information on the included programs. Although the directory has a large selection of programs, we make no claims that it is exhaustive. In fact, the somewhat baffling quantity of curricula and professional development programs and the great variation among them is in part what inspired this book. Moreover, the proliferation of new programs, especially those being designed through renewed research interest in adolescent literacy, inspired us to include an appendix listing programs that are currently emerging through research. Hence, we strongly urge you to resist the temptation to skip right to the directory, which includes comparative matrixes, descriptive information, and sources. Rather, please take the time to study the first part of the book because

of the information it provides to guide you in determining the specific needs of your students and how to meet them most effectively. It is in the inclusion of these chapters that this book differs from other excellent reviews of adolescent literacy programs (Florida Center for Reading Research, 2006; Shanahan, 2005). It is our hope that armed with the information found in the first five chapters, you will approach this overview as simply a starting point for digging deeper and finding a literacy solution that is uniquely suited to your situation—your school, your administration, your teachers, and most of all, your students.

---

## Contextualizing the Facts

To aid you in the process of finding a literacy solution, we have woven examples of how the facts we present might work themselves out in practice in several real schools that we have come to know in our research and practice. We hope that our discussion of these very real cases as we work through the issues in the following chapters will help you to imagine how you might do the same. Although we will cite a number of actual examples, we will focus more closely on the three schools we introduce here. (All names of institutions and people have been changed to maintain anonymity, but as much information as possible on each school's context has been preserved in order to make the examples as useful to the reader as possible.)

### *Hampshire Middle School*

Hampshire Middle School is a public, urban school in Boston, Massachusetts, that serves 560 students in grades 6 through 8. Over three-quarters qualify for free or reduced-cost lunches, which is not unusual in Boston. About a third of Hampshire students are identified as English-language learners (ELLs), but only 6% (or 35 students) are identified as limited English proficient (LEP). LEP students do not receive services for developing their English proficiency as there are no teachers of English as a second language in the school. Hampshire is unusual in that a third of its students are in special education, and many of these students are not integrated into regular education classrooms. The school was declared underperforming by the State Department of Education in 2004–2005 when state tests revealed that less than a quarter of students were performing at grade level on the state test, with half needing improvement and almost a third in danger of failing. Moreover, the results were worse for other subject areas such as math. In addition to its literacy woes, the school has a higher than average out-of-school suspension rate (18 versus the city's average of 8) and absentee rate (19 days versus the city's average of 13).

### *Hope Academy*

Hope Academy was a private, urban middle and high school for boys in New Orleans, Louisiana. Sad to say, it was destroyed in Hurricane Katrina. While in

operation, Hope Academy served approximately 140 boys in grades 7 through 10. One hundred percent of the students were African American, native English speakers; all but two students qualified for free or reduced-cost lunch. Although the school was a private school, students paid only a small amount of tuition (on average US\$20 per month) with the rest of the funding provided by scholarships. This being a new school, teachers were flexible and ready for change, although the level of teacher preparation was varied. While the school's status as a private school meant that teachers had three years after hiring to meet certification requirements, the lack of certified teachers was very reflective of schools in the area. Although only a small number of the students were identified as special education students, the teachers readily acknowledged their students' reading difficulties and that many students at each grade level were unable to decode even single-syllable words.

### ***Bernadine High School***

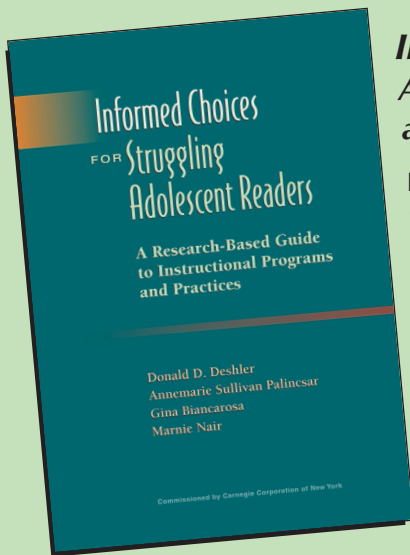
Bernadine High School (BHS) is a public, rural high school in the Midwest. BHS serves approximately 1,200 students, about 60% of whom are Caucasian, about 30% Hispanic, and 8% African American. Almost half of the students qualify for free and reduced-cost lunches, and an increasing number of ELLs have been enrolling at BHS. Most of these ELLs come from migrant-worker families. In the 1970s and 1980s the school had one of the best academic records of comparable schools in the state. But with its shifting demographics, academic performance began to fall rapidly in the early 1990s, which led to a 10-year string of failed short-term reform efforts that did little to reverse the school's decline. Recent assessments have revealed that half of the school's 390 ninth-graders read below grade level, with one-third of them performing two or more years below grade level. With a staff weary of the turnstile of reform, BHS faces an uphill battle to regain its former glory as a place where adolescents learn, read, and write proficiently.

## **Some Final Food for Thought**

Clearly, these three schools have very different student bodies and very different contexts. Despite their apparent differences, the same issues that are covered in the following chapters apply to them all. What are their students' different needs and strengths? Are the schools in similar stages of readiness for change? What changes in content, characteristics, and supports of literacy instruction will best suit their students? And what will those changes cost them?

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# The definitive guide to adolescent literacy programs



## *Informed Choices for Struggling Adolescent Readers: A Research-Based Guide to Instructional Programs and Practices*

Donald D. Deshler, Annemarie Sullivan Palincsar,  
Gina Biancarosa, Marnie Nair

This comprehensive resource delivers the insights you need to choose wisely among the many instructional programs currently available for adolescents.

- Part I offers an overview of what the latest research in adolescent literacy has shown to work best. You'll find out how to target effective instruction to meet your students' needs, how to budget for specific programs, how implementation may influence total budget costs, and how leadership and organization contribute to real change in adolescent reading instruction.
- Part II provides an extensive directory of adolescent literacy curriculum and programming options. Each entry includes a program description, summary of research, and professional development options to help you find a literacy solution that fits your school.

A bibliographical reference section and an appendix of websites for new and developing adolescent literacy programs are included.

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