CARNEGIE Results

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Summer 2005

America's Literacy Challenge: Teaching Adolescents to Read to Learn

***Carnegie Results* Is A Quarterly Newsletter Published By Carnegie Corporation Of New York. It Highlights Corporation Supported Organizations And Projects That Have Produced Reports, Results Or Information Of Special Note.**

Editor's Note: *This edition of the Carnegie Results reviews a relatively new initiative for Carnegie Corporation of New York: the Advancing Literacy program, which focuses on improving the literacy of students in grades four-to-twelve. Though the effort was only begun in 2003, it has already made important inroads in tackling the challenge of improving adolescent literacy and in highlighting what has been done and what still needs to be done in this area. We thought that an early look at the issues and directions the program is pursuing as well as some preliminary "lessons learned" would provide useful insights for all of us who are concerned about how the ability of our nation's youngsters—who, after all, are tomorrow's potential leaders—not only to read, but also to understand the content and depth of what they read, may affect the future of our nation.*

All the reading experts agree. America is having an awful time teaching its middle school and high school students how to read with comprehension. Counter-intuitive and oxymoronic as such a notion appears to be (after all, what does reading without comprehension mean?), it is nonetheless true. The track record of America's schools in teaching their children to read is, in a word, abysmal. Indeed, a glance at what Catherine Snow, Henry Lee Shattuck Professor of Education at Harvard University's Graduate School of Education, refers to as the "dire data" very quickly leads to the conclusion that, when it comes to student literacy, the nation is clearly on the wrong track. According to the U.S. Department of Education, more than eight million of America's schoolchildren in grades four-to-twelve are "struggling readers." Meanwhile, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and state assessments reveal that the gap in reading achievement continues to widen between subgroups of students disaggregated by race/ethnicity, low income and students with limited English proficiency and disabilities. The Alliance for Excellent Education has reported that each day in America 3,000 high school students drop out. Perhaps most alarming of all is the following: among those high school students who enter college as freshmen, approximately fifty-three percent enroll in remedial courses. British economist Richard Layard reports in his new book, *Happiness: Lessons from A New Science* (Penguin Press HC, 2005), that people without skills are "much more likely" to be unemployed and low-paid. Literacy is arguably the most basic skill of all, yet Layard points out that "In Britain and the United States roughly one in five of the population is functionally illiterate: for example, they cannot read a simple instruction on a medicine bottle. This contrasts with roughly one in ten in Germany, Sweden, and the Netherlands."

Written by: Anne Grosso de León. De León writes about education.

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No wonder Bill Gates is angry—and scared. In a keynote address delivered at a meeting of the National Governors Association on February 26, 2005, the Microsoft chairman focused his fury on the American high school system, which he described as "obsolete" and responsible for "ruining the lives of Americans every year." He explained: "When I compare our high schools to what I see when I'm traveling abroad, I am terrified for our workforce of tomorrow. In math and science, our fourth graders are among the top students in the world. By eighth grade, they're in the middle of the pack. By twelfth grade, U.S. students are scoring near the bottom of all industrialized nations."

Education experts might differ as to the reasons why, but reading experts would point out that the decline Bill Gates describes in science and math achievement closely parallels a similar decline in reading achievement, which is the fundamental prerequisite to all academic achievement. In the fourth grade, their beloved storybooks now a fond memory, students experience what has been described rather poignantly as "the fourth grade slump." The decoding skills developed in grades one-to-three—i.e., recognizing and sounding out words—which have helped them to learn to read are insufficient to help them read to learn. The fourth graders are now being handed texts laden with new vocabularies and more complex content in science and mathematics, but also in social studies and literature. The reality of the situation, however, is that middle and high school subject teachers generally do not see the teaching of reading as their responsibility, nor are they trained to do so. Catherine Snow explains that the common perception among teachers is that "Reading instruction after fifth grade is remediation, not instruction"—and subject teachers don't teach remedial reading. Without any meaningful instructional intervention, reading experts say, the slumping fourth grader will continue an inexorable decline, ominously edging toward "the eighth grade cliff," struggling all the while with increasingly diverse and complex texts. By twelfth grade, according to NAEP assessments, only forty percent of students are performing at or above a level of reading proficiency. What of the other sixty percent? If they haven't already joined the sad cohort of 3,000 high school dropouts a day, some will "join" the workforce in marginal jobs that lack the security that Richard Layard says is so fundamental to human happiness. Others, against all odds, will enroll in college and find themselves summarily directed to remedial courses, painfully aware that they have begun the most challenging educational

experience of their young lives severely handicapped.

All in all, the world's remaining superpower appears to have an awful mess on its hands. Far from despairing, the response of Carnegie Corporation of New York has been to intensify its historic commitment to the advancement of literacy, a commitment that, through the years, has taken many forms. In 1955, following the publication of the best-selling *Why Johnny Can't Read* (Harper & Row, 1986, ©1955) by Rudolf Flesch, the phonics-whole language controversy became part of a passionate public debate on the teaching of reading. In 1959, John Gardner, president of Carnegie Corporation (1955–1967), observed in the Corporation's annual report that it was time to determine through research "whether Johnny can or cannot read—if so why, if not, why not." Toward this end, the Corporation awarded a grant to Jeanne Chall of the City College of New York to conduct research that would inform, if not settle, the reading debate. Determining that there were distinct advantages to programs that included systematic phonics instruction—particularly for poor children—in 1967 Chall published her groundbreaking work, *Learning to Read: the Great Debate* (McGraw Hill, ©1967). Later, at Harvard University, Chall developed a conceptual framework to identify the stages of reading and clearly distinguished between "learning to read" and "reading to learn." Nearly forty years later, Chall's research has lost none of its relevance. At the same time, recognizing the huge potential of television as a vehicle for public education, in 1969 the Corporation provided support for the internationally acclaimed public broadcasting program, *Sesame Street* and, more recently, the PBS series, *Between the Lions*.

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In 2001, the Corporation, in partnership with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, initiated Schools for a New Society (SNS), a five-year, $60 million urban high school reform effort, matched with local funds, aimed at promoting systemic, district-wide reform in seven cities. Encouraging partnership and collaboration with the community, including school officials and teachers, parents and students, and "community stakeholders" such as unions, business leaders, elected officials and higher education leaders, SNS has begun to address the issue of adolescent literacy in school districts in Boston, Chattanooga, Houston, Providence, Sacramento, San Diego and Worcester.

The following year, the Corporation launched Teachers for a New Era (TNE), a teacher education reform effort that seeks to develop new models of university-based teacher education rooted in research, the full engagement of arts and sciences faculty in the education of prospective teachers as well as collaboration between arts and science and education faculties and a view of education as a clinically taught practice. In both cases, while the original intent of the reform efforts was not to focus on adolescent literacy, or on the "dire data" that documents the inequalities in reading achievement among our nation's students, it soon became clear that, ultimately, the success of SNS and TNE was intrinsically and vitally linked to the advancement of literacy.

In 2003, drawing upon what was learned through its work in redesigning the urban high school, Carnegie Corporation established the Advancing Literacy program, an initiative that would focus intensively on improving the literacy of students in grades four-to-twelve. Explains Daniel Fallon, Chair of the Corporation's Education Division, "Our plan is to support ventures in research, policy and practice, while working to increase national awareness of the importance of teaching children not only to read words, but to understand what they're reading."

In a bare two years, this plan, designed and implemented by Andrés Henríquez, Program Officer in Carnegie Corporation's Education Division, has been executed as if the future of the republic depended on it which, arguably, it does and, as of this writing, a total of thirty grants have been awarded to support projects designed to advance the literacy of middle school and high school students. Intense, focused, and exhaustively research based, the plan has been pursued with an extraordinary sense of urgency and purpose by literacy experts who are

agreed on at least one point: teaching adolescent students to read to learn is not optional and, ultimately, subject teachers must assume the responsibility of helping their students to do so. Catherine Snow recalls a presentation she made to a group of subject teachers on the need to teach students the skills required to read with comprehension. To a science teacher who expressed consternation over the prospect of teaching reading to his students, she said: “If you want students to become science students, then you’ve got to help them to access the text.” How to get the job done, says Snow, is the challenge. “People are thinking a new pedagogy will solve the problem,” she declares, “but there is no one struggle, so there is no one solution.” The diversity of projects being carried out by the numerous reading experts who have signed on to become part of the Advancing Literacy initiative of Carnegie Corporation provides ample evidence that the struggles—and the solutions—are indeed many.

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In a critical first step to support the Advancing Literacy initiative, Carnegie Corporation asked the RAND Corporation to examine the status of adolescent literacy achievement nationwide, which it did within the context of the No Child Left Behind law. The results of that study produced still more "dire data." According to the RAND report, *Meeting Literacy Goals Set by No Child Left Behind: A Long Uphill Road*, "A comprehensive portrait of where the nation's adolescents stand relative to state and national literacy goals. . . underscores how far we are from the goal of 100-percent proficiency set under No Child Left Behind (NCLB)."

The formation in June 2003 of the Carnegie Advisory Council for Advancing Literacy to advise the Corporation over the next three years on how it can best use its resources was another key step in launching the initiative. According to Andrés Henríquez, The Corporation is extremely fortunate to have the vast expertise of this distinguished panel to guide the research and to benefit from their advice and counsel in bridging the research-to-practice gap and infusing best practice into classroom instruction. The Council, which is committed to meeting three-to-four times a year, will conduct ongoing reviews of the growing literature, examine the work of Corporation grantees and consider the testimony of individuals and groups that appear to have an effective track record in increasing adolescent literacy, and at the same time, draw on and share their own experiences in the field. These activities will form the basis for the Council to propose promising strategies for advancing the literacy of middle and high school students. Chaired by Catherine Snow, the Council comprises of ten literacy experts who bring to the table their knowledge and experience in policy, preservice training, content literacy and special education.

Advisory Council member Donald D. Deshler, a Professor of Special Education in the School of Education and Director of the Center for Research on Learning at the University of Kansas, stresses that the value of the Council lies in the fact that it is "made up of people with a host of perspectives and disciplines, who are on the front lines." Council members, "passionate" about what they are doing, "ask important questions," he says, and keep "pushing" for the answers. After he has attended a meeting of the Advisory Council, Deshler says he tells his wife, "I feel like I've been to school."

In an innovative move to shore up and consolidate support for the

adolescent literacy challenge, in May 2002, Carnegie Corporation hosted the first meeting of the Adolescent Literacy Funders Forum (ALFF), a group of private and government literacy agencies. (See appendix for a list of ALFF members.) The purpose of the gathering was to permit funders to share their knowledge and ideas on an issue of common interest and concern to them: adolescent literacy. “It’s very rare for federal folks to meet with private foundation folks,” explains Catherine Snow. These agencies, she notes, which spend a lot of money on literacy, often “didn’t know what the others were doing.” Donald Deshler agrees, applauding the Corporation’s leadership role in bringing together these funding sources, an accomplishment that he views as “truly remarkable.”

Adolescent Literacy and the Achievement Gap: What Do We Know and Where Do We Go From Here? is an account of the first meeting of ALFF written by Snow and Gina Biancarosa, a doctoral student at the Harvard School of Education. According to the report, members of the newly formed ALFF concluded that, “Coordinated effort is needed to jumpstart a focus on adolescent literacy in order to resolve the minority achievement gap.” The report offers a review of some of the evidence linking adolescent and preadolescent literacy to this persistent achievement gap; it also looks at some of the current research and program initiatives that address literacy as a means of improving academic achievement. Finally, it summarizes ideas for future projects proposed by participants at the meeting that could benefit from collaboration and coordination.

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In a move to promote policies leading to the improvement of intermediate and adolescent literacy, the Corporation awarded a grant to the Alliance for Excellent Education in May 2003. A year later, the Alliance presented a report to Carnegie Corporation of New York. Entitled *Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy*, the report was written by Snow and Biancarosa with input by five of the nation's leading literacy experts and researchers. Drawing on recommendations made by this panel of experts, the report identifies the fifteen key elements of effective adolescent literacy programs, sorting them in terms of elements aimed at instructional and infrastructure improvements. The nine elements aimed at instructional improvements include effective instructional principles embedded in content and ongoing formative assessment of students; the six elements addressing infrastructure include professional development and leadership. Each of the elements is explained in detail and examples of each are also given. Henríquez points out that state education departments, a number of schools of education and the National Governors Association are using *Reading Next* "as a template for how to organize adolescent literacy." In fact, the National Governors Association has used this template to develop its own document, *A Governor's Guide to Adolescent Literacy*, a kind of briefing book on adolescent literacy designed for use by governors and policymakers. The guide outlines "the core knowledge and action steps required for creating effective statewide adolescent literacy policies."

"*Reading Next* is compelling," says Susan Frost, President of the Alliance for Excellent Education from 2001 to 2004, "because it's something you can pick up and put into practice." She adds, "It's almost a checklist." If Frost finds *Reading Next* "compelling," she is not alone in her judgment. Available for downloading on the web site of the Corporation (http://www.carnegie.org/sns/literacy.html) and the Alliance (www.all4ed.org/publications/ReadingNext/index.html) as well as through links with partner organizations working to advance literacy, *Reading Next* is in its third printing. Its pass-along readership is huge, says Henríquez. The Corporation grant made it possible to take the issue of adolescent literacy, which Frost describes as cutting edge, to the public at large, including educators and policymakers. The aim, she explains, was to find everyone's research and practice [on the subject] and put it together in a readable document, and then to use it to influence federal policy. The wide dissemination and readability of *Reading Next* are not in question at this point; the extent of its

influence on federal policy remains to be seen. Too many adolescent readers "can't comprehend, use information, think critically and write," observes Frost. "Policy people understand the problem, but not the general public. [The reception of] the *Reading Next* report is a good example of people being ready to receive this information," she says. "Carnegie Corporation has taken some nascent efforts and grown them," says Frost, adding, "Let's see how we can speed this up."

A grant to the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning (CRL) in July 2003 certainly has the potential to accelerate the reform. The CRL project, according to Don Deshler, seeks to answer a fundamental question: What are the factors that make some urban secondary schools succeed, while others fail? In an effort to "scale up" successful secondary school reform models that advance adolescent literacy, the CRL project conducted a thorough review of the literature of secondary school reform models and then scheduled visits to targeted sites where innovative work in school reform and literacy instruction is taking place. The goal was to develop "a converging practices model," explains Deshler.

As with the *Reading Next* research initiative, upon completing the literature review, a set of "critical components" of urban school reform began to converge, which were identifiable by category, e.g., performance outcomes, instruction and learning, professional development, incentives and accountability, data analysis and leadership—each of which the CRL investigators developed, researched and tested in a variety of school settings and situations.

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For decades, says Deshler, the focus of American education has been on early childhood education, the belief being that if we "get them young and bolster them soundly, they won't have problems later." As a result, he observes, "We have neglected older kids in this country." The power of the early childhood argument, he continues, is clearly reflected in the way federal funds have been allocated. At one end of the spectrum are the Head Start and Title I programs—with Pell grants at the other end. "In between," Deshler says, "there is the forgotten middle." The investment of the federal government in adolescent education is "spit in the ocean," he declares, though he acknowledges that there are some hopeful signs in Washington that this imbalance might be changing. For the most part, adolescent literacy experts have been "toiling in the shadows" and "sort of living on the crumbs." The Carnegie Corporation of New York Advancing Literacy initiative, Deshler says, has "had a very profound influence on adolescent literacy," by directing national attention to the issue, bringing together the best talents in the field to address the issue and supporting needed research and innovative practices. But is the work destined to become another blip on the screen? To sustain this effort, he explains, "We need to build an infrastructure in the field," which will support and encourage careers that focus on adolescent literacy. As with the development of careers in early childhood education, "These things take time."

The infrastructure Deshler refers to must inevitably include researchers and teachers. In October 2004, Carnegie Corporation addressed this need with the creation of an Adolescent Literacy Preservice Initiative, which, over the next two years, will invite up to twelve teacher preparation programs to develop innovative instructional materials, build up a cadre of adolescent literacy researchers and enrich existing secondary school literacy programs. The goal is to create an adolescent literacy preservice network, which will promote and share instructional designs, innovative data collection instruments and "lessons learned" from teacher preparation programs throughout the country. A vital component of this initiative is a requirement that reading specialists work closely with arts and sciences faculty to insure that content area literacy is clearly defined. On this point, it is imperative that teacher preparation programs and the arts and sciences are literally on the same page. Notably, the engagement of arts and sciences faculty in the education of prospective teachers is a cornerstone of the Corporation's Teachers for A New Era program.

To date, Michigan State University and the University of Kansas Center

for Research and Learning have been selected to participate in the Corporation's preservice initiative. Other university preservice literacy programs are currently under consideration.

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Other grants awarded by the Corporation focus on key issues such as the role of the family in fostering literacy, the training of literacy coaches, the use of technology and the special needs of English language learners (ELLs). Included is a grant to the National Center for Family Literacy to plan for the design and testing of programs and strategies that engage parents in the literacy development of their adolescent and pre-adolescent children. The project, which focuses on minority students, ELLs and students living in poverty, aims to create and perpetuate a new cycle of literacy to replace generational cycles of literacy deficits. At the same time, in an effort to address the growing use of "literacy coaches" by school districts to increase the instructional capacity of middle and high school subject teachers so they can incorporate literacy instruction into content teaching, the Corporation has awarded a grant to the International Reading Association (IRA). Working with the National Council of Teachers of English, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, the National Council for the Social Studies and the National Science Teachers Association, IRA has focused on developing standards to define what effective literacy coaches must know and be able to do. A grant to the University of Michigan also focuses on literacy coaches and involves the development of a web-based tool designed to support and inform the work of literacy coaches who work with subject matter teachers in middle and secondary schools. CAST Resources, Inc., received a grant that resulted in the development of "the Strategy Tutor," a multimedia program designed to provide individualized mentoring and support in reading comprehension to students as they attempt to "read to learn" from the Internet. Grants to the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) by Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Rockefeller Foundation have enabled CAL to develop a language acquisition and academic literacy model—the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP)—for middle and high school ELLs. SIOP is an approach to teaching content to students who are learning English that focuses on developing "academic language" to aid them in learning academic subjects. Still another project supported by the Corporation that focuses on the special literacy needs of ELLs is ExC-ELL (Expediting Comprehension for English Language Learners), a project of the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk (CRESPAR) at Johns Hopkins University. ExC-ELL is a ten-step, research-based professional development program for middle and high school teachers of English, science and social studies that focuses on vocabulary, fluency, writing and the strategic processing of texts.

Clearly, the projects aimed at advancing adolescent literacy funded thus far by Carnegie Corporation are in a nascent state but taken together, these projects, the dissemination of critical research contained in documents like Reading Next and the formation of distinguished working groups such as ALFF and the Carnegie Advisory Council for Advancing Literacy make a powerful statement that the responsibility for advancing adolescent literacy is no longer just an orphaned concern.

An unconscionable number of American adolescents are functionally illiterate?or uncomfortably close to it. Few would disagree that citizens unable to read and follow instructions on a medicine bottle will never be productive players in the global economy in this digital age nor be able to navigate the information superhighway. Indeed, they will never fully grasp the significance of clichés such as these that have become part of the verbal currency of American society. So the sense of urgency that prompts Susan Frost to wish out loud that things speed up with respect to advancing adolescent literacy is perfectly understandable. It is the same sense of urgency that moves Donald Deshler and his colleagues to ask the following question in their summary of the Advancing Literacy project: What makes one [urban] school so successful that children and adolescents bloom like wildflowers in the harsh environment of a desert, and what makes others struggle just to survive and often times fail completely to thrive? It is this sense of urgency that keeps a dedicated cadre of reading experts and literacy advocates in a state of almost perpetual motion, crisscrossing the country to spread the word on the ramifications for our students of the dire data floating ominously like a large black cloud over the nation. Finally, it is this sense of urgency that has inspired Carnegie Corporation of New York to invest its resources, its professional expertise, its leverage in the funding community and its long track record as a leader in American education reform on behalf of advancing the cause of adolescent and pre-adolescent literacy.

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Says current Corporation President Vartan Gregorian, “Teaching middle and high school students to read with comprehension is a critical goal for the nation. At the Corporation we have enlisted some of the most creative minds in the nation to work with us to advance literacy.” He adds, “Together, we will do what it takes to ensure that the spectacle of American students shutting down and dropping out of high school at the appalling rate of 3,000 a day quickly becomes one of those shameful memories in American history that we are all eager to forget.” He concludes, “What does America’s magnificent legacy of free, universal public elementary and secondary education mean if we fail to provide every American child with the reading and writing skills they need to succeed in higher education, to become productive citizens in the workplace—and, dare I say it—to fulfill their own happiness?”

Evidence is mounting that America’s failure to provide these basic tools for success and happiness is increasingly taking its toll. Thomas Friedman of The New York Times tells us that the world is flat after all1, and that American workers are stumbling on this increasingly leveled playing field. In a recent article in the Washington Monthly2, Benjamin Wallace-Wells describes a disconcerting shopping excursion to Best Buy. “Whereas a decade ago the most creative, groundbreaking stuff came from Silicon Valley,” he observes, “now it all seemed to come from overseas. The plasma televisions were from Korea; the computer-like cell phones were from Finland; the feature-packed digital cameras were from Japan.” Wallace-Wells cites a report of the Council on Competitiveness, a group comprising 400 CEOs of blue chip companies and university presidents. According to the Council’s report, while it took fifty-five years for the automobile and thirty-five years for the telephone to spread to a quarter of the country, it took a mere seven years for the Internet to accomplish this. Indeed, observes Wallace-Wells, in the past, falling behind five years in the building of car factories meant the loss of some profits, but in our twenty-first century economy, “[F]all five years behind on hybrid cars and you may have lost an industry.”

For America to remain competitive in a global environment in which the diffusion of knowledge across a newly flattened horizon and the development of new technologies move at warp speed, we must ramp up the process of education reform and tend to that most basic challenge of all: insuring that America’s children—all of them—develop the literacy skills necessary to get the job done.

1. “It’s a Flat World, After All,” by Thomas Friedman, The New York Times, April 13, 2005.
2. “Off-Track” by Benjamin Wallace-Wells, Washington Monthly, March 2005.

APPENDIX

Members of the Adolescent Literacy Funders Forum

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

Carnegie Corporation of New York

Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation

Global Foundation Group, JP Morgan Private Bank

Institute of Education Sciences

The James Irvine Foundation

Leeds Family Foundation

National Institute for Literacy

National Institute of Child Health and Human Development

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