PURSUING HIGH SCHOOL READING PROFICIENCY

A Mississippi 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 Mississippi Department of Education. The authors would like to acknowledge Texas Instruments and the U.S. Department of Education for their support of this research.

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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 in 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 Gov. 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 Association of Secondary School Principals, 2004). Data from the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Reading Report Card suggest that most secondary students are not achieving 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 M oore (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) collaborated with state department officials in Mississippi 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., African-American);
• 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 District is located experiences an urban influence, as it is located within a large metropolitan statistical area of one or more million residents. The county is further classified as manufacturing-dependent, meaning 25 percent or more of average annual labor and proprietor's earnings were derived from manufacturing between 1998 and 2000; 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 a GED; and in persistent poverty, meaning that 20 percent or more of the residents are poor, as measured by each of the last four censuses.

Although the county experiences an urban influence, Reading School District—one of two school districts in the county—is home to less than 25,000 people and is coded rural by the Census Bureau. According to 2004 data, the school district has approximately 3,500 students, and approximately 450 have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Schools and grade configurations in the district include: one 9-12 high school, one K-12 attendance center, one 4-12 attendance center, one K-8 junior high school, one PK-8 elementary school, and one PK-3 elementary school. Sources of the approximately $16 million in total revenue for the district are 17 percent federal, 23 percent local, and 60 percent state. Per student expenditures are approximately $6,000.

The public high school visited by the CPSRE Team in Reading School District is classified as a rural Title I school located outside a Metropolitan Statistical Area. In 2004, approximately 415 students attended the school, of which 52.5 percent were male and 48.5 percent female. Slightly less than three-fourths (72 percent) of the students were black, while slightly more than one-fourth (26 percent) were white. Over four-fifths (83.5 percent) participated in the free or reduced price lunch program. Twenty-five teachers were employed at the school, yielding a student to teacher ratio of 16.6 to 1.

A according to the Mississippi State Report Card of NCLB results (2004), the high school met Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in reading/language for School Level Determinations, All Student Subgroups, Economically Disadvantaged Students, and African-American Students. The school was not in school improvement. Approximately 95 percent of NCLB core academic subject teachers were highly qualified. The 2003 graduation rate was 77.9 percent, based on the 9th grade adjusted enrollment of 95.

Procedures

In spring 2004, CPSRE collaboration with Mississippi 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 April, the CPSRE Team conducted semi-structured interviews with key department officials, including the state superintendent; deputy state superintendent; special assistant for state schools and special projects; associate superintendent for academic education; bureau director, office of academic education instruction; and the bureau director, office of reading, early childhood and language arts. The Team also interviewed a member of the Mississippi State Board of Education.

In addition, the Team conducted semi-structured interviews with the superintendent and assistant superintendent of the school district, principal of the high school, counselor, library/media specialist, 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

Several key initiatives at the state level support reading achievement in the public schools. In July 1997, the Mississippi Board of Education made a commitment to reading reform with the establishment of the Every Child a Reader initiative. To support the initiative, the Mississippi Legislature passed Senate Bill 2944 in 1998 to create the Reading Sufficiency Program. This law...
Language is the currency of thoughts. All children need to read well, write well, and speak well.

— Dr. Henry Johnson, Mississippi State Superintendent of Schools

The National Association of State Boards of Education required every school district to establish a program for reading reform. Drawing from research such as the National Research Council’s (NRC) Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children and the National Reading Panel’s report Teaching Children to Read, the state department of education developed the Mississippi Reading Reform Model (see Figure 1 on page 6). This model guides the systematic change in reading achievement in the public schools and includes the following components:

- Well-designed early literacy interventions to ensure reading readiness;
- Prescriptive direct instruction utilizing the essential elements of reading instruction and based upon the results of appropriate, valid and reliable assessments;
- Extended instructional opportunities for children; and
- High quality professional development to improve reading instructional practices of Mississippi teachers, administrators, and support staff.

In fall 1997, the state department of education replaced the separate curriculum structures for reading and for English and language arts with the Mississippi Language Arts Framework. Developed by a group of teachers, the framework was written to reflect the best practices in teaching the language arts of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing. The group members drew from their own experiences and knowledge, as well as other sources (drafts of national standards; What Work Requires of Schools: A SCANS Report for America 2000 by the U.S. Department of Labor; curricula of other states and Australia; and “Academic Preparation for College” by the state and national college boards). In addition, the group considered test specifications of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. A correlation of the ITBS and the framework showed that although the test specifications were highly specific and the competencies and objectives more broad, there was harmony between the two. Widespread comment from teachers across the state was also sought and incorporated into the final Mississippi Language Arts Framework.

This new framework, organized by grades, provides a description of what students should know and do in English and language arts, as well as in kindergarten through 12th grade reading classrooms. It also addresses the interrelatedness of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing. The framework intends to advance learning and instruction in the language arts by raising expectations for student performance, providing intellectual challenge, and promoting a student’s individual achievement.

Competencies in the framework are required to be taught. These competencies, designed intentionally to be broad, allow school districts the flexibility to shape the curriculum to the needs of their students, emphasize the integrated nature of language, combining the strands of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing. In addition, they provide a general guideline of ongoing instruction, not isolated units, activities, or skills—they are not intended as a list of discrete skills to be taught once and checked off as “mastered.” The state provides a scope and sequence continuum for teaching the competencies. Moreover, each competency has objectives, which are suggested, not mandated. The sample objectives indicate skills that enable fulfillment of competencies, describe competencies in further detail, or show the progression of concepts throughout the grades. Districts may adopt the objectives, modify them, or write their own.

For schools that have district reading and language arts programs (separate classes and teachers), the state recommends the following:

- Reading and language arts teachers could teach separate classes, but teachers plan together to better coordinate instruction;
- Reading and language arts teachers could share a common planning period;
- Reading and language arts teachers could team teach their classes; and
- Reading and language arts teachers could teach a two-period block of combined reading and language arts.
SBRR Conclusion #1
Well-Designed Early Literacy Intervention Programs

SBRR Conclusion #2
Direct Instruction Utilizing Essential Components of Reading

SBRR Conclusion #3
Extended Instructional Opportunities

SBRR Conclusion #4
High Quality Professional Development

Partnerships
Mississippi Department of Education
Barksdale Reading Institute
Community Colleges
Institutions of Higher Learning
Mississippi Schools

Partnerships
Parents
Public & Private Care Providers
Parent/Family Literacy Centers
Public & Private Pre-Kindergarten
Head Start Centers

Prevention/Intervention Process
Publication Resources
Every Child A Reader: Getting Ready for Kindergarten
Parent/Family Resource Center Guide
Pre-Kindergarten Curriculum & Guidelines
Reading Tutorial Partnerships
A Handbook of Educational Services for English Language Learners
MS Language Arts 2000 Framework
K-3 Reading Instructional Intervention Supplement
K-3 Writing Instructional Intervention Supplement
4-8 Reading Instructional Intervention Supplement
4-8 Writing Instructional Intervention Supplement
English II Subject Area Intervention Guide
Mississippi Student Expectation Booklets
Reading Tips: A Guide for Parents (K-3)
Mississippi Dyslexia Handbook 2002
Schools and Parents Partnering for Student Success
Evaluation of Instructional Materials

Prevention/Intervention Process Professional Development
Reading Assessment & Intervention Strategy Exploration (RAISE)
RAISE (Pre-K, K-3, 4-8)
Parent/Family Resource Training
Extended Instructional Opportunities
Writing and Reading Integration to Excellence (WRITE)
Peer Coaching and Data Analysis
Mississippi Reading Academies (K-3)
Integrating Learning Centers
Essential Components of Reading Instruction
Mississippi English II Subject Area Test Instructional Intervention
Identifying Research-Based Instructional Programs and Assessments
Utilizing the Mississippi Language Arts Framework (K-3, 4-8, 9-12)
BRIDGES
Writing for the State Assessments

The Process of Intervention

Benchmarks
Research-Based

Assessments
Informal
Decision-Making
Mississippi Primary Reading Assessment

Interventions
Instructional Strategies

Peer Coaching
Prof. Dev. Follow-Up
Strategy Implementation

Data Analysis
Outcome Data
Process Data
Disaggregated Data

Funding Sources for Implementation
Reading Sufficiency Funds
Reading Excellence Act Grant
Barksdale Reading Institute
Reading First
In such cases, both reading and language arts classes are to include reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing. As districts use the Language Arts Framework, teachers are to be given the curriculum for the grade taught as well as that of the prior and succeeding grades.

Funding for the Mississippi reading effort comes primarily from the federal Reading First initiative. Reading improvement, as managed from the state department of education, is focused on the elementary and middle school level students. The state requires that each school district implement a reading plan to provide each student with grade-appropriate reading skills, and that the Mississippi State Board of Education report annually to the legislature on implementation of the Reading Sufficiency legislation. The state also required elementary teacher preparation programs to add nine hours credit in reading for graduates to meet certification and licensure as a teacher in the public schools.

Although no specific state funding is devoted to the reading initiative at the secondary level, the state department of education provides technical assistance, on a regional basis, focusing on preparing students for the English II proficiency exam. This is administered at the 10th grade, and students must pass the exam to meet graduation requirements.

State officials interviewed listed key activities that the state should do to improve reading proficiency at the secondary level, should funds be available. These include:

- Revise frameworks to focus on gaps in depth of knowledge, with a focus on levels of difficulty;
- Place more emphasis on reading comprehension;
- Accelerate the move toward Student Progress Monitoring System, a web-based approach to monitor student performance in reading;
- Fund school district projects designed to address the identified reading weaknesses of students and link professional development of teachers to areas of student weaknesses;
- Provide relevant training for school leaders that can be immediately used to assess reading; and
- Prepare all teachers on effective reading instructional practices.

What We Learned: District Level

School district personnel gained focus on addressing the reading difficulties of students after an external consultant analyzed student achievement data and reported results. This “external shock” opened eyes to the degree of change needed if the district and schools were to achieve increasing accountability measures and expectations (e.g., accreditation).

District personnel viewed the relationship with the state department as collegial, meaning they could ask for help—if needed—to improve reading achievement of students, particularly in the elementary and middle school grades. The state department’s weekly newsletter was viewed as critical for providing information about improving practices that lead to greater proficiency in students’ reading/language arts skills.

Leadership from the district’s central office was critical to facilitating improvement efforts. Significant professional development was offered for K-6 of teachers to address the reading deficiency issues of students. The focus of professional development was on teachers in the four content areas coming together to discuss and arrive at solutions that might work in addressing these deficiencies.

What We Learned: High School

The high school enjoyed the leadership of a long-term principal, who had been in the position for almost 20 years (let it be noted that since the CPSRE visit, the principal has left the district). Teachers employed at the school were expected to “fit the culture” of meeting the educational

My job is to determine what each department in the high school needs for teachers to reinforce high expectations for reading among all students. I advise teachers on preparing good lesson plans that address reading.

I help them decide how to pace the lesson, locate and recommend useful resources materials, and even demonstrate lessons when necessary in their classrooms.

— School Curriculum Coordinator
needs of students. Teachers could expect the backing of the principal in all decisions that focused on improving educational opportunities and effective teaching and learning practices for students. Teachers had both responsibility to get results and authority to make teaching and learning decisions. The school’s philosophy called for teachers to teach what students need, not what the subject requires. The culture of the school encouraged teachers who could not “fit” this philosophy to seek employment elsewhere.

The principal has done all he can to hire the best teachers he can hire. I, like most teachers, am willing to work before and after school to be a tutor for kids. I use reading circles in my classroom where students offer to help each other. We are teaching kids that “I don’t know” is not an acceptable answer. I am raising my expectation level of students and doing more to motivate them.

— Teacher with 10 years experience at the high school

The Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) was used as a diagnostic test given to all 8th graders coming to the high school. Based on results, remediation efforts were focused on students reading at a functional level, particularly for comprehension. The school’s curriculum coordinator worked across all subject areas in installing a reading focus (e.g., word problems in math; book reports in science). The school’s media-librarian specialist worked with teachers to purchase materials to supplement their reading in the content areas. The school counselor worked in cooperation with teachers to identify students in need of extra reading help—not necessarily in need of remediation in reading.

Reading High School had a strong tutorial program that involves all teachers.

Teachers shared information as much as possible, but indicated that they need more time to plan and develop more effective strategies in their lessons that reinforce teaching for reading in the content areas. The principal, curriculum coordinator, and key teachers ensured the Team that there was clear articulation of the importance of reading in all content areas. The team found that reading was always being discussed in the school.

**Reading Culture Survey**

The Reading Culture Survey was completed by teachers and administrators at the high school and is presented in Table 1. The culture indicator statements are listed in rank order based on the mean (average) score by the respondents. In the table, "N umber" 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 school using a scale of 1 = Not at All to 7 = Very Great Extent.

The highest rated indicators pertained to students having reading materials, students seeing adults read, and all teachers valuing reading as a tool to help students understand course content. The lowest rated items by the school’s staff pertained to involvement of the community or parents in supporting the reading achievement of students. Staff ratings also indicated informal conversations about reading experiences may not occur regularly among students at the school.

**What We Learned: Students**

The high stakes nature of testing was not lost on the students. In fact, those we interviewed were quick to indicate that the English II test in the 10th grade is a high stakes test, meaning a student must pass it to graduate. Most students remarked that they would not take the test seriously if not for the graduation requirement. It was pointed out, however, that this might also be a function of

Students are scared and afraid to ask for help in reading because they think other students will make fun of them. Most of the other kids will help you. Parents and family need to push and support their child in getting reading help.

— 11th Grade Female Student
<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 have access to appropriate reading materials in school</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>5.79</td>
<td>1.031</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Students witness adults reading for various purposes</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>5.32</td>
<td>1.307</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. All teachers value reading as a tool to help students understand course content</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>5.22</td>
<td>1.368</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. School leadership monitors implementation and results of key reading initiative components</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>4.96</td>
<td>1.192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. School’s resource center (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>28</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>1.669</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Informal conversations about reading experiences occur regularly between adults and students</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>4.54</td>
<td>1.170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. School culture reflects shared responsibility (students and teachers) for reading achievement</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>1.319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. All classified/support staff in school takes responsibility for improving reading performance of students in the high school</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>1.474</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. School’s environment is inviting and visually stimulating for promoting student reading</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>4.36</td>
<td>1.393</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. All teachers demonstrate how their work (e.g., planning, teaching) supports reading</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>1.285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Reading work of students is displayed prominently in school</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>1.515</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. All employers and other appropriate community members/organizations take responsibility for students’ reading at acceptable standards of proficiency established by school</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>1.344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Informal conversations about reading experiences occur regularly between and among students</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>1.384</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. 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>28</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>1.389</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. All parents (or guardians) take responsibility for improving their student’s reading performance</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>1.498</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the grade level interviewed. Eleventh and 12th grade students typically reported that the high stakes testing was a disincentive, increasing the tendency to consider withdrawal and eliciting complaints about the use of a single instrument to assess graduation eligibility. Teachers, however, suggested the need for high stakes testing might be a function of the high-poverty, low-expectation culture from which most of the school’s students come.

Students also noted that their teachers cared about their good reading skills. However, even in the supportive culture of help for reading created by the school, the 11th and 12th grade students experienced a tremendous stigma if they are unable to read. Students noted that peer tutoring might be the only viable or acceptable way to help these students.

Some students, as well as teachers, believed that the structure itself—a fairly new building—might prompt some students to raise self-expectations, and that parents tended to send students to that school if they had the choice. Additional or new facilities might also have caused teachers to refocus on teaching, as they both removed the excuse of inadequate facilities and motivated teachers to realize that the community cared about their work environment and success with students.

Policy Insights

The story told herein is the Center for Policy Studies in Rural Education’s examination of how one small high school in a rural area in a Southeastern state 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.

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. Reading proficiency is viewed as a key element in the drop out prevention program. Being literate is closely related to the local economy and tied to all jobs.

2. At the high school (secondary) level, 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.

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 chief state school officer 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 of 11th and 12th grade students are highly related to student peer pressure. Student work to improve reading proficiency must count for “academic credit.”

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 is to increase awareness and support for reading initiatives among all stakeholders of public education, 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 supports for improving reading instruction in the content (subject) areas.

I recommended a man for a job as a night watchman. Nice man...works hard. After a couple of weeks the man was let go. I never knew he could not read. But when deliveries were made at night, he could not log them in, or even read the paperwork to see where they should go. There are no jobs for those who cannot read and write.

— Charles Deaton, Mississippi State Board of Education
9. Reading excellence must be a part of the school’s culture that demands a focus on students as the driving philosophy of the school’s faculty and staff.

10. One promising practice is a tutorial program involving all teachers. The high school in this evaluation provided each teacher with training in reading. This was coupled with the expectation that each teacher would provide tutorial services to any student so in need.

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