



Education Policy Brief

ADOLESCENT LITERACY:

READING TO LEARN

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Why do we need to concern ourselves with reading beyond elementary school?

- ✚ **In 2005, 70% of Delaware's eighth grade students were *not proficient* readers with 20% scoring *significantly below* grade level¹ on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). This was true despite the statistically significant gains that Delaware had made between 1998 and 2005 in 8th grade reading; gains that out paced the nation's average.²**
- ✚ **Delaware's high school graduation rate ranges between 63% and 83%.³**
- ✚ **Of those Delaware students who do enter ninth grade,**
 - 36% drop out of high school,
 - 25% get high school diplomas but don't go on to college.
 - 17% drop out of college without a degree,⁴ and,
 - 21% go on to earn a bachelor's degree within six years of starting college.
- ✚ **About 800 Delawareans adults are on the waiting list for literacy tutoring; the wait time is a three to six-months.⁵**

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INTRODUCTION

There is a common misconception that a strong foundation in early literacy at the elementary school level is sufficient for future reading success. The RAND Reading Study Group saw this as the “core challenge facing those in the field of research on proficient reading.”⁶ While it is true that some students who are labeled “proficient” at the third-grade level will sustain levels of reading independence throughout secondary school--many will not. While in elementary school students may *learn to read*, however, many when they reach middle and high school do not have the ability to *read to learn*.⁷

Because of this common misconception, secondary teachers have not been expected or trained to teach literacy skills. Unfortunately, these teachers often misdiagnose struggling older students who cannot master secondary content; they believe they are unable or unwilling to read. Then these teachers often restructure lessons and, sometimes, stop requiring independent reading altogether.⁸⁹

When teachers no longer expect purposeful reading, students have fewer opportunities to gain experience with text and may lose their desire to do so. Yet interaction and involvement with text are critical to learners’ ability to comprehend.¹⁰ This misunderstanding about adolescent literacy development lies at the center of an endless cycle of ineffective instruction and student failure.

NATIONAL TRENDS

In 2005, National Association of School Board Executives (NASBE) advocated that state boards revisit and reexamine literacy standards, goals, and assessments to ensure that all secondary teachers have adequate professional development to teach literacy skills *within the context of core academic subjects*.

“Simply put, literacy is the linchpin of standards-based reform. As literacy skills improve, student achievement rises not only in reading and writing but across the curriculum spectrum, a benefit that has profound consequences for the ultimate success of standards-based reform.”¹¹

A growing number of professional organizations support the establishment of literacy practices within the secondary classrooms; these include:

- ✚ International Reading Association in collaboration with the National Council of Teachers of English, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, the National Science Teachers Association, and the National Council for the Social Studies¹²
- ✚ Alliance for Excellent Education¹³
- ✚ National Association of Secondary School Principals¹⁴
- ✚ National Governor’s Association¹⁵
- ✚ National Academy of Education¹⁶

A PROMISING APPROACH: THE READING APPRENTICESHIP MODEL

Like traditional apprenticeships, Reading Apprenticeship (RA) centers on solving real problems and uses expert modeling, coaching, and skill release. The approach acknowledges the gaps between students' unique linguistic and cultural experiences, strengths, and values and what is expected within the academic disciplines that students encounter in school. It re-examines a common misconception about struggling adolescent students, that they are beginning readers. More often, these students are novice readers when it comes to the progressively more specialized vocabularies, text structures, and genres that are required at the secondary school level.

Just as the rules of discourse vary between the home and school, they also differ among subject areas. "For example, we can speak of the discourse of science and scientists which is quite different from the discourse of history and historians."¹⁷ Reading Apprenticeship proposes that secondary teachers can help students successfully make this transition. First, teachers redefine instruction for themselves, seeing it as an apprenticeship into their field of study. Then a partnership between the teacher and student develops. "the teacher serves as a 'master' reader of subject-area texts to his or her student apprentices, paralleling the role of more proficient 'expert'"¹⁸

Teachers who adopt these practices report that their classrooms become collaborative, interactive places of learning. Their students become more highly engaged. Teachers "come to understand that teaching students to read in their content area is teaching their content area."¹⁹ Results include improved student achievement, decreases in the achievement gap, higher student engagement, and increasingly greater teacher buy-in.²⁰

DELAWARE SITUATION

- ✚ Currently, Delaware's requirements for middle and secondary teacher certification specifically call for coursework in content area literacy in *only one* content area-science. Even in this area, the teaching of reading is one of two options to fulfill a pedagogical requirement.^{2122]}
- ✚ Examples of Delaware secondary literacy programs that target content area teachers include: a national initiative (Project CRISS) and two state initiatives (SSSR and IMPACT.) These programs have been used to varying degrees by districts, by single schools, by departments within schools, and/or by individual teachers for professional development training.²³
- ✚ The Delaware Recommended Curriculum's focus on understanding, "guided inquiry, practice, active learning, and rethinking to enable students to make sense of how and when to apply content knowledge and skills"²⁴ is well-matched with the inquiry-based methods of content area literacy instruction.
- ✚ In *Redesigning Delaware's High Schools: NGA Honor States Grant Proposals*,²⁵ the Delaware Department of Education plans to improve the graduation rate and the achievement of Delaware's high school students. DOE recommends an examination of Delaware high school culture, expectations of excellence, and *content area practices*.

✚ In a recent poll²⁶ of Delaware fifth- through twelfth-grade teachers:

- About 17% were not satisfied with the literacy component of their undergraduate teacher education preparation, and 23% were unfamiliar with content area literacy.
- Of the 202 teachers who provided specific suggestions of ways to improve their undergraduate literacy preparation,
 - about 38% said they would have liked additional time working in schools,
 - 26% wished they had received more training in “content area literacy” methods.

Delaware teachers desire more and better methods of teaching adolescent literacy, while systemic forces are moving to support such improvement. As Greenleaf and Schoenback point out,

“We cannot mandate the kind of insightful and responsive teaching that researchers have described as effective, high-quality teaching for today’s students; we can only invest in developing teachers’ capacities to carry out the complex actions that such high-quality teaching demands.”²⁷

Adoption of any new literacy initiative carries with it a multitude of policy concerns—accountability, teacher quality and professional development, funding, and most importantly, cohesive vision.

POLICY QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

- ✚ Delaware schools have all but closed the achievement gap in reading at the elementary level; but by middle school it begins to widen again. Could this be a result of the misconception that the current focus on a strong foundation in early literacy is sufficient?
- ✚ How should teacher preparation programs more adequately prepare middle and high school teachers to help their students read to learn? What can be learned from the apprenticeship model in regards to the preparation and certification of secondary teachers?
- ✚ What forms of supervisory support from district and school administrators will lead schools to re-organize around a content literacy initiative?
- ✚ How can the culture of middle and high schools be transformed to recognize the significance of adolescent literacy and that it is the responsibility of all teachers?
- ✚ Are investments in adolescent literacy at the middle and high school levels more cost-effective than those that are currently made in adult literacy programs? In literacy remediation at the community college level?

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