

Adolescent Literacy: Tennessee’s Efforts to Address Literacy for Adolescent Learners

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Introduction

The ability to read and comprehend increasingly difficult material is key to K-12 students’ educational development. National and state data indicate, however, that many students in grades 4 through 12 cannot read at grade level and some read far below grade level. This mismatch of reading ability and complex material raises concerns at a time when many states – including Tennessee – are upgrading educational standards to prepare students for the demands of college and the workplace. In May 2009, the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) released a report urging state leaders to “make middle grades and high school reading the highest immediate priority in education.”¹ In August 2009, the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE), based on an analysis of the state’s reading data (see blue box), announced a renewed focus on reading

comprehension for middle and high school grades, along with the creation of a new Office of Reading Information and Proficiency.

This brief

- Discusses adolescent literacy generally;
- Considers how states can effectively address the needs of struggling readers in upper elementary, middle, and high school grades; and
- Profiles recent actions the Tennessee Department of Education and the State Board of Education (SBE) have taken to improve adolescent literacy, identifying potential challenges the state faces in undertaking this effort.

In 2009, in Tennessee:

- 162 schools failed reading/ language arts and writing in at least one subgroup (e.g., economically disadvantaged students, English language learners, etc.).
- Of these, 97 schools failed reading/ language arts and writing in every subgroup.
- 82 schools that met student achievement standards in 2008 failed to do so in 2009 at least partly on their reading test results – 46 of these failed because of their reading test results alone; the remaining 36 failed because of test results for both reading and math.

Source: Tennessee Department of Education.

What is adolescent literacy and why is it important?

Adolescent literacy addresses reading skills in grades 4 through 12, the grades when students are said to “read to learn” rather than “learn to read.” Education researchers note that most students, even those who easily acquired the reading skills taught in the early grades, do not necessarily develop effective

adolescent literacy skills on their own. As students progress through the middle and high school grades, the texts they encounter become longer, use more complex words and sentence structures, and contain more challenging concepts. Students who are not taught strategies to help them navigate complex

material may become disengaged and disinterested in reading, arguably the one skill they need to be successful in all subject areas.

Literacy skills affect student achievement. Students who develop good adolescent literacy skills, according to the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), are able to analyze, synthesize, organize, and evaluate information, abilities that build on the rudimentary reading and writing skills taught in the early grades. According to ACT researchers, "...the clearest differentiator in reading between students who are college ready and students who are not is the ability to

comprehend *complex* texts."² SREB researchers link strong literacy skills to improved performance in all subject areas.

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.

National Association of State Boards of Education, *Reading at Risk: The State Response to the Crisis in Adolescent Literacy*, July 2006, p. 5.

What skills do adolescent readers need?

Research is clear about what adolescents need to develop good literacy skills. To become proficient at reading increasingly complex material, research shows that students in the upper elementary, middle, and high school grades need:³

- **Explicit vocabulary instruction, not only in reading and language arts classes but in all content-area classes.** Researchers say that this is especially true for content areas such as science and math, which have specialized vocabularies and concepts. Vocabulary development that is specific to each content area contributes to students' reading comprehension and "enhances students' ability to acquire textbook vocabulary."⁴ Vocabulary development is strongly associated with reading comprehension.
- **Direct and explicit comprehension strategy instruction.** Comprehension strategies are methods and practices that help students understand text. Effective comprehension strategies include summarizing, asking and answering questions, paraphrasing, and finding the main idea. To provide direct and explicit teaching of comprehension strategies, teachers can:
 - Show students multiple strategies using a variety of texts so students can learn to apply strategies flexibly,
 - Model and provide explanations of the specific strategies students are learning,
- Give guided practice and feedback on the use of the strategies, and
- Promote independent practice to apply the strategies.
- **Intensive and individualized interventions for students with the most severe reading deficiencies that are provided by trained specialists.** Students who need this kind of intensive intervention (which includes about 10 percent of all students), researchers say, will not progress with classroom instruction alone.⁵ Adolescents' reading difficulties can differ significantly from student to student, thus requiring varied interventions. According to the What Works Clearinghouse practice guide, *Improving Adolescent Literacy*, it is critical that the "major source of the students' reading difficulties be identified so that interventions can be targeted to the most critical areas."⁶
- **Opportunities for extended discussion of text meaning and interpretation.** In addition to comprehending the facts of a text, students

To ensure that our students are college and career ready, all teachers, no matter their content area, need to be able to incorporate literacy instruction within their classrooms.

M. Miller, *Teaching for a New World: Preparing High School Educators to Deliver College- and Career-Ready Instruction*, Nov. 2009, p. 6.

should be learning how to “make deeper interpretations, generalizations, and conclusions.”⁷ High-quality classroom discussions can help students develop these abilities, and can help engage students in learning. According to the U.S. Department of Education’s Doing What Works Clearinghouse, teachers have a critical role to play in developing a classroom environment that is conducive to extended discussions, asking follow up questions, and providing assignments and other ways for students to talk about text.

- **Motivation and engagement in literacy learning.** Students, particularly those who struggle, often lose the motivation to read as they progress from elementary to middle school. Research suggests that students benefit less from external incentives – teachers pressuring them to work hard – than from feedback that “conveys realistic expectations, links performance to effort, details step by step how to apply a reading strategy, and explains

why and when this strategy is useful and how to modify it to fit different tasks.”⁸ Methods that can help improve students’ motivation to read include:⁹

- Providing content goals, which are questions or purposes for reading;
- Allowing students to make some of their own choices with regard to reading, such as what type of product to develop for an assignment;
- Using interesting texts, including some that are on familiar topics;
- Providing sufficient background knowledge before asking students to read unfamiliar material;
- Increasing opportunities for students to collaborate during reading.

Exhibit 1: What kinds of problems with reading do adolescent readers experience?

Students in grades 4 through 12 who struggle with reading range from those who need intensive assistance to those with varying degrees of difficulty with fluency (reading with speed, accuracy, and proper expression) and comprehension (understanding text). In its *Reading at Risk* report, the National Governor’s Association describes three general groups of struggling adolescent readers:

Group One: Some Reading Problems

The largest group of struggling readers has some problems with fluency and comprehension. These readers may be able to read everyday texts like newspapers or simple instruction manuals but have difficulty with more specialized and advanced texts. Many may meet state literacy proficiency standards but some are unprepared to meet the more complex literacy demands of colleges and workplaces.

Group Two: Greater Reading Deficiencies

The middle group has problems with fluency and comprehension, and has difficulty with everything they read. These students may be able to read a simple news article but are unable to read a novel or follow directions in a technical manual. Many in this group do not meet state literacy proficiency standards.

Group Three: Severe Reading Deficiencies

The third and smallest group has severe reading deficiencies. These students were not successful in acquiring the reading skills taught in the early grades and have fallen further behind with each successive grade.

See Appendix B for a comparison of struggling and successful readers’ characteristics.

Source: NGA Center for Best Practices, National Governors Association, *Reading to Achieve: A Governor’s Guide to Adolescent Literacy*, 2006, p. 6.

What is the status of adolescent literacy nationally and in Tennessee?

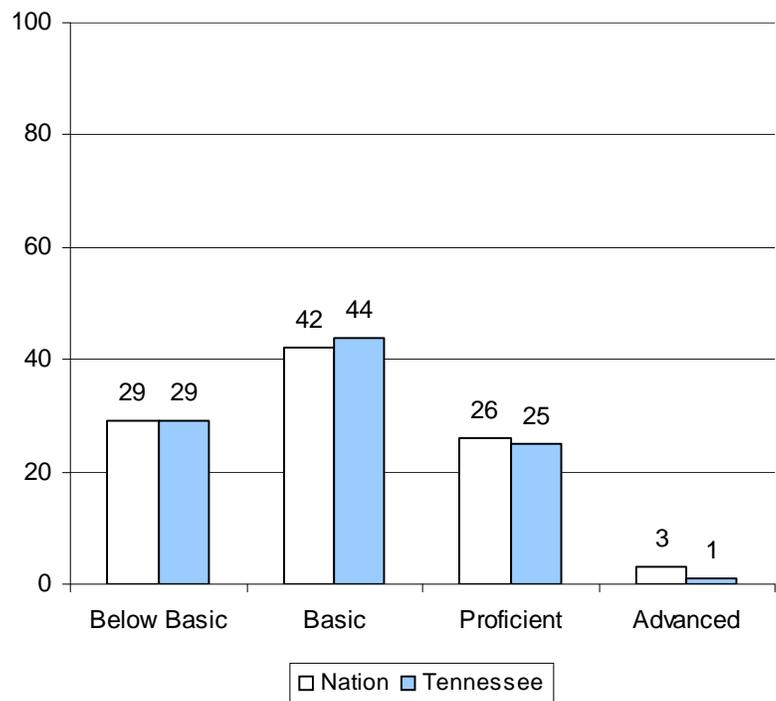
Nationally, student achievement in middle- and high-school reading indicates serious deficiencies. More than two-thirds of the nation's 8th graders and more than half of 12th graders read below the proficient levels for those grades as determined by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). More than a quarter cannot read at the most basic level.¹⁰ The National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) calls the problem "staggering." According to NASBE research in middle and high school grades, "large numbers of entering students cannot comprehend factual information from their subject matter texts and struggle to form general understandings, develop interpretations, and make text connections."¹¹

Tennessee's NAEP scores are similar to the national scores, with more than 70 percent of 8th grade students reading at the basic and below basic levels. (See Exhibits 2 and 3.)

In 2005, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) assessed grade 12 students in reading for the first time since 2002 and provided national results only. The assessment found that 27 percent of the nation's 12th graders read below the basic level.¹²

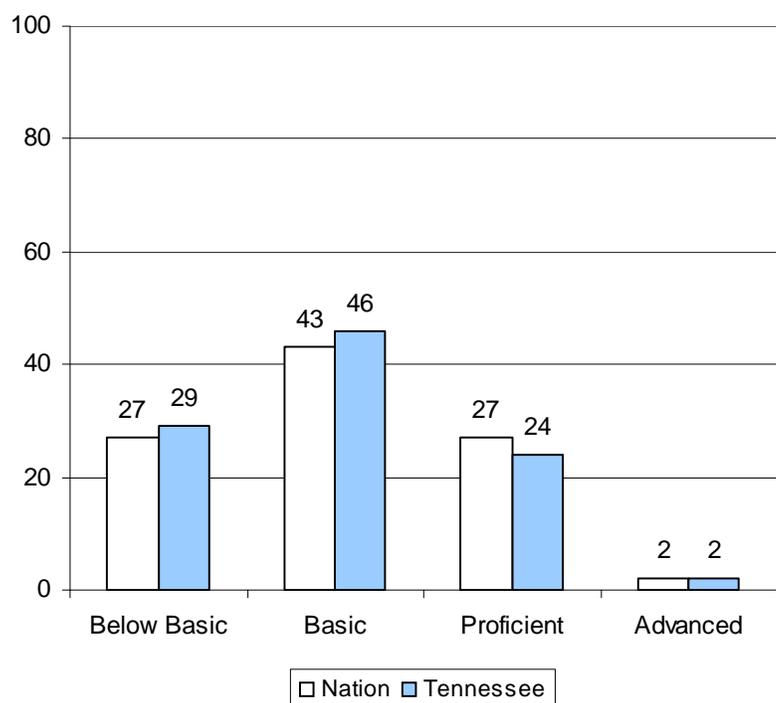
Results from the state's required diagnostic exams indicate reading comprehension issues for Tennessee's adolescent learners, particularly in grade 10. In 2007, the General Assembly adopted legislation requiring diagnostic exams in grades 8, 10, and 11 to determine students' college readiness.¹³ These exams include reading and writing components. Districts use the ACT Educational Planning and Assessment Series (EPAS), which includes the EXPLORE test in grade 8, PLAN in grade 10, and ACT in grade 11.

Exhibit 2: NAEP 2005: Reading, 8th Grade, percent by proficiency category for the U.S. and Tennessee



Note: Numbers may not total 100 because of rounding.
 Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, *The Nation's Report Card, Reading 2005*, NCES 2006-451, p. 16, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/main2005/2006451.pdf>.

Exhibit 3: NAEP 2007: Reading, 8th Grade, percent by proficiency category for the U.S. and Tennessee



Note: Numbers may not total 100 because of rounding.
 Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, *The Nation's Report Card, Reading 2007*, NCES 2007-496, p. 34, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/main2007/2007496.pdf>.

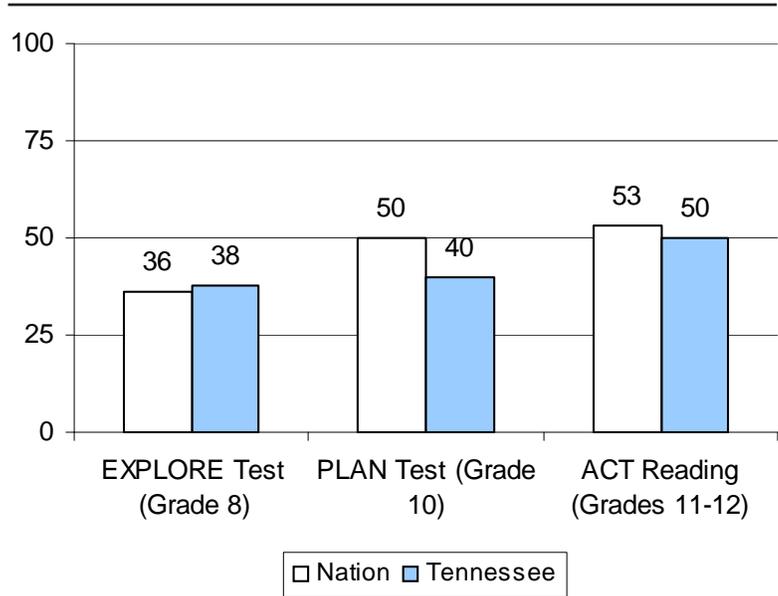
According to ACT, the EPAS tests are curriculum-based and measure the reading comprehension skills that students have acquired in courses taken up to and including the grades in which the tests are given (grades 8, 10, and 11). To determine the content of the tests, ACT identifies the

...concepts and skills that are taught in classrooms nationwide and considered necessary for future academic and career success. Designed to simulate the types of reading tasks students encounter in their academic work and in life outside of school, the Reading Test measures students' literal-level reading skills as well as their ability to make inferences, draw conclusions, generalize from specific data, and reason logically.¹⁴

The statewide diagnostic results for 2007 indicate that the percentages of Tennessee students prepared for college-level reading are low, and are similar to percentages of students across the nation in grades 8 and

11-12. A lower percentage of Tennessee 10th grade students test as being prepared for college compared to the national average. (See Exhibit 4.)

Exhibit 4: ACT 2007: Reading, percent of students at or above ACT College Readiness Benchmarks for the U.S. and Tennessee



Source: Tennessee State Board of Education, *The State Board of Education Master Plan, FY 2008-2012*, April 2007, p.7, http://www.state.tn.us/sbe/Final_MP_Booklet_FY09.pdf.pdf.

How did these problems with adolescent literacy develop?

Educators nationwide have concentrated more on developing reading skills of students in the early grades and less on reading skills of adolescent readers. Research shows that children who develop good reading skills by the end of grade 3 are more likely to graduate from high school. Influential reports on reading – including *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* by the National Research Council in 1998 and the *Report of the National Reading Panel* in 2000 – promoted literacy development in the early grades to prevent later reading difficulties. No Child Left Behind emphasized early literacy skills and provided funding through the Reading Excellence and Reading First programs. And results have been impressive: long-term NAEP trend data between 1999 and 2004 (designed to track student progress over time) showed the highest achievement in reading for grade 4 students in the history of NAEP.¹⁵ Gains in grade 4 reading achievement continued an upward trend in the 2008 long-term NAEP data.¹⁶

However, NAEP long-term trend data between 1971 and 2008 show that reading performance tends to stagnate as students move through the middle and high school grades. Thus, promising early reading performance alone does not appear to ensure a high degree of performance in upper grades. Though “[i]t has been easier to focus attention on the early grades and hope that reading successes in the primary years will translate to resolving the problems in middle and high schools,” data suggest that this strategy has not worked in practice.¹⁷ (See Exhibit 5.)

In Tennessee

TDOE officials estimate that about 65 percent of Tennessee schools don't offer reading as a separate subject after grade 3. Although schools continue to provide English/Language Arts classes, this subject typically focuses on the study of literature rather than reading skills.

Middle and high school teachers often lack the training needed to incorporate reading instruction into their classrooms, assess students' reading problems, and devise appropriate interventions.

Many states' teacher education requirements for secondary school level certification do not include separate courses in content-area reading. Teachers are generally focused on the subject matter they are required to teach, and often enter the classroom

...assuming their students already possess all of the reading and writing skills they need to learn. Moreover, teachers in the secondary grades are often ill-prepared to recognize and address the specific reading and writing interests, needs, and challenges of their students.¹⁹

According to SREB, "subject-area teachers are best qualified to help their students master texts in each course" but many have not been provided substantive pre-service or professional development opportunities to learn how to do so.²⁰ Practitioners emphasize that all instruction by teachers in the various content areas –

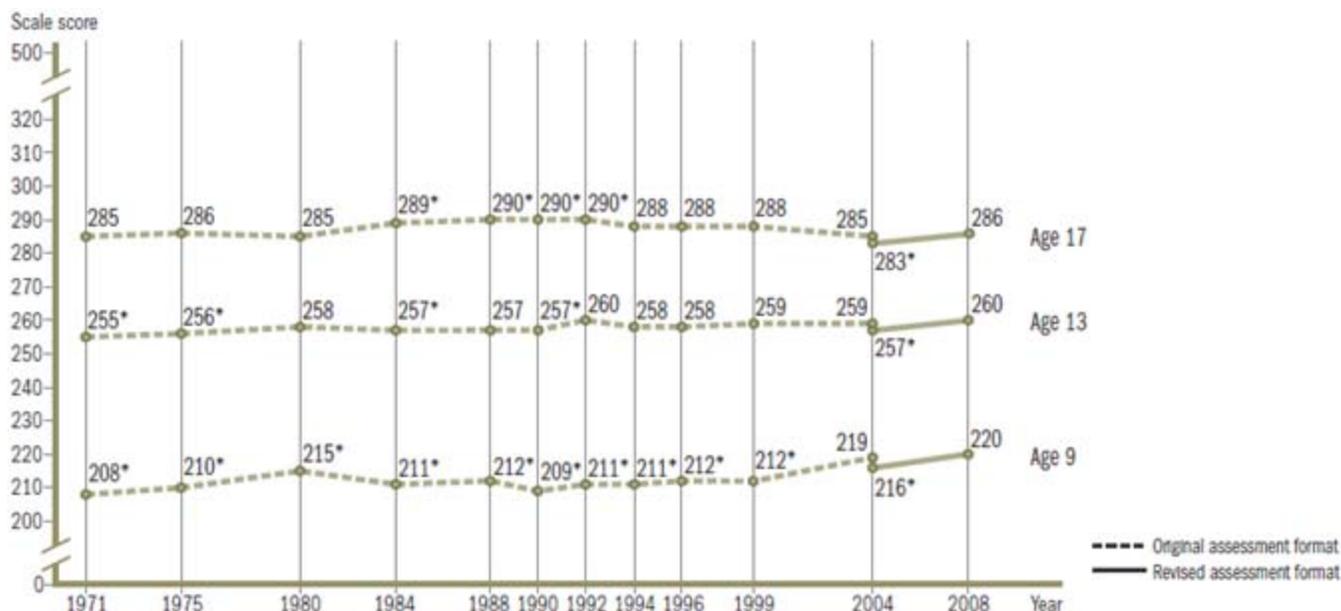
including reading instruction – must be relevant to the subject area. Science teachers should always teach science, for example. But they can also help students develop strategies for reading specialized scientific texts by teaching vocabulary that is specific to science. The same is true of all content areas, even English/ Language Arts, which deals primarily with literature and not reading skills.

Many states' academic standards do not specify the reading skills students need as part of the subject-area standards for all middle grades and high school subjects. Academic standards reflect what students should know and be able to do in the core academic subjects at each grade level; educators

The only way a secondary school is likely to improve reading achievement is with a big investment in teachers' knowledge.

Timothy Shanahan, "Improving Reading Achievement in Secondary Schools: Structures and Reforms," *Bridging the Literacy Achievement Gap, Grades 4-12*, 2004, p. 50.

Exhibit 5: Trends in average reading scale scores for students ages 9, 13, and 17: 1971- 2008



*Significantly different from 2008.

Note: In 2004, NAEP revised the original assessment format, content, and procedures to "update content and provide accommodations to students with disabilities and English language learners. The knowledge and skills assessed, however, remain essentially the same since the first assessment year....The average reading score for 17-year-olds [as measured by the 2008 assessment] was not significantly different from that in 1971."¹⁸

Source: B.D. Rampey, G.S. Dion, and P.L. Donahue, *NAEP 2008 Trends in Academic Progress*, NCES 2009-479, National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, Washington, D.C., p. 9, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/main2008/2009479.pdf>.

develop curriculum based on standards. If state academic standards do not describe the reading skills that students need at all grade levels and in all content areas, teachers are at a disadvantage in being able to help students develop those skills. Moreover, they are likely to conclude that teaching reading skills is not a part of their teaching responsibilities.

Researchers suggest that the demands of employment and citizenship in the 21st Century have significantly increased, and that the skills taught in most U.S. high schools do not reflect the increased demands. According to a July 2009 report by the President’s Council of Economic Advisers, “the modern economy requires workers with higher skills than in the past.”²¹ The report cites a 2006 Conference Board survey of 400 employers about the readiness of new entrants to the job market. Survey respondents believed that “most recent high school graduates lacked the basic skills of reading, writing, and math that were deemed necessary by employers. Among these basic skills, employers deemed this group to be most deficient in writing.”²²

A 2000 American Management Association (AMA) survey found that 38 percent of job applicants lacked the basic reading and math skills necessary for the jobs for which they were applying – an increase from 19 percent of job applicants four years earlier. The

AMA attributed the doubled percentage to increases in workplace demand for higher levels of reading and math skills and not to a declining set of skills in current workers.²³

However, although demands for high-level skills appear to have increased, the general approach to teaching reading skills in upper elementary, middle, and high school grades has remained the same:

Despite what we know, there is a large breach between research and practice—and a marked reluctance on the part of many middle and high schools to focus on literacy support at the district, school, or even departmental level. And, therefore, despite the urgency, there is limited understanding of how to bring these effective literacy strategies to life in the content-area classroom in ways that will make a positive difference for students.²⁴

In Tennessee

As is true in most states, Tennessee curriculum standards incorporate reading skills only in English/ Language Arts. The newly adopted math and science standards do not address the reading skills that teachers could use to help students develop skills for reading texts within each subject.

In Tennessee

TDOE officials indicate that Tennessee teachers – particularly middle- and high-school teachers – generally lack sufficient training to diagnose students’ reading deficiencies and facilitate students’ ability to understand and learn from content area text.

A 2006 RAND report, *Improving the Achievement of Tennessee Students*, found that Tennessee teachers report using less stringent classroom techniques for including reading instruction than teachers in several comparison states. In the NAEP teacher survey responses, Tennessee 8th grade reading and English teachers, compared to their other state counterparts, reported:

- Less emphasis on integrating reading and writing;
- Less often requiring the writing of three or more pages;
- Less often discussing interpretations of written material;
- Less often requiring more than one draft;
- Less often requiring long, written answers in testing; and
- Less often using essays or assigning papers for assessment.

David W. Grissmer, Ann Flanagan, *Improving the Achievement of Tennessee Students: Analysis of the National Assessment of Educational Progress*, RAND Corporation, 2006, p. 88, http://www.rand.org/pubs/technical_reports/2006/RAND_TR381.pdf, (accessed Nov. 10, 2009); Jim Herman, Tennessee Department of Education, interview, Nov. 18, 2009.

What are the consequences of having significant percentages of struggling readers in middle and high school grades?

Students' literacy problems may result in significant personal and societal consequences. In the past few years, several organizations – including the National Governors Association, the Institute of Education Sciences, ACT, SREB, the National Association of School Boards of Education, and the National Council of Teachers of English, among others – have published reports noting the consequences of neglecting to develop students' adolescent literacy skills:

- Continued decline in workforce skills resulting in the nation's inability to compete globally;
- Continuing high expenditures by postsecondary institutions and businesses to remediate high school graduates; and
- Higher dropout rates, higher risk of entering the juvenile justice system, and higher levels of unemployment among those with low literacy skills.

A 2006 report by the Alliance for Excellent Education estimated that the U.S. spends more than \$1.4 billion per year providing remedial education to high school graduates who left school without the skills needed to succeed in college or the workplace. The report estimated that Tennessee loses more than \$19 million per year in remedial education costs.²⁵ Achieve, a nonprofit education reform organization, estimates that “[s]tates, postsecondary institutions, employers and young people spend an estimated \$17 billion each year on remedial classes to re-teach material that should have been mastered in high school.”²⁶

According to the Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR), about 25 percent of first-time freshmen entering all TBR universities and community colleges required developmental classes in reading in 2006, 2007, and 2008.²⁷

What action is Tennessee taking at the state level to address adolescent literacy?

Tennessee's most recent major state-level initiatives to address the issue of adolescent literacy include:

- The 2009 creation of the Office of Reading Information and Proficiency;
- The coordination of two statewide reading summits, a standards training workshop in reading, and a content knowledge institute, in spring and summer 2009; and
- The 2005 adoption of the “Tennessee Reading Policy.”

Announcing a renewed focus on reading, TDOE created the Office of Reading Information and Proficiency (ORIP) in August 2009. Part of the office's mission, according to its Executive Director, is to create an ongoing conversation about the importance of reading. The office's first major organizational meeting in October 2009 included goal-setting, changing the high school teaching culture, identifying the state's high-achieving schools in reading, and planning for needed training. The office plans to provide structured training to educators by

spring 2010, modeled after the train-the-trainer model TDOE used for the recent standards awareness training.

Other goals for the office include:

- Review existing reading policies at the state and district levels;
- Survey districts to determine what they are already doing in regard to reading;
- Develop and provide professional development, some of which is already available on the Tennessee Electronic Learning Center website;
- Revisit existing standards, including those in the secondary subject areas, to see how they incorporate reading skills;
- Provide teachers with a toolbox of interventions for struggling readers;
- Collaborate with the higher education community to help develop and provide training to teachers;

- Help to change the culture among middle and high school teachers in all subject areas (i.e., get all teachers accustomed to the idea that teaching reading strategies is every educator's job); and
- Develop a statewide public relations campaign effort focused on literacy.

TDOE officials are considering ways of restructuring the department to accomplish their objectives. The literacy effort is involving personnel throughout the department, including staff in Accountability, Early Childhood, Elementary Education, Special Education, Career and Technical Education, and English Language Learners, as well as content and middle grades specialists and staff from the Office of Achievement Gap Elimination. In October 2009, the Department appointed its Pre-K-12 Reading/Language Arts Director to also direct the day-to-day operations of ORIP.

According to ORIP's Executive Director, TDOE's focus on literacy will be reflected in how the state and districts spend federal stimulus dollars, including competitive awards such as Race to the Top funds, if the state's applications prove successful.

In 2009, the Tennessee Department of Education provided four opportunities for educators' professional development that included training in the teaching of reading.

Tennessee Reading Summit (April 2009) sessions focused on:

- Improving K-12 educators' reading instruction, and
- Working with struggling readers in grades 5 through 9.

Middle and High School Reading Summit (Aug. 26-28, 2009) sessions focused on:

- Strategies for improving vocabulary and comprehension,
- Content area reading,
- Using data and assessment to inform instructional decisions, and
- Teaching struggling adolescent readers.

Spring Content Knowledge Institutes (May 11-14, 2009). K-12 reading sessions focused on:

- Reading instruction for grades K-12 using the reading standards, with an emphasis on the essential components of reading, intervention, assessment, and differential instruction;
- Reading in the content areas;
- Strategies and techniques for using the state reading standards;
- Corrective and remedial reading strategies for struggling readers; and
- Reading strategies for English Language Learners and special education students.

Summer Standards Training Workshops (June 2009). K-12 Language Arts and English / Language Arts Grades 9-12 sessions focused on:

- Implementing the new standards, and
- Enhancing content knowledge.

According to TDOE officials, approximately 800 educators, including middle and high school teachers, reading specialists, reading coaches, and school and district administrators, from across the state attended both reading summits.²⁸ Sessions from all four conferences were filmed and are available online at TDOE's Electronic Learning Center, along with links to all curriculum standards and related information.

In October 2005, the Tennessee State Board of Education (SBE) adopted the "Tennessee Reading Policy," based on suggestions made in the Tennessee Reading Panel's April 2005 report. The charge of the Tennessee Reading Panel (TRP) was "to create a comprehensive, cohesive reading policy for all educational institutions in the state of Tennessee," with an overarching goal to inform and improve instructional practices so that Tennessee's students become successful readers. The TRP's report was based on the National Reading Panel's April 2000 report, *Teaching Children to Read*, and the most current research on reading, as well as input from classroom teachers, school administrators and supervisors, representatives from higher education, and TDOE.²⁹

The “Tennessee Reading Policy”:

- Outlines students’ rights to excellent literacy instruction, as developed by the International Reading Association;
- Describes the three-tier model for reading instruction for districts and schools;
- Lists the necessary services and supports for “improved student reading achievement;” and
- Includes 17 recommendations made by the Tennessee Reading Panel.³⁰

The state’s reading policy also includes a recommendation to focus on the 15 elements of effective adolescent literacy programs from the Alliance for Education’s 2004 *Reading Next* report. (See Exhibit 6.)

According to TDOE officials, the Office of Reading Information and Proficiency plans to review and make recommendations to SBE to update the state’s 2005 reading policy to ensure that it is based on the latest scientifically-based research. At the time of publication, revisions to the policy are not yet on the State Board’s agenda, though SBE staff indicate their readiness to address the issue in the future.³¹

Districts and schools are not required to use the Tennessee Reading Policy, which is not contained in state regulation or law. TDOE officials indicate, however, that the policy provides helpful guidance to districts, and that some districts follow the policy.

Exhibit 6: Key Elements in Programs Designed to Improve Adolescent Literacy Achievement in Middle and High Schools

Instructional Improvements	Infrastructure Improvements
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Direct, explicit comprehension instruction 2. Effective instructional principles embedded in content 3. Motivation and self-directed learning 4. Text-based collaborative learning 5. Strategic tutoring 6. Diverse texts 7. Intensive writing 8. A technology component 9. Ongoing formative assessment of students 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 10. Extended time for literacy 11. Professional development 12. Ongoing summative assessment of students and programs 13. Teacher teams 14. Leadership 15. A comprehensive and coordinated literacy program

Source: Alliance for Excellent Education, *Reading Next - A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy: A Report to the Carnegie Corporation of New York*, 2004 (second edition 2006), p. 12, <http://www.all4ed.org/files/ReadingNext.pdf>.

How does the Tennessee Diploma Project (TDP) address adolescent literacy? To what extent do Tennessee’s new curriculum standards, which were developed as part of the TDP, address the skills that adolescent reading requires?

In January 2008, the Tennessee State Board of Education adopted new K-12 standards in language arts, math, and science, representing more rigorous expectations for students.

Tennessee’s involvement with the American Diploma Project (ADP) drove much of the work done to develop these new standards. However, the state’s reading standards were not a part of the recent curriculum standards revisions.

In January 2007, Tennessee joined the American Diploma Project, a national initiative headed by Achieve, Inc., with the purpose of minimizing the “expectations gap” – the gap between what a student knows upon graduating from high school and what the student needs to know to be successful in college or the workforce. According to the National Governors Association’s *Reading to Achieve* report:

The American Diploma Project (ADP) has also been outlining how the high school curriculum can be changed to help students meet the

increased literacy expectations...[B]oth business leaders and college presidents expect high school graduates to possess sophisticated literacy skills, such as being able to choose words well, alter their writing style and voice appropriately, and gather and synthesize relevant information from multiple sources.³²

Tennessee’s new English/Language Arts standards incorporate reading standards; however, reading standards are not included in the new math or science standards, nor are they included in any other content area. There are eight Language Arts standards in each K-8 grade level and high school English course. The standards, which are the main content areas addressed in the grade level or course, are language, communication, writing, research, logic, informational text, media, and literature. These content areas are identical to the ADP standards in English/ Language Arts.

Historically, Tennessee’s reading standards have been provided separately through grade 8. Reading standards have now been incorporated into the English/Language Arts standards but also remain as a separate document on the Department’s website. According to TDOE’s Director of ORIP, the Department will be updating the reading standards, which currently apply to grades K through 8, to extend them to grade 12. In addition, although the reading standards are not included in the state’s new math and science standards, TDOE officials indicate content area specialists have emphasized in their work with teachers the importance of teaching reading skills so that students develop reading and comprehension skills.

Research suggests that “[s]tudents who take an advanced English curriculum and other content-area courses with a heavy emphasis on reading and writing have higher achievement than those who do not.”³³ SREB “urges states to identify the reading skills students need in order to meet academic content standards in each subject in the middle grades and high school,” but also notes that no SREB states have done so.³⁴

How can policymakers effectively address adolescent literacy at the state level?

Results from national and state test scores suggest that states need to provide meaningful assistance in reading to the large numbers of students who need it. Two overarching issues require consideration: the wide range of adolescents’ reading difficulties coupled with a teaching force that is inadequately trained in the teaching of reading. “Research suggests that the scope and complexity of the adolescent literacy problem require a large-scale, systemic approach from states.”³⁵ According to a 2006 report from the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE), few states have addressed adolescent literacy systematically through strategic state policies – “rather, improvements have more commonly been made at the margins, with scattered sites served by a disparate collection of programs – while most secondary schools remain impervious to significant change.”³⁶

Recently, several organizations concerned with education policy have published reports containing

state-level recommendations about improving adolescent literacy. The National Governors Association (NGA), NASBE, the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), and the Carnegie Corporation of New York’s Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy have published reports that share some similar recommendations for state policies. (See Appendix A for a summary of the recommended policies in each report.) The four reports’

State policies on adolescent reading should be vested at the highest levels of government because all of the education systems have a stake in addressing the issue: higher education agencies, career/technical education systems, and workforce development agencies, along with K-12 education agencies.

A Critical Mission: Making Adolescent Reading an Immediate Priority in SREB States, Southern Regional Education Board, 2009, p. 8.

recommendations can be grouped in the following areas:

Declare adolescent literacy as an immediate state priority. All four reports suggest that states need to act quickly to ensure that students have the reading skills they need to graduate from high school and be successful in college and in the workforce. SREB's statement is clear: "SREB strongly believes that improving middle grades and high school students' reading comprehension skills is the most important action states and schools can take to improve achievement in all areas."³⁷ NGA suggests several means to build statewide support for a focus on adolescent literacy, directed primarily at governor's offices:

- Create a state literacy report card for K-12 with literacy indicators listed by district, school, and student demographics;
- Lead a statewide adolescent literacy campaign with assistance from businesses, state agencies, and postsecondary institutions; and
- Designate a state office for adolescent literacy or an adolescent literacy advisory panel to coordinate programs and initiatives and provide information to policymakers.

SREB suggests that efforts to address adolescent literacy should be established and supported by those at the highest levels of government – the governor, the legislature, and the state board of education.

Raise literacy expectations and set state literacy goals and standards. NASBE believes that states should raise proficiency standards to a level of rigor that will reduce the current gap between results on state and national reading tests. These should be clearly aligned with curriculum and assessments, and "[t]here must be a unity of purpose at all levels,"³⁸ from state policy down to the classroom. Teachers need curriculum frameworks that "clearly articulate both grade level expectations and a developmental perspective on teaching and learning in specific disciplines."³⁹ State policies should map the way toward "local capacity to develop and sustain effective, comprehensive programs to advance students' literacy skills at all levels."⁴⁰ NGA calls for policymakers to ensure that the literacy skills required in each content area are made explicit, allowing teachers to more effectively incorporate literacy in daily instruction.

Develop educators' capacity. Much depends on teachers' abilities to support students in reading various types of content. All four reports recommend that states provide high-quality, ongoing professional development to middle and high school educators focused on teaching reading skills in the content areas, diagnosing students' reading problems, and providing appropriate reading strategies to adolescent readers. The expectation is not that subject-area teachers teach basic reading skills, but rather that teachers should be able to help students develop reading strategies appropriate to various disciplines. States should also

ESEA Reauthorization and State Literacy Requirements

If Congress passes President Obama's March 2010 proposal for the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, states will have to develop "comprehensive, evidence-based, pre-K-12 literacy plans."

In addition, states will be able to provide subgrants to districts to support literacy programs in schools with the greatest need. According to the proposal, approved programs would provide:

- Effective professional development for teachers and school leaders;
- High-quality state- or locally-determined curricula, instructional materials, and assessments;
- Interventions that ensure that all students are served appropriately; and
- Language- and text-rich classroom environments that engage and motivate students.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, *ESEA Blueprint for Reform*, Washington, D.C., 2010.

review and address teacher preparation requirements to ensure that educators begin their careers with some understanding of the problems faced by adolescent readers.

Develop literacy plans. States can help to ensure a comprehensive approach to literacy improvement by requiring districts and schools to create K-12 literacy plans. All four reports highlight the benefits of schools and districts developing and using effective comprehensive literacy plans. Literacy plans provide guidance for districts and schools to ensure that instruction helps students master reading, writing, and communication skills. For these plans to be effective, they must be tied to literacy performance data, linked to state standards, and aligned with curricula, assessments, and professional development activities. Additionally, the plans should be based on real-time school data and draw upon research-based practices for teaching literacy skills.

Use data strategically. To ensure that data is used to identify student needs and inform instruction, state policy can require the use of multiple indicators of student reading ability, and support classroom assessments along with the professional development and support teachers need to administer them. NASBE also suggests that states should regularly evaluate how policies are working at the district, school, and classroom levels by looking at data on literacy levels, state assessments, graduation exams, dropout rates, and graduation rates. Resulting information should guide improvement focused on developing students' literacy skills and expanding educators' capacity to

diagnose students' reading deficiencies and teach reading comprehension strategies.

Develop reading interventions or mechanisms that districts and schools can use to intervene with struggling readers. The Carnegie Corporation outlines four specific steps states can take to improve literacy intervention for adolescents:

- Define and provide mechanisms for schools and districts to identify students with low literacy skills;
- Require credit-bearing reading intervention classes for students two or more years behind grade-level reading;
- Fund elements needed to make credit-bearing reading intervention classes effective (i.e., diagnostic assessments, teachers for those classes, and professional development for teachers and schools); and
- Develop a tracking system to document students' intervention responses, for accountability and improvement purposes.

NGA suggests that, in the absence of required literacy plans for schools, states can require diagnostic reading screenings for students who perform below proficiency on state reading assessments. Unlike state proficiency tests, diagnostic screenings provide educators with information to determine students' specific difficulties and develop appropriate interventions.

Exhibit 7 summarizes Tennessee's general progress in addressing adolescent literacy through the lens of these four reports' recommendations.

Conclusion

Ensuring adequate ongoing literacy development for all students in the middle and high school years is a challenging task. However, state-level policy can play an important role in addressing adolescent literacy. Although TDOE has taken some important first steps in tackling the issue, Tennessee faces challenges in undertaking this effort, including:

- Outlining explicit literacy standards and goals for all grades,
- Outlining explicit literacy standards and goals across all subjects,

- Teacher training and professional development, and
- Real-time data access and usage for educators to help struggling readers.

The ultimate measures of the state's renewed focus on adolescent literacy will be whether students graduate with the reading and writing knowledge and skills necessary to be successful in college or the workforce.

Exhibit 7: Status Check: Tennessee's progress in addressing adolescent literacy

Declare adolescent literacy as an immediate state priority.

- TDOE created the Office of Reading Information and Proficiency in August 2009. Part of the office's mission is to create an ongoing conversation about the importance of reading.
- SBE adopted the "Tennessee Reading Policy" in October 2005, which includes a recommendation to focus on the 15 research-based elements of effective adolescent literacy programs.
- The state has not created a K-12 literacy report card for schools and districts.
- The state does not currently have a clear picture of what districts and schools are doing to address the issue of adolescent literacy; however, TDOE surveyed districts in the fall of 2009 to assess the situation.

Raise literacy expectations and state literacy goals and standards.

- In January 2008, the SBE adopted new K-12 standards in language arts, math, and science, representing more rigorous expectations for students.
- The new English/Language Arts standards incorporate reading standards; however, reading standards are not included in the new math or science standards, nor are they included in any other content area. SREB and other education advocates recommend that states identify the reading skills students need in each subject area. No SREB state currently includes reading in the academic standards for each high school subject.

Develop educators' capacity.

- Training for teacher candidates preparing to teach high school grades in Tennessee focuses on various content areas (math or science, for example); teacher candidates in many programs may have little opportunity to learn how to implement instructional strategies in their subject-area instruction to facilitate students' ability to understand and learn from content area text. TDOE is in the beginning stages of revising teacher licensure standards for the secondary academic areas; education officials plan to place a greater emphasis on student development of reading comprehension in the revised standards, which are expected to be considered by the State Board of Education by late fall 2010.
- In 2009, TDOE coordinated two statewide reading summits, a reading standards workshop, and a content knowledge institute, to provide training to the state's K-12 educators.
- TDOE's Office of Reading Information and Proficiency plans to:
 - Develop and provide professional development, some of which is already available on the Tennessee Electronic Learning Center website;
 - Collaborate with the higher education community to help develop and provide training to teachers; and
 - Work to change the culture among middle and high school teachers in all subject areas (i.e., getting teachers accustomed to the idea that teaching reading is every educator's job).

Develop literacy plans.

- Tennessee has not developed a comprehensive literacy plan.
- The state does not require schools or districts to develop comprehensive literacy plans. However, TDOE officials acknowledge that some schools and districts may have developed their own literacy plans.

Use data strategically.

- As of January 2010, all teachers in Tennessee have direct access to a TVAAS account. Prior to that time, only 14 percent of teachers had such access. As part of the state's application to receive Race To the Top federal funds, TDOE plans extensive training for principals and teachers in 2010-11. The SAS Institute is also working with Tennessee to develop a user-friendly "data dashboard" for teachers, who will be able to track individual student academic progress and make instructional decisions based on student data.⁴¹
- TDOE staff and Appalachian Regional Education Laboratory (AEL) researchers have developed a survey aimed at understanding district data issues. TDOE officials hope survey results will help them work with districts to improve data-driven decision-making.
- TDOE has entered into a contract with Metametrics, which will allow every district and school to use the Lexile Framework for Reading. The Lexile Framework measures text difficulty and reading ability; it places texts and readers on the same scale to match readers with appropriate but challenging reading materials. The Lexile Framework can be used to track reading progress for each student on a daily basis.

Develop reading interventions or mechanisms that districts and schools can use to intervene with struggling readers.

- TDOE's Office of Reading Information and Proficiency plans to provide teachers with a toolbox of interventions for struggling readers.
- In April 2009, the State Board of Education adopted the Middle Grades Task Force Rule, which requires that schools provide interventions prior to grades 1, 5, and 9 for students who are not ready for advancement to the next grade level. Schools are to identify students in need of interventions prior to grade 5 through a formative assessment process focused on numeracy and literacy skills, and 4th grade TCAP scores in math and reading/language. Schools are to identify students needing interventions prior to grade 9 using the ACT Explore test results in English, Math, Reading, and Science and the 8th grade TCAP scores in math, reading, language, and science. Districts and schools are not required to provide these interventions, however, until the BEP 2.0 is fully funded or specific funding is provided for this effort.

Appendix A: Summary of state-level policy recommendations focused on adolescent literacy from four reports

National Governors Association	National Association of State Boards of Education	Southern Regional Education Board	Carnegie Corporation of New York
<p>Build support for a state focus on adolescent literacy.</p> <p>Raise literacy expectations across grades and curricula.</p> <p>Encourage and support school and district literacy plans.</p> <p>Build educators' capacity to provide adolescent literacy instruction.</p> <p>Measure progress in adolescent literacy at the school, district, and state levels.</p>	<p>Craft a comprehensive state literacy plan.</p> <p>Set state literacy goals and standards, ensuring alignment with curricula and assessments and raising literacy expectations across curricula for all students in all grades.</p> <p>Ensure that teachers have the preparation and professional development necessary to provide effective, content-based literacy instruction.</p> <p>Strategically use data to identify student needs, design cohesive policies, and evaluate the quality of implementation and its impact.</p> <p>Require the development of district and school literacy plans that infuse research-based support strategies in all content areas.</p> <p>Provide districts and schools with funding, supports, and resources.</p> <p>Provide state guidance and oversight to ensure strong implementation of comprehensive, quality literacy programs.</p>	<p>Develop a state-level comprehensive set of policies that establishes improvement in reading as the most immediate critical priority for public middle grades and high schools. The policies should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Require the state to identify the reading skills students need to improve reading achievement and meet state standards in key academic subjects through high school. ▪ Provide for the development of the curricula and teaching strategies to help students master these reading skills in each subject. ▪ Establish statewide reading intervention programs that schools can use to assist struggling readers in the middle grades and high school. ▪ Enable all teachers to embed reading instruction into each subject, through teacher preparation, certification/ licensure, and professional development. <p>Have the state's Department of Education develop a detailed plan to work with school districts to help them implement the policies – and then monitor districts' progress.</p>	<p>Align the content of state standards to models, such as the International Reading Association adolescent literacy coaching standards and ADP high school standards.</p> <p>Align the challenge level of the state tests to NAEP and to tests in states making progress on NAEP outcomes, such as Florida and Massachusetts.</p> <p>Work to revise teacher certification standards, content of pre-service education, and professional development and support to districts.</p> <p>Define and provide mechanisms for districts and schools to identify and intervene with middle and high school students who are not demonstrating grade-level literacy skills within specific content areas, as well as across content areas.</p> <p>Require credit-bearing reading intervention classes for students who are reading two or more years behind grade level.</p> <p>Build statewide data systems to ensure that data collected from districts are captured in a central place.</p> <p>Develop a system of tracking the response to intervention shown by students receiving supportive or intervention services, in order to maintain accountability and to improve the system over time.</p>

Source: Adapted from L. Bates, N. Breslow, and N. Hupert, *Five states' efforts to improve adolescent literacy*, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast and Islands, 2009, pp. 37-38. NGA Center for Best Practices, *Reading to Achieve: A Governor's Guide to Adolescent Literacy*, 2005. National Association of State Boards of Education, *Reading at Risk: The State Response to the Crisis in Adolescent Literacy*. The Report of the NASBE Study Group on Middle and High School Literacy, Revised Edition, July 2006. Southern Regional Education Board, *A Critical Mission: Making Adolescent Reading an Immediate Priority in SREB States*, The Report of the Committee to Improve Reading and Writing in Middle and High Schools, 2009. Carnegie Corporation of New York, *Time to Act: An Agenda for Advancing Adolescent Literacy for College and Career Success*, Final Report from Carnegie Corporation of New York's Council on Advancing Literacy, New York, Carnegie Corporation, 2009.

Appendix B: Characteristics of Successful and Struggling Readers

Successful Readers	Struggling Readers
Word Study	
Read multisyllabic words and use strategies to figure out unknown words.	May read single-syllable words effortlessly but have difficulty decoding longer multisyllabic words.
Make connections between letter patterns and sounds and use this understanding to read words.	May lack knowledge of the ways in which sounds map to print.
Break unknown words into syllables during reading.	Have difficulty breaking words into syllables.
Use word analysis strategies to break difficult or long words into meaningful parts such as inflectional endings, prefixes, suffixes, and roots.	Often do not use word analysis strategies to break words into syllables.
Fluency	
Read 100-160 words per minute (at the middle school level), depending on the nature and difficulty of the text	Read slowly and laboriously.
Decode words accurately and automatically.	May continue to struggle with decoding or may decode correctly but slowly.
Group words into meaningful chunks and phrases.	May not pause at punctuation or recognize phrases.
Read with expression.	Often lack voice or articulation of emotion while reading.
Combine multiple tasks while reading (e.g., decoding, phrasing, understanding, and interpreting).	May lack proficiency in individual skills that result in dysfluent reading and limit comprehension.
Vocabulary	
Are exposed to a breadth of vocabulary words in conversations and print at home and at school from a very early age.	Have limited exposure to new words. May not enjoy reading, and therefore do not select reading as an independent activity.
Have word consciousness.	May lack word consciousness, including an awareness of the complex and varied nature of words in written and oral language.
Understand most words when they are reading (about 90%) and can make sense of unknown words to build their vocabulary knowledge. Learn words incrementally, through multiple exposures to new words.	Are unable to comprehend consistently what they read or to learn new words from reading.
Have content-specific prior knowledge that helps them understand how words are used in a particular context.	Lack the variety of experiences and exposures necessary to gain deep understanding of new words. Often have limited content-specific prior knowledge that is insufficient to support word learning.
Comprehension	
Monitor reading for understanding. Consider the writing from the author's view, interacting with text during and after reading.	Fail to use metacognitive strategies as they read.
Link content with their prior knowledge.	May lack subject-specific prior knowledge. May not be aware when understanding breaks down. Do not readily make connections between what they are learning and what they already know.
Use a variety of effective reading strategies before, during, and after reading.	Have limited knowledge and use of strategies for gaining information from text.
Set a purpose for reading and adjust their rate and strategy use depending on the text and content.	Do not question or interact with the text during or after reading. May fail to read with purpose or goals. Often do not enjoy reading and lack understanding of the utility of reading.
Motivation	
Interact with text in a motivated and strategic way.	May engage in reading as a passive process without giving effortful attention to activating prior knowledge, using reading strategies, or employing other strategic thought processes.
Have improved comprehension and reading outcomes when engaged with text.	Often have low comprehension of text.
Read more and thus have more access to a variety of topics and text types.	Fail to access a variety of wide reading opportunities. Given the choice, prefer not to read.
Are interested in and curious about topics and content in texts and read to find out more.	May not be interested in or curious about exploring topics or content through reading.

Adapted from A. G. Boardman, G. Roberts, S. Vaughn, J. Wexler, C.S. Murray, and M. Kosanovich, *Effective Instruction for adolescent struggling readers: A practice brief*, Portsmouth, N.H., RMC Research Corporation, Center on Instruction, 2008, <http://centeroninstruction.org/files/Adol%20Struggling%20Readers%20Practice%20Brief.pdf>.

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