PURSUING HIGH SCHOOL READING PROFICIENCY

An Arizona Experience
This issue brief is the result of a collaboration between the Center for Policy Studies in Rural Education (CPSRE), housed at the National Association of State Boards of Education, and the Arizona Department of Education. The author would like to acknowledge Texas Instruments and the U.S. Department of Education for their support of this research.

Authors for this issue:

Michael Hill, NASBE
Hobart Harmon, Education Consultant
Introduction

Reforming America's public high schools is taking center stage. Influenced significantly by provisions in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 requiring that all schools show annual progress toward educational goals, new state standards and accountability programs make improving high school education imperative. Indeed, the No Child Left Behind Act requires states and schools to track and improve their graduation rates over time. The National Governors Association (NGA) is focusing a yearlong effort on redesigning high school education, while President George W. Bush has outlined initiatives to increase high school standards. An NGA task force has developed a series of best practices and a "Top 10 List" of achievable policy actions for high school reform.

The statistics driving this reform clearly document the need. Across the nation, only 70 percent of all high school students graduate. Moreover, barely half of African-American and Hispanic 9th graders complete high school within four years. At nearly 2,000 of the nation's high schools, graduation is no longer the norm, as the senior class is nearly 60 percent smaller than the freshman class that entered four years before. In announcing the new initiative, NGA Chairman Governor Mark Warner of Virginia noted that the high cost of high school dropouts has very real consequences for our nation's economy; and especially for low-income and minority students who are affected the most.

The Reading Challenge

Six million of the nation's 20 million adolescents between the ages of 15-19 have difficulty reading and writing. This statistic is the single largest contributing factor to less than 75 percent of all 8th graders graduating from high school in five years (National Assessment of Educational Progress). Data from the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress Reading Report Card suggest that most secondary students are not attaining high levels of literacy. Greenleaf, Schoenbach, Cziko, and Mueller (2001) note that there are still persistent gaps in achievement between students who are members of the dominant culture and those who are not. Some researchers maintain that unless we can turn around the poor reading skills of many high school students, their overall chance for academic success and persistence in high school is in great jeopardy (Cappella and Weinstein, 2001; Zipperer, F., Worley, M., Sisson, M., and Said, R., 2002). It is clear that, after years of focusing reading intervention in the elementary grades, literacy among middle and high school students is of critical concern.

In fact, reading achievement is a major outcome measure of the U.S. Department of Education's Smaller Learning Communities program. The program strives to reform high schools in ways that create more personalized and successful learning environments for all students.

Moje, Young, Readence, and Moore (2000) caution that the issues of teaching and learning in the context of secondary school content areas are critical and complicated areas for research. What constitutes best practices depends on many factors:

- How students perceive themselves as readers;
- What their interests are at the time;
- The interactions of teacher and student, of student and student;
- The classroom environment in which the strategy is being used; and
- How institutional structures shape daily events that occur in classrooms and schools.

NABSE Rural High School Reading Project

The Center for Policy Studies in Rural Education (CPSRE), housed at the National Association of State Boards of Education, collaborated with state department officials in Arizona to investigate the mechanism by which a high school located in a rural area of that state was gaining ground on improving student reading proficiency. Four criteria were considered in selecting the state and high school:
• State was NASBE-affiliated member with a reading initiative and willingness to participate in project;

• Rural location of school represented a significant diversity population (i.e., Hispanic);

• Student reading proficiency state test scores showed a two-year trend of improvement; and

• Significant percentage of students in the high school were eligible for free and reduced price lunch.

Context

Based on 2004 County Typology Codes, the county in which Reading School District1 is located is classified as non-metropolitan (i.e., rural). Regarding urban influence, this non-metropolitan county is one of 301 counties classified as micropolitan, adjacent to a small metro area. Classification regarding economic dependence reveals the county is federal/state government-dependent, meaning 15 percent or more of average annual labor and proprietor’s earnings were derived from federal and state government during 1998 and 2000. The county is further classified as housing stressed, meaning 30 percent or more of the households had one or more of the following housing conditions in 2000: lack of complete plumbing, lack of complete kitchen, paid 30 percent or more of income for owner costs or rent, had more than one person per room; “low education,” meaning that 25 percent or more of the residents 25-64 years of age have neither a high school diploma nor GED; and “low-employment,” meaning that less than 65 percent or more of the residents 25-64 years old were employed in 2000.

The U.S. Department of Education classifies Reading School District as located in a town not within a metropolitan statistical area, and with a population less than 25,000 and greater than or equal to 2,500 people. According to 2004 data, the school district has approximately 2,900 students, and approximately 210 students have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Schools and grade configuration in the district include: one 9-12 high school, one 6-8 middle school, one 3-5 elementary school, and one PK-3 elementary school. Sources of the approximately $16 million in total revenue for the district are 10 percent federal, 46 percent state, and 44 percent local. Per student expenditures are approximately $4,600.

The public high school the CPSRE Team visited in Reading School District is classified as a rural Title I school located outside a metropolitan Statistical Area. In 2004, approximately 791 students attended the school, of which 54 percent were male and 46 percent female. Over four-fifths (84 percent) of the students were Hispanic, while slightly more than one-tenth (14 percent) were Caucasian. Almost 50 percent of the students in the high school were classified as Limited English Proficient (LEP). In addition, almost three-fourths of the students in the district were classed as economically disadvantaged. Approximately 39 teachers were employed at the school, yielding a student to teacher ratio of 20 to 1.

According to the Arizona State Report Card of NCLB results (2004), the school met Average Yearly Progress (AYP) in reading proficiency. The graduation rate (five-year cohort) for the class of 2002 was 85 percent. This compares most favorably with the statewide average of 76.4 percent.

Procedures

In spring 2004, CPSRE collaboration with Arizona Department of Education officials and Reading School District administrators yielded a site visit to both the state department of education and the school district. That May, the CPSRE Team conducted semi-structured interviews with key department officials, including the deputy associate state superintendent; director of reading; director of Title I; director of English immersion; director of special education; director of best practices/school improvement; and the coordinator of literacy of the state improvement project.

In addition, the Team conducted semi-structured interviews with the superintendent of the school district, principal of the high school, counselor, library personnel, selected teachers, and selected students. The Team also asked the principal to administer a school reading culture survey to all faculty and staff at the high school.

What We Learned: State Level

With nearly unanimous bipartisan support, the Arizona State Legislature passed A.R.S. § 15-704, referred to as the AZ READS Legislation. It forms the foundation of the statewide initiative to ensure that children learn to read no later than the 3rd grade and remain proficient readers through the 12th grade. Each school district or charter school that provides instruction in kindergarten programs and grades one through three must select and administer screening and ongoing diagnostic and class-

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1 Reading School District is a pseudonym name to maintain confidentiality assured personnel during interviews.
room-based instructional reading assessments, including a motivational assessment as defined by the state board of education, to monitor student progress. Each school must use the diagnostic information to plan appropriate and effective intervention. Reading proficiency is measured for students in the 10th grade and reported on each school's report card.

While no specific state-level initiative focuses on high school reading proficiency, the Arizona Department of Education has convened the AZ READS Task Force to address issues of the law, including the examination of scientific research and instructional practices specific to early reading assessment and intensive intervention. Supported by a U.S. Department of Education school improvement grant (SIG), the Arizona Department of Education operates a literacy site at www.azsig.com/sig3web.htm. The AZ SIG Literacy website:

- Shares literacy activities and accomplishments;
- Provides an opportunity for educators, parents, and the public to ask questions about literacy related issues and concerns (Ask the Expert);
- Provides information that can be downloaded for parents and educators (Parent Pages/Professional Pages);
- Provides connections to literacy-related resources; and
- Contains a literacy news and views newsletter that can be easily read online and printed in hard copy.

State department representatives emphasize that while no state-level funding is targeted to secondary reading specifically, school districts have considerable discretion to use funds such as federal Title I allocations to address reading issues at the secondary level. School districts may also use their allocation of Arizona 301 state funds. Use of such funds are viewed as addressing the "remediation" needs of students at the secondary level, primarily focused on those not meeting the reading standards required by the state for the school to achieve adequate yearly progress standards required in the No Child Left Behind Act.

Current state-level technical assistance for addressing the reading issues of secondary students focuses on schools competing for Title I planning grant funds that enable schools to purchase necessary external technical assistance. Schools designated as "In Need of Improvement" are eligible for competitive comprehensive grants that may include a reading component. Schools that are considered "failing" after two consequent years receive technical assistance from "Solution Teams" of the state department of education.

Although no state requirements exist for reading at the secondary level, state-level discussions center on requiring testing in the Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS) that addresses English and reading standards as a required test in the 10th grade. This would include adoption of state regulations pertaining to English content standards in the high school curriculum and subsequent passage of an English test for a student to meet high school graduation requirements.

In essence, the perceptions of state-level personnel interviewed emphasize:

1. Achieving success in the AZ Reads program in the early grades, with all students being able to read proficiently by the end of grade three; and
2. Addressing the remediation needs of high school students in ways that focus on students with significant lags in reading. For example, not allowing these students to take other subjects until proficient in reading. This means students entering the 9th grade with reading skills that greatly limit their chance of succeeding in the high school curriculum would have to be brought up (remediated) first to desired standards of reading proficiency, and then integrated back into the appropriate high school curriculum.

State education officials indicate such a remediation effort would require a realignment of existing resources for maximum impact. Access to additional resources at both state and local levels may be necessary for schools to stimulate and accelerate desired levels of reading proficiency. School districts may need to offer an intense, highly focused “academy” type of program that addresses identified reading deficiencies among students. Also significant, some state education officials believe attaining reading proficiency among all high school students will require

In two years, state high-stakes testing will be the policy driver.

— Director of Reading
approaches that enable students to clearly understand external benefits, such as getting a good job and or connecting to concrete “life success.”

Specific to the Arizona experience, some officials also perceive a considerable difference between English Language Learning (ELL) students that begin instruction literate in their native language and those that do not. The consensus is that students without literacy skills require instruction in their native language prior to instruction in English. Consequently, a major implication is that proficiency in the student’s native language must be assessed prior to any intervention intended to improve the student’s reading skills.

**What We Learned: District Level**

The school district superintendent was a person with extraordinary commitment to addressing the issues of educational achievement associated with the “border culture” of the community. Having grown up and worked his entire life in the area, the superintendent had a keen understanding of the need to be culturally responsive to educational issues prevalent in a community situated on the border of Mexico. At the time of the CPSRE Team visit, the district population was growing 4-5 percent each year, approximately three-fourths of the residents in the school district were Hispanic, and the vast majority of students were English Language Learners.

Surroundings in the superintendent’s office reflected his strong focus as an instructional leader. Books such as *Schools That Learn* and *The Productive High School: A Fifth Discipline* were present on the superintendent’s desk, with tabs and yellow sticky notes that revealed their use. State publications of school laws, procedures, and other documents of educational operations were prevalent. One could not miss the superintendent’s zeal for identifying and using what is known about making schools productive institutions.

I came from the kind of people I now am trying to help. I emphasize to principals and faculty that students must be expected to achieve better, not just score better (on tests).

— District Superintendent of Schools

Actions by the superintendent reinforced support for a professional growth committee and a strong teacher mentoring program. Teachers were encouraged to visit other schools to witness best practices. The use of relevant data was emphasized in making decisions about programs and students. An “outsider audit” of student achievement (e.g., reading skills of students) served to help schools take an objective look at their performance.

Also significant, the superintendent had established three systems designed to provide information on the manner in which the district performed. First, he consistently conducted exit interviews with teachers and students to learn their perspectives on the district’s (e.g., high school) quality of education. Second, each school had to develop its own “instructional learning cycle,” designed to embed each student in learning. Finally, the last day of the school year—“data day”—was devoted to reviewing how the schools and students performed.

While competitive grant funds from the state could have been helpful, the district lacked the personnel to aggressively develop proposals for such funds. Perhaps as a correlate to this, district personnel tended to view state education policies as mandates without adequate money for implementing the real change required in schools. One view expressed was that fewer state demands for rapid change would be welcomed, as the high school implemented key changes that promised to improve student performance. Pressure for change “now” also was felt. While district personnel recognized that no child should be left behind, they also felt that change required time to allow an intense focus on changing practices regarding teaching and learning.

Building parent and community support in ways that facilitated the school district’s quest for educational excellence was a hallmark of the superintendent. As both a product and promoter of the “border culture,” he was able to build trust for change that consequently created a supportive climate for leadership and faculty at the high school to advance necessary educational improvements in reading and other areas.

**What We Learned: High School**

The high school enjoyed the leadership of an experienced principal and other key staff; all of whom brought considerable out-of-state experiences to their positions that seemed to facilitate their desire to take risks and advocate change in teaching and learning practices. Some teachers
came to the school because they heard it had a reputation for encouraging innovation. Others left and then returned. All perceive a strong degree of support by the district leadership. It should be noted that approximately 80 percent of all teachers lived in the school district.

Results of an external North Central Accreditation audit became the catalyst for the school leadership to focus on its students’ inadequate reading skills. This external shock, coupled with a climate in the school that was more open to change, resulted in a willingness to deal with the issues.

Also important as a catalyst for change was the school’s designation by the state as a low performing school. Review of assessment data (state test results [AIMS], Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory’s MAP, school attendance, and classroom grades) became a driving force in planning needed changes to teaching and learning practices. In response, school leadership used local funds to create a freshman transition program that used a double dose approach to address reading deficiencies (see Figure 1). Students that scored below a 6th grade-level in both reading and math were required to complete a transition program, in which students received elective credit and academic credit for their English class. A team composed of department heads, the assistant principal, and two counselors provided leadership for the reading improvement initiative.

In addition to the transition program, a freshman academy was initiated specifically to achieve the goals of smaller classroom size and additional emphasis on basic skills. The academy was based on the concept that success in the 9th grade was critical to success in later grades, and without this early success students are, in effect, set up for failure.

Title I teachers played a critical role in the program. It was common for a Title I staff person to take over the class of a teacher and teach a class as a coach. Thus, the Title I teacher’s role focused on teacher mentoring and modeling to demonstrate effective practices.

In addition, a team of nine teachers was handpicked to implement the reading initiatives by working in the freshman academy, the transition program, and with colleagues. School leadership selected the teachers who wanted to work with the academy students, and those who agreed to teach in the program could receive a $1,800 raise. The teachers also had to agree to being observed on 10 occasions to determine if their professional development in reinforcing reading was embedded in their classroom practices. These actions reinforced “accepting facts” that the school needed to teach students how to read well.

All teachers had had assistance in working with ELL students to support attainment of the reading initiative. The goal for the school’s reading initiative was for all students with reading deficiencies to be able to read well, and for students with reading skills to also be able to read for understanding in the content areas. The coaching and mentoring program appeared to be a key element. A one key school leader noted, “We must find those at-risk teachers and help them be better teachers so they can be successful. We must create an environment for teachers to take risks—to try—and to reward them for trying. Teachers need a very positive approach and support to try new teaching strategies.”

All principals in the school district were required to attend the professional development activities offered to teachers. The superintendent attended if it was a professional development activity that focused on a key school improvement initiative like reading.

Teachers also reported that the superintendent and principals visited their classes. A one teacher noted, “The (superintendents and principals) are visible, so it shows they value individual teachers. And students get to see them.” His teacher also noted that the district had a vision, the principal promoted professional development of teachers, there were high expectations for student achievement, and the school was a welcoming place.

The Reading Culture Survey was completed by teachers and administrators at the high school and is presented in Table 1 (page 9). The culture indicator statements are
listed in rank order based on the mean (average) score by the respondents. In the table, Number is the number of respondents to the item (statement), Mean is the average score of all responses for the statement, and SD is the standard deviation. The school staff were asked to rate the extent to which an indicator was present in the high school using a scale of 1 = Not at All to 7 = Very Great Extent. The highest rated indicators pertained to students seeing adults read, teachers valuing reading as a tool to help students understand course content, and students having access to appropriate reading materials. The lowest rated items by the school’s staff pertained to parent or community involvement in supporting the reading achievement of students. Staff ratings also indicated that informal conversations about reading experiences may not occur regularly among students at the school.

What We Learned—Students

Ninth-grade students interviewed said they benefited greatly from having more time devoted to reading and the individual attention received from teachers. Students were more receptive to the program because it allowed them to exit the reading program when they passed the reading proficiency tests. They also noted the reality of high-stakes testing as a function of their graduation. Several freely stated that this reality was a significant motivator in getting them to take reading and language arts seriously.

At first, students who were selected to participate in the reading program felt isolated from the other students in the school. Some noted that other students inquired about the reading program, or made fun of them. This also seemed to motivate the students to want to succeed and...
### Table 1. School Reading Culture Survey Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Culture Indicator Statement</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Students witness adults reading for various purposes</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>5.70</td>
<td>1.363</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. All teachers value reading as a tool to help students understand course content</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>5.69</td>
<td>1.127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Students have access to appropriate reading materials in school</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>5.69</td>
<td>1.220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. School’s environment is inviting and visually stimulating for promoting student reading</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>5.24</td>
<td>1.055</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. All teachers demonstrate how their work (e.g., planning, teaching) supports reading</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>4.69</td>
<td>1.398</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Informal conversations about reading experiences occur regularly between adults and students</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>1.315</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. All classified/support staff in school take responsibility for improving reading performance of students in the high school; School culture reflects shared responsibility (students and teachers) for reading achievement</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>1.479</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Reading work of students is displayed prominently in school</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>1.410</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. School’s resource center (e.g., library) is the center of reading efforts, reflected as a priority through various activities (e.g., student readings, posting of student work, book clubs, book fairs)</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>1.810</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Informal conversations about reading experiences occur regularly between and among students</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>1.308</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. All employers and other appropriate community members/organizations take responsibility for students’ reading at acceptable standards of proficiency established by school</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>1.363</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. School provides parents with training on supporting reading achievement of their children (e.g., reading aloud to children, list of age-appropriate books to read or recommend)</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>1.490</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. All parents (or guardians) take responsibility for improving their student’s reading performance</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>1.072</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
move quickly through the program. The opportunity to have lunch with the other (mainstream) students in the school seemed to reduce the isolated feeling among the 9th-graders in the reading program, and provided them an opportunity to explain the program to friends. Program participation also caused parents to take a more active role in their child’s schooling.

In the small sample of 9th-grade students interviewed, it was also apparent that differences existed between how male and female students perceived placement in the reading program. In general, female students took opportunities to socialize with mainstream students, and used their peer groups as support structures. Male students, however, often did not recognize the connection between their success in the program and their future success, and did not use their peer groups for support. Without either connection, the male students simply resented the placement into the reading program.

Mom had to use the reading materials that the teacher gave me, had to listen to me read a paragraph and time me. She then had to sign a form that she did it that I took back to my teacher.

- 9th Grade Female Student

Policy Insights

The story told herein is the Center for Policy Studies in Rural Education’s examination of how one high school in a rural area in a Southwestern state with a high population of Hispanic students is striving to ensure that all students can read well. Numerous socio-economic and political realities confront both the school and community as they work toward educational excellence in reading and language arts education of all students. The border culture had a profound influence on academic achievement of students.

Based on observations in this high school and state, CPSRE offers the following insights to help guide policymakers in considering ways to support reading achievement of students in a rural high school:

1. Culturally responsive school district leadership is essential for promoting higher reading proficiency among all students in ways that bridge prior community expectations and current realities of state (and national) accountability for student and school improvement.

2. At the state and high school (secondary) levels, reading is viewed and treated by teachers and students as a remedial issue. A student must be able to read to become proficient in other subjects. Proficiency in the student’s native language must be assessed prior to implementing any intervention expected to improve the student’s reading skills.

3. High-stakes testing requiring reading proficiency for graduation may be a necessary incentive in getting students to focus on their reading abilities.

4. Leadership and advocacy by both the state board of education and the state department of education is essential for communicating the importance of reading/language arts to all public education stakeholders.

5. High school stereotypes and stigmas associated with reading remediation are highly related to student peer pressure. Male students may particularly resent placement in such a remediation program. Programs for improving reading proficiency must connect to students’ life experiences and include motivational strategies, such as awarding “academic credit” for student participation and accomplishments.

6. Teacher preparation programs in institutions of higher education must be expected to contribute to the issue of all teachers at the secondary level knowing how to effectively address reading inadequacies of students, a logical corollary for reform brought to K-12 public education by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

7. A key role of the state board of education may be to increase awareness and support for reading initiatives among all stakeholders, including recognizing high schools that are examples of promising or best practices for getting results in reading achievement.

8. At the high school (secondary) level, the library/media resource center and specialist(s) are necessary support for improving reading instruction in the content (subject) areas.
9. Reading excellence must be a part of the school’s culture that demands a focus on students and data-based decision making as the driving philosophy of the school’s faculty and staff.

10. One promising practice is providing a financial incentive that encourages selection of teachers who agree to be evaluated on implementation of strategic reading enhancement practices in their classrooms. Providing these and other teachers with the necessary professional development opportunities is essential to creating a supportive, risk-taking environment for teachers to try new instructional approaches that may be more appropriate for the school’s student population (e.g., Hispanics).

11. Long-term principal leadership that consistently focuses on reading achievement and embraces shared decision-making for designing and implementing the reading initiative are critical for building a culture of reading in the school.

12. It appears that high schools may require an external “shock to the system” as a catalyst to change. To go from accepting the status quo to expecting proficient reading achievement by all students may simply not occur without external intervention that helps school faculty members objectively interpret student achievement data and examine current teaching practices.

References


Kelder, E. (September 14, 2004). Governors and president focus on high school. Available online at www.stateline.org/live/

The National Association of State Boards of Education is a nonprofit, private association that represents state and territorial boards of education. Our principal objectives are to strengthen state leadership in education policymaking; promote excellence in the education of all students; advocate equality of access to educational opportunity; and assure responsible lay governance of public education.