

# SEDL Letter

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Building Knowledge to Support Learning

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## CREDITS

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# Meeting Our Goals With Research

Two and a half years ago we published an issue of *SEDL Letter* titled “Putting Reading First.” It remains our most popular issue ever. The issue won a distinguished achievement award from the Association of Educational Publishers and it has been reprinted twice. We still receive requests for copies. Because of the high demand for information about helping students become proficient readers and the increasingly high goals teachers must help their students attain, we are devoting another issue of *SEDL Letter* to reading topics.

In this second reading issue, we discuss a variety of subjects—how to improve instruction for adolescent readers and struggling readers, using literacy coaching as an approach for ongoing professional development, and how to motivate students to read. Also, we visit Bernalillo, New Mexico, to see how literacy coaches have played a role in helping students at Algodones Elementary School and Bernalillo Middle School become better readers. In another article we look at the effects of Reading First in our SEDL region of Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas. Finally, we describe how SEDL is working with teachers in Georgia to help them turn their large numbers of Spanish-speaking students into English-language readers.

Several articles in this issue include information about the research base related to the topic being discussed. The recent focus on scientifically based research is not new. What *is* new is the growing responsibility of people in local educational agencies and schools to carefully consider what the research says and to understand how to use scientific evidence in their practice. When reading articles related to research—whether in *SEDL Letter* or other publications—it is important to remember that a single study or finding isn’t sufficient evidence to say that a certain practice works well. It is also important to understand how the study was conducted—for example, whether it was experimental, quasi-experimental, or observational—and to identify practices or suggestions that are based on philosophy, tradition, or professional judgment instead of research. We all have much to gain and learn from the growing emphasis on scientifically based research in education—as do our students. It is one of the goals of SEDL and *SEDL Letter* to link research and practice, and we plan to continue to do so in upcoming issues.

Happy reading!

**SEDL**



# Required Reading

## *Literacy Education Under No Child Left Behind*

By Geoff Camphire

*High expectations are necessary if you're going to encourage schools to serve the people they should serve.*

Sebastian Wren,  
SEDL program associate

**T**hanks to funds made available through Reading First, part of the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, literacy instruction is stronger in 67 Arkansas schools. These schools employ full-time literacy coaches. They provide educators with professional development targeting reading instruction. They implement special reading programs and supply aligned materials for English language learners and others having difficulty reading. And they monitor students' progress in reading through new tests.

"It has helped us be more focused on scientifically based research," which is a major thrust of the effort, affirms Connie Choate, director of the Arkansas Department of Education's Reading First Project. "It's been a lot of work to get our staff development revised so that it's all research based, but I think it's been a very good thing."

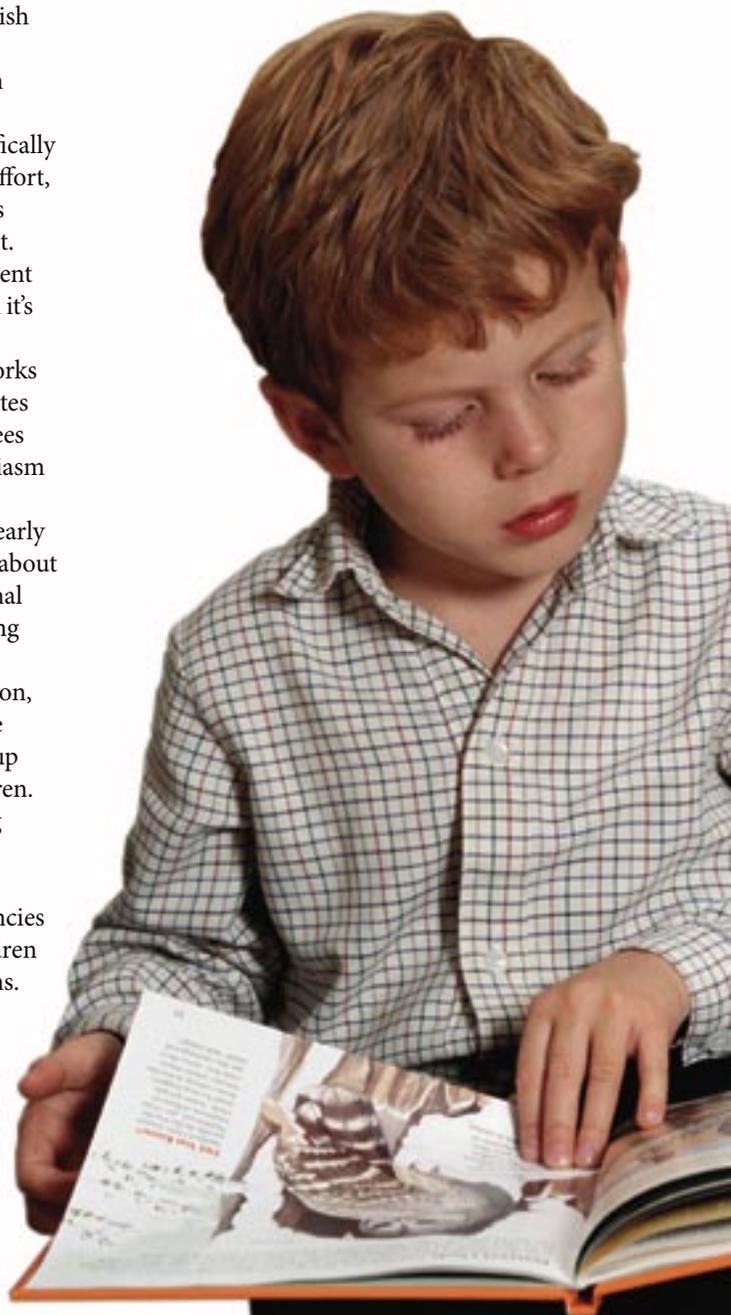
Sebastian Wren, a program associate who works with SEDL's Regional Educational Laboratory sites in Arkansas to improve reading achievement, sees educators working "night and day" with enthusiasm to help children read. A small rural school with which he works that failed to make "adequate yearly progress" this year is paying a private company about \$50,000 to tutor the students who need additional help. It will be a hardship, but the school is taking necessary steps to support its students.

"We're going through some pains in this region, as we are across the country, but it's one of these things where schools are finally having to own up to the fact that they can help every kid," says Wren. "High expectations are necessary if you're going to encourage schools to serve the people they should serve."

In schools, districts, and state education agencies nationwide, those responsible for teaching children to read are wrestling with such high expectations. Choate hopes to reach more of her state's 1,100 schools with Reading First. "Even though we're starting the third year of the program, we just have over a year's worth of implementation so far," she points out. "We just need to continue helping these schools we have right now. Real implementation takes time."

### Impact on Literacy

The No Child Left Behind Act, passed by a bipartisan majority of Congress in 2001 and signed into law by President Bush in January 2002, is expected to continue dominating the country's education agenda.



## Real implementation takes time.

Connie Choate,  
Arkansas Department  
of Education

Bush has outlined plans to expand the legislation—the latest reauthorization of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the federal government’s main K–3 education law—with new efforts aimed at rewarding effective teachers and boosting instruction and assessment for middle and high school students.

“One of my real concerns is that we stay on track,” says Sandy Garrett, Oklahoma’s superintendent of public instruction, who says she believes that the political will for reform remains intact at the federal level. “You know, Ted Kennedy was in that picture with George Bush when No Child Left Behind was signed.”

Recognizing that literacy skills are crucial to academic success across the curriculum, NCLB currently makes improving children’s reading skills a centerpiece of its reform agenda. Under the law, Reading First offers competitive grants to help establish scientific, research-based literacy programs for students in kindergarten through third grade. Funded at \$1.02 billion in 2004, the program prioritizes schools and districts in economically disadvantaged areas. The program supports such approaches as screening and diagnosis of reading difficulties, monitoring of student progress, and high-quality professional development. Each state is encouraged to build a comprehensive infrastructure to guide reform and assist districts funded under a state-run competition for subgrants.

Of course, there is more to NCLB than Reading First. Dramatically changing literacy education in the Southwest and across the country, the law also stipulates that all states must:

- Begin administering annual reading assessments, aligned with state standards, to students in grades three through eight by the 2005–2006 school year. Also, sample groups of fourth and eighth graders must take the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading test every other year to allow comparisons with state test scores.
- Enable all students to demonstrate “proficient” reading skills on state assessments by 2013–2014. In the meantime, schools must satisfy detailed criteria for “adequate yearly progress,” not only among their overall student populations, but also for specific demographic subgroups. The law spells out various forms of assistance and sanctions for schools failing to meet these goals.
- Publish yearly report cards on school and district performance, including achievement data in such key areas as English and language arts, to help make public education systems accountable to the public.

- Ensure that all teachers in such core content areas as reading are “highly qualified,” that is, certified or demonstrably proficient, in the subjects they teach by the end of the 2005–2006 school year. The measure lists similar quality criteria for school paraprofessionals.

Many observers see the law as a boon to literacy education. “Certainly it’s brought attention to reading, since that’s one of the four areas that’s tested,” observes Kathy Christie, vice president for clearinghouse and information management with the Education Commission of the States. If these efforts fail to produce the desired outcomes within a few years, then federal and state leaders simply will need to make adjustments, she adds. “You work off data. You determine what is effective.”

## Looking for Results

NAEP scores, which offer a uniform yardstick of performance across states, provide the baseline against which progress will be measured. But officials warn that it is still too early to look for the signs of progress in NAEP—the scores so far likely reflect little of NCLB’s impact. The law is only about three years old, and many states did not receive their first round of Reading First funding until 2003. While it appears to be a “fantastic program for children,” there just is not enough achievement data available yet to back up that impression, says Jana Bland, Reading First director for the Texas Education Agency. As of November 2004, Texas and other states were preparing reports to the U.S. Department of Education, required under the law, including updated achievement data. Education officials warn that the program’s emerging influence on teaching and learning glimpsed in these data.

Education researchers have provided little more certainty with contradictory studies published in recent months. In October, Bruce Fuller, a University of California at Berkeley researcher, released an analysis of 15 states’ reading scores, finding no compelling pattern of rising achievement in grades three and four since passage of NCLB. Later that month, a separate study by the Education Trust, a school reform and equity advocacy group based in Washington, D.C., contended that fourth- and fifth-graders’ reading scores have climbed in 15 of 23 states examined since the statute took effect. Critics of both studies have assailed the narrow limits of these examinations and questioned the possible political motivations for releasing such findings just weeks prior to the November elections.

Around the same time, however, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), which is the research arm of Congress, issued two reports apparently backing some educators' claims that NCLB is not doing enough to help schools meet the ambitious goals it has set for them. One report concluded that many states are falling behind in meeting the law's requirements, particularly in the design of educational accountability plans and that the U.S. Department of Education is failing in its responsibility to guide them (GAO, September 30, 2004). The other report by the GAO asserted that the federal education agency specifically needs to provide more support to small rural school districts, which are common in the Southwest (GAO, September 23, 2004).

Throughout the region, states are taking the challenge to boost literacy seriously, most notably launching or bolstering efforts to provide technical assistance and reading instruction workshops, academies, and summits for principals, K-3 teachers, special education teachers, early childhood teachers, paraprofessionals, and parents. But whether these efforts will be sufficient to do the job remains to be seen.

## Controversy Heating Up

There can be no doubt that some states are struggling to meet NCLB's requirements. The law demands that all students be made proficient in reading by 2014, for example, but students in nearly a third of all public schools nationwide currently are not making the grade in this core subject, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. Tens of thousands of schools nationwide already have been labeled as failing to achieve adequate yearly progress.

Advocates argue that NCLB provides just the right mix of high expectations, support, and accountability needed to inspire scholastic success. For instance, the law is structured to allow states and districts increased flexibility in spending federal dollars and, through a change in the Title I formula, enhance support for districts with large shares of poor children. But critics question whether the law's ambitious goals are attainable, particularly given what some believe is limited funding and unrealistically tight time frames. With stiff financial penalties looming for schools that fail to hit academic benchmarks, some educators anticipate

an onslaught of lawsuits intending to circumvent sanctions outlined in the measure.

"It has created some challenges," says Robin Jarvis, assistant superintendent for student and school performance as well as Reading First coordinator for the Louisiana Department of Education. The state already has had to modify the accountability system it had in place before NCLB. Also, Louisiana administers standardized tests in March of each year, so it has been difficult to use those results to inform accountability decisions before the start of the next school year. And, Jarvis adds, there are concerns about meeting deadlines for teacher quality requirements since Louisiana has had to restructure its way of handling middle school teacher certification.

Still, she expresses optimism. "We have really embraced, from the state level, the philosophy and research focus of Reading First," Jarvis says, adding that Louisiana plans to do what it takes to scale up NCLB's approach to all its schools. "We're working with experts across the country who can help the states in implementing it."

"There are advantages and disadvantages," agrees Patricia Parkinson, assistant secretary for instructional support of the New Mexico Public Education Department, echoing some ambivalence about NCLB. "The overarching idea is really wonderful, and it's brought a new look to many of our programs—but we're all still learning it. We've gone to a lot of training, and we've had to absorb a lot of costs of implementing it in our budget. And that's tough."

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*Advocates argue that NCLB provides just the right mix of high expectations, support, and accountability needed to inspire scholastic success.*

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# Literacy Coaches

## *Roles and Responsibilities*

By Sebastian Wren and Deborah Reed

For several decades, research findings have noted the importance of high-quality teachers to the reading success of students, especially students who are at-risk for reading and academic failure. While other factors, such as the quality of the core reading program and the teacher-student ratio in the classroom, appear to have some influence on reading achievement, the knowledge, skills, and experience of the classroom teacher seem to play a pivotal role in student reading success

(Block, 2000; Bond & Dykstra, 1967; Brady & Moats, 1997; Darling-Hammond, 1988; Moats & Foorman, 2003); Sanders & Horn, 1998; Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, & Hemphill, 1997).

Teaching all students to read is a complex task which requires that teachers have a sophisticated understanding of how students learn to read, a thorough understanding of appropriate interventions that can be used to help struggling readers keep up with their peers, and an ability to use a variety of instructional strategies to meet the needs of all learners (National Reading Panel, 2000). It is clear that if schools are to rise to the challenge of leaving no child behind, they must take steps to ensure that all elementary school teachers are well-trained, highly effective reading teachers and that secondary schools develop effective literacy instruction, especially for struggling students who need to acquire strong comprehension skills and build vocabulary.

High-quality training for all teachers, however, has been problematic in real school settings. It has



SEDL program associate Stacey Joyner works with literacy coach Brenda Chavez at Bernalillo Middle School.

been emphasized in a number of studies that the reading instruction training most teachers get is often limited both in time and quality (Dole, 2003; Fullan, 1991; Little, 1993). Training usually comes in the form of workshops, lectures, or training academies. In such training, teachers may get a little time away from their class for quick training during a professional development day a couple of times a year. That is not the sort of training that results in deep understanding and high levels of instructional skill building (Joyce & Showers, 2002).

A handful of teachers go above and beyond the most basic training to get richer, more advanced training in reading instruction. Those teachers may become reading specialists—highly trained, often certified professionals (NCES, 2004) who specialize in helping students who are struggling with learning to read in the regular classroom. Schools have come to depend upon reading specialists to help struggling readers and are more willing to make substantial investments in the professional growth and development of those reading specialists.

## Teacher Quality and Reading

**The studies cited in the first paragraph of “Literacy Coaches: Roles and Responsibilities” represent a range of studies that emphasize the importance of teacher quality in reading. Here is a brief summary of some of the research cited.**

“The Cooperative Research Program in First-Grade Reading Instruction,” by Guy Bond and Robert Dykstra (1967) is landmark research in the field of reading. The Cooperative Research Program included 27 research projects studying first-grade students, designed to gather data relevant to three basic questions:

- To what extent are various pupil, teacher, class, school, and community characteristics related to pupil achievement in first-grade reading and spelling?
- Which of the many approaches to initial reading instruction produces superior reading and spelling achievement at the end of first grade?
- Is any program uniquely effective or ineffective for pupils with high or low readiness for reading?

Each of the 27 projects collected different types of student data including personal information such as age, sex, amount of preschool experience, and the number of days of absence during the experimental period. Other data focused on information about the teacher, the student’s class, the school in which he or she was enrolled, and about the community in which he or she lived. Numerous pre-instructional and post-instructional tests were administered and measures of each student’s writing ability and attitude toward reading were obtained.

Bond and Dykstra’s findings correlated teacher experience with student reading achievement, based on five measures of the Stanford Achievement Test. A rating of general teacher efficacy also correlated positively with the five achievement measures.

Susan Brady’s and Louisa Moats’s position paper for the International Dyslexia Association, “Informed Instruction for Reading Success: Foundations for Teacher Preparation,” drew on 20 years of reading research to identify core requirements for reading teachers. They stress the necessity of teachers’ receiving a solid foundation regarding the “theoretical and scientific underpinnings for understanding literacy development,” including knowledge of the relationship between the spoken and written language, sophisticated understanding of the development of phonological awareness and the process of learning to read, and an understanding of what constitutes adequate research evidence. They also suggest teachers have a strong knowledge of the structure of language including knowledge of the English speech sound system and its production, knowledge of the structure of English orthography and its relationships to sound and meaning, and knowledge of grammatical structure.

Louisa Moats and Barbara Foorman conducted a four-year descriptive, longitudinal study of reading instruction in low-performing, high-poverty schools that included teacher surveys and observation. The researchers surveyed teachers who taught in grades K–4 to document their understanding of reading instruction and language concepts. They also

analyzed the teachers’ misconceptions about sounds, words, sentences, and principles of reading instruction. Moats and Foorman reported that they “established a modest predictive relationship between teachers’ knowledge, classroom reading achievement levels, and teachers’ observed teaching competence.” They also write, “We found surprising gaps in teachers’ insights about learning to read.”

Linda Darling-Hammond used data from a 50-state survey of policies, state case study analyses, the National Center for Educational Statistics’ (NCES) Schools and Staffing surveys, and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) to examine ways in which teacher qualifications and other school factors are related to student achievement across states. Quantitative analyses showed measures of teacher preparation and certification as the strongest correlates of student achievement in reading and mathematics, even after controlling for student poverty and language status.

William Sanders and Sandra Horn were among the researchers who analyzed the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVASS). TVASS is a large database linking students and student outcomes to the schools and districts in which they are enrolled and to the teachers to whom they are assigned from grade to grade. Sanders and Horn reported, “Research conducted from the TVAAS database has shown that race, socioeconomic level, class size, and classroom heterogeneity are poor predictors of student academic growth. Rather the effectiveness of the teacher is the major determinant of student academic progress.”

Catherine Snow and her colleagues Wendy Barnes, Jane Chandler, Irene Goodman, and Lowery Hemphill used a mixture of approaches (interviews, observations, and tests) in their long-term study, which is documented and discussed in *Unfulfilled Expectations: Home and School Influences on Literacy*. They studied the effects of home and school experiences in the lives of low-income children on their literacy achievement, comparing low-income families that had children who had been successful in school with low-income families that had children who were below-average learners. One of the factors they examined was the performance of students who received instruction from teachers determined to be “strong” teachers versus the performance of students who received instruction from “weak” teachers. The researchers found a correlation between teachers and reading ability. Students who received two years of reading instruction from strong, knowledgeable teachers tended to become successful readers no matter how much home support they received. Even students who came from literacy-poor homes where reading and education were not well supported tended to be successful when given two years of instruction from knowledgeable, highly qualified teachers.

## There Is No Quick Fix

In many schools, struggling readers are pulled out of their regular classroom for short, intensive sessions with a reading specialist. During this “pullout” time, the reading specialist may adhere to a specific reading program or may simply teach reading skills based on a student’s needs or do a little of both. This short-term tutoring approach is used with the belief that struggling readers will learn effective reading skills and strategies from the reading specialist that they can then practice and use to help them when they return to their regular classroom.

Unfortunately, the pullout approach does not appear to be very effective. Walmsley and Allington (1995) reviewed research on remedial and special education reading programs,\* finding that “in virtually every study the evidence indicates that some children seem to benefit enormously, but these children are not in the majority.” They suggest that once these pullout programs are established for the struggling readers, the classroom teachers excuse themselves from the responsibility of making sure these students become good readers. Walmsley and Allington assert that, as a result of these pullout reading interventions, the students “in most need of instructional support may actually receive less support in the regular classroom where they spend most of their school day.”

Additionally, the good habits, skills, and strategies taught by the reading specialist may not be supported in the regular classroom, and struggling readers are likely to revert back to their old, ineffective reading habits. For example, while a reading specialist may know to direct the student’s attention to sounding out unfamiliar words, offering help only when the student has reached a point of frustration, the classroom teacher may allow the student to simply guess at words on the page or may be more eager to identify the words for the student, thus teaching the student to depend upon the teacher for answers. As noted by Snow, Burns, and Griffin (1998), “It is nothing short of foolhardy to make enormous investments in remedial instruction and then return children to classroom instruction that will not serve to maintain the gains they made in the remedial program.”

This traditional model of depending on a few well-trained teachers to do most of the work with struggling readers is problematic for several other

reasons as well. For example, many schools have difficulty coordinating the times that students are pulled from the classroom with the classroom instruction schedule, and there is also evidence that segregation from the regular classroom stigmatizes children (Leinhardt & Pally, 1982). Considering the tremendous cost of training and supporting a full-time reading specialist who works individually or in small groups with struggling readers, the gains in student achievement are not as substantial or long-lasting as one would hope (Walmsley & Allington, 1995). Also, in many schools, there are simply too many struggling readers and the reading specialist is not able to work with all of them.

Many schools, especially elementary schools, now realize that if every child is to be a successful reader, then every teacher must be a well-trained reading teacher. In secondary schools, teachers often feel unprepared to support and instruct struggling readers—they generally have received considerably less preparation to teach reading than elementary teachers. The responsibility for high-quality reading instruction cannot be left to a few reading specialists; that responsibility must be shared by all teachers. Schools are looking for effective but cost-effective ways to build the capacity of all classroom teachers, and many recognize that their reading specialists are in a good position to share their wealth of knowledge with the rest of the teachers.

## From Reading Specialist to Literacy Coach

Rather than having the reading specialist work with struggling readers, some schools are now asking their reading specialists to serve as reading coaches or literacy coaches, who provide ongoing, job-embedded training and support for the other teachers in the school to build their capacity and effectiveness as reading teachers. Researchers who examine issues related to teacher professional development are finding that the best-trained, most knowledgeable teachers (in any domain, not just reading) have had substantial support from a strong mentor or coach who helped them to learn new concepts and practice new skills in the classroom (Darling-Hammond, 2000). These highly skilled teachers get some training through

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\* Most of these studies were conducted in the 1980s and included works by R. L. Allington and P. A. Johnston (1989), R. L. Allington and A. McGill-Franzen (1989), L. Carter (1984), L. M. Gelzheiser, J. Meyers, and R. M. Pruzek (1992), K. A. Kavale (1988), B. Larrivee (1985), G. Leinhardt and A. Pally (1982), C. A. Lyons (1989), Slavin, R. E. (1987), and M. Will (1986), among others.

workshops and lectures, but the training that has influenced their instruction the most has been ongoing and job-embedded with the support of a knowledgeable mentor or coach.

Shifting the role of reading specialists into a mentoring and coaching role responsible for providing other teachers with support and guidance that improves reading instruction can be a powerful step toward improving achievement at low-performing schools. Thousands of schools are taking this step, in part due to the federal Reading First initiative, which considers coaches an important part of professional development. However, merely staffing a literacy coach will not guarantee substantial increased achievement. In addition to the requisite knowledge and skills about reading instruction, the effectiveness of the literacy coach likely depends on the roles and responsibilities that the coach has to fill, the level of support the coach has from campus and district leadership, and the culture of the school where the coach is working.

The recent proliferation of literacy coaches in schools across the country (International Reading Association, 2004a) has not been studied very thoroughly or systematically. There have been, to date, no evidence-based or data-driven empirical studies of the various factors that can influence the effectiveness of literacy coaches. However, there have been a number of less formal case studies of literacy coaches, and a good deal of useful advice can be gathered from recent books, articles, and papers based on the experiences of those who have established coaching programs. Examples of the current literature base include works by the International Reading Association (2004a, 2004b), which published a position statement about the roles and responsibilities of reading coaches and included reading specialists and literacy coaches in its *Standards for Reading Professionals* (2004b). Other examples include works by Lyons and Pinnell (2001), Dole (2004), and Symonds (2002) who examined the roles literacy coaches can play in literacy improvement and school improvement efforts. Walpole and Blamey (in press) surveyed principals and literacy coaches about their practices and their perceptions about the roles that they play in school improvement efforts.

Based on our own work at SEDL in school-improvement efforts involving literacy coaches and the experiences of others, we have recommendations that schools should consider when staffing a literacy coach. Although there are a variety of ways literacy coaching programs may be structured, the elements discussed below should be considered when establishing the coaching position and in ensuring campus support of the position.

## Three Competencies of Effective Literacy Coaches

From our work and from other literature, we have identified three competencies that seem key to the success of literacy coaches. Effective literacy coaches

- **understand reading.**

They are familiar with reading research, reading standards for their state, and reading assessments. They know what is to be taught at each grade level.

- **understand pedagogy.**

They are familiar with best practices in reading instruction, they have a collection of effective strategies to draw upon, and they know how to manage a classroom of diverse learners so that the learning needs of individual students are addressed. They know that students learn in engaging learning environments, and they know how to engage students in appropriate learning.

- **understand coaching.**

They know how to help other teachers learn, experiment, and apply new knowledge. They know how to facilitate meetings, use questioning strategies, and offer support. They do not simply share information with teachers, but instead work collaboratively with teachers to learn new information and strategies together.

## Recommendations for the Literacy Coach's Role

1. **Literacy coaches are resources for the teachers, always trying to provide support in a non-judgmental way.** Most of the examinations of literacy coaching initiatives have indicated that the successful literacy coaches are never put in a position of evaluating the job performance of other teachers. The principal or some other administrator is responsible for evaluating teachers and making decisions that may affect the pay, teaching assignment, or employment of the classroom teachers—the literacy coach should be represented as someone who serves as a resource for teachers and who provides support to help teachers improve reading instruction. The literacy coach should take steps to establish a safe, supportive environment for improving instruction. Certainly the literacy coach should observe instruction and provide feedback for the teachers, but the teachers should understand that the coach's observations are not used for formal evaluations of the teachers' performance. Teachers are less likely to trust a literacy coach who is evaluating their class performance, and in the absence of a trusting environment, they are less likely to take risks and try new approaches and strategies.

*Teachers should understand that the coach's observations are not used for formal performance evaluations.*

2. **Most of the literacy coach's time should be spent working with teachers, but the coach's own professional development should also be a priority.** The literacy coach's professional development should include reading articles, learning new strategies for instruction and professional development, communicating with other reading experts, staying abreast of the research, and gathering information to share with the other teachers. Time for the coach's own professional development should be explicitly scheduled and protected. It may be a good idea when first setting up the literacy coach position to specify what percentage of the coach's time will be spent working with teachers and what percentage will be spent on the coach's own professional development.
3. **The literacy coach should not work with students unless it is to demonstrate lessons to teachers.** The literacy coach is not a substitute teacher or a tutor. The time the literacy coach is working with students is not a time for the teacher to grade papers. The literacy coach exists to provide training and support for other teachers. The coach should visit every classroom regularly (several times a week), and the coach should work with teachers to make clear plans about areas of instruction to work on and practice between visits and meetings.
4. **The literacy coach should clearly focus on five areas of instructional support for teachers: theory underlying instruction, demonstration of activities, observation of teachers practicing new lessons, feedback and reflection about instruction, and supporting collaboration among teachers.** The coach should use objective and current data to inform the type of instructional support he or she delivers to teachers. For example, if assessments show that students are leaving kindergarten without developing phoneme awareness, the coach should emphasize the theory and practice of phoneme awareness instruction for the kindergarten teachers. Similarly, if data indicate that students are failing to develop appropriate fluency skills, the coach should emphasize theory and instructional activities related to developing fluency.
5. **The coach should facilitate frequent staff meetings devoted to examining samples of student work and assessment data, helping teachers interpret assessment information and use that information to provide more focused instruction based on student needs.** These meetings should be designed to encourage questioning, discussion, and dialog. The coach

should also focus on building expertise and leadership within the staff.

## Recommendations for the School Leadership Support Role

The literacy coach cannot be effective without the consistent support of campus leaders. Initially, some teachers may not be enthusiastic about a literacy coach coming into their classrooms and may not welcome the support the literacy coach provides. Especially in the beginning, the principal and other campus leaders will need to play an active role to support the literacy coach.

### 1. The principal should communicate through both words and behaviors that the literacy coach is not evaluating the performance of the teachers.

As Cathy Toll (2004) suggests, "Coaching is new to the culture of many schools, and staff members often feel suspicious about claims that the coach is there to help. In such situations, when a coach behaves like a supervisor, even subtly, those suspicions flare and the entire coaching endeavor is compromised."

To this end, occasional positive comments from the principal can help to earn the teachers' trust and help teachers to see the literacy coach as an advocate, a resource, and someone to help meet their needs. To facilitate this, the literacy coach may share positive comments with the principal who, in turn, may want to share the positive feedback with teachers. This helps to reassure the teachers that the literacy coach is there to encourage and support good instructional practices. It also lets the teachers know that the principal is communicating with the literacy coach and is playing an active role in supporting the literacy coach.

- ### 2. The principal plays an important role in holding staff accountable for working with the literacy coach to improve instruction.
- There may be teachers who are reluctant to collaborate with other teachers or to work with the literacy coach—it is up to the principal to encourage active participation from all of the staff. This is a sensitive area, however, because it may undermine the trust that teachers should have for the literacy coach. It is best to begin with a clear expectation that teachers will accept support and will cooperate with the literacy coach to improve instruction. The principal should follow up regularly with the teachers and monitor whether the teachers are actually cooperating with the literacy coach. If the teachers are stubbornly reluctant, a direct intervention may be necessary.

But usually, just the consistent monitoring from the principal is sufficient to communicate an expectation for collaboration and cooperation among the teachers.

**3. The literacy coach and the principal should meet frequently (about once a week) to discuss goals and plans for activities.** The principal, as a good instructional leader, should have a clear vision for improving reading achievement in the school, and the principal should work closely with the literacy coach to ensure that they are both working toward the same goals. A collaborative relationship between the literacy coach and the principal will prevent the literacy coach's work from being undermined or derailed and will help the principal lead the school toward high levels of student success.

**4. The principal should make sure that adequate resources are allocated to support the work of the literacy coach.** Class schedules may need to be changed to allow for common planning periods, or space may need to be designated for meetings or professional resources. Funding may need to be provided for such professional resources as subscriptions to professional journals, trade books, or conferences.

**5. When the literacy coach organizes collaborative meetings for the staff, the principal should attend as many of those meetings as possible.** This helps the principal understand what is happening in the classroom and what he or she should be looking for when making classroom visits (something principals should be doing every week or so). Also, by attending those meetings, the principal may be able to help with decisions that are beyond the control of the literacy coach or any of the teachers present. Furthermore, the principal's presence communicates an expectation that every educator (including the principal) is expected to work with the literacy coach in some capacity.

The addition of a literacy coach can be a cornerstone for improving reading achievement for a school, but the school principal and other administrators must clearly, consistently support the coach if he or she is to be effective. Teachers know how important it is for children to become proficient readers and they do not want any of their children to fail to develop this essential skill. It has been our experience that teachers are usually eager to have someone on staff who can support them and help them improve reading instruction, but they also frequently ask for help from the coach that the coach cannot provide (like reduction in class size, retention of students, help with discipline problems). The

school leaders must work closely with the coach and the staff to set clear expectations and communicate clear boundaries for the work of the literacy coach.

The literacy coach and the principal should also work together to examine ongoing student assessment data and monitor the progress of their school improvement efforts. They should keep in mind that the gains in reading achievement may not be dramatic in the first year with a new literacy coach. It is not reasonable to expect a school to suddenly turn around in a year or to expect instruction to dramatically change immediately. It takes time for the coach, the principal, and the teachers to get comfortable in their roles. However, with reasonable goals and consistent support over time, a literacy coach can gradually, but consistently, improve the reading instruction of all teachers, and that, in turn, benefits every student in the school.

*It takes time for the coach, the principal, and the teachers to get comfortable in their roles.*

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**SEDL**

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# Program Gives Parents Confidence to Bolster Their Kids' Success in Georgia

By Darryl Ewing

“Pregúnteles a sus hijos sobre lo que han leído,” a mother writes on the overhead projector transparency as other parents, almost all Hispanic, look on at Woodward Elementary School in DeKalb County, Georgia. The phrase is a strategy parents can use to help their kids improve reading comprehension skills. Translated the phrase means: “Ask your children about what they have read.”

A little more than a year ago, SEDL began working with Woodward on an English Language Learners (ELL) program. The program is led by SEDL's Southeast Comprehensive Assistance Center (SECAC) and brings together about 60 Hispanic parents for monthly workshops to help them better help their kids in school. The challenge is more difficult because many of the families have come to Georgia from other countries—Mexico, Central and South America, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico—and they do not speak English. SECAC's work at Woodward and other schools in the southeast supports SEDL's work under No Child Left Behind, and it expands SEDL's reach into Alabama, Mississippi, and Georgia.

“This kind of instruction is very challenging and many of the schools in the Southeast don't have teachers who are prepared to meet the needs of these immigrant families,” says Dr. Marie Kaigler, program manager for SECAC. “We help teachers acquire necessary skills through professional development and technical assistance. We also work with the parents and families, in their native language, to help bridge the language gap.”

“My greatest challenge is to motivate parents to believe that they can make a difference,” says SEDL program associate Maggie Rivas, who facilitates the ELL workshops.

For example, Rivas helps parents grasp reading comprehension by referring to popular Latin daytime dramas. In Spanish, she asks parents to identify the

main characters, story theme and conflict. Once the parents understand that these elements also are present in the books their children read, they can ask their kids to identify characters or the plot in their school reading.

“The kids start to think, ‘Hey, my parents are interested in me and how I perform in school,’” Rivas says.

Attendance in the ELL workshops has remained around 60 parents, with many of the families coming back for additional workshops. Some of the parents have gotten to know each other through the workshops and others have grown interested in becoming more involved in the school.

“Maggie's work has had a profound impact on the community and my staff,” says Clarence Montgomery Jr., principal at Woodward Elementary. “She's helping to bring together the home and school connection. It is my belief that until we get into the home to make learning important, we're not going to see the results in school that we want to see.”

**SEDL**

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# Motivating Students to Read

## *Issues and Practices*

By Deborah Reed

*Students with high interest in a topic might be able to read more difficult material than an ability test might indicate.*

Most teachers would love to help students make a daily habit of reading across a wide variety of texts, and recent survey research indicates there is a need for students to do so. Only about 30–40 percent of fourth-, eighth-, and twelfth-grade students are reading at or above the proficient level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests (Donahue, Daane, & Grigg, 2003). Reading at this level means that students can comprehend subject-matter material and apply appropriate analytical skills or relate to real-world situations. Unfortunately, performance on the NAEP has remained relatively stagnant over the test's 30-year history, while literacy demands have been steadily increasing. Less than half of the adult labor force is able to perform at a literacy level required for most jobs in the current labor market, according to an analysis of data collected in two adult literacy surveys (Sum, Kirsch, & Taggart, 2002).

The latter study and another literacy survey, *Reading at Risk* (National Endowment for the Arts, 2004), highlight the challenge of aliteracy and the large number of people it includes. Aliterate students and adults can read but either are not able to read with comprehension or choose not to read. Cramer and Castle (1994) report that best estimates indicate “only about 20 percent of adults who are able to read do so voluntarily with any degree of regularity.”

Fostering the ability and inclination of students to read more is an important instructional goal for a number of reasons. Many studies have shown a correlation between the amount of time students spend reading and the variety of texts they read with greater reading success and vocabulary growth (Anderson & Nagy, 1992; Biemiller 1977–1978; Juel, 1988; Krashen, 1989; Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 1999; Nagy & Anderson, 1984; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998). Moreover, fluency and automaticity are likely to improve with more practice (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998; National Reading Panel, 2000; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), which in turn facilitates comprehension. In short, a well-read student is typically a successful student.

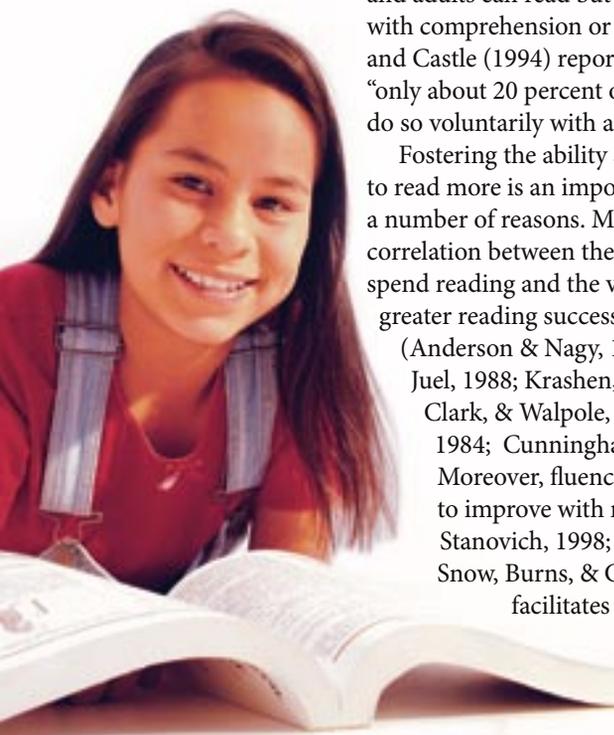
### Independent Reading Time

Good readers tend to be intrinsically motivated to read, and the amount of time they spend reading is highly correlated with their reading proficiency and overall academic success across all subject areas. Students who are less motivated to read, and who spend less time practicing their reading skills, typically lag behind their peers and often experience frustrating academic difficulties.

Motivation to read independently appears to be a key component of reading success and should be a goal of reading instruction. Teachers are not merely responsible for providing instruction in the mechanics of text and reading, they also bear responsibility for instilling in all students a desire to read independently from a variety of sources. Although research has provided a wealth of information to inform instruction on the mechanics of text, there are few findings from well-designed, experimental research studies to guide educators in motivating students to spend a great deal of time reading widely and independently.

In an attempt to simply get students to read more, many teachers have carved out blocks of uninterrupted class time for students to practice reading independently. This approach, sometimes known by the acronym SSR (Sustained Silent Reading) or DEAR (Drop Everything And Read), seems intuitively appropriate. While SSR and DEAR clearly communicate the value schools attach to reading and serve to alleviate the surface-level problem of students spending too little time practicing, there are other factors to consider beyond merely providing this basic encouragement for students to read more.

Providing time for silent reading does not, after all, guarantee that students will legitimately engage in reading or appropriately select materials to stimulate their growth (Kuhn & Stahl, 2003). Even students who are proficient, motivated readers often do not spend the allocated time actually engaging in reading activities. But students for whom the task of reading is too difficult or tedious, those for whom practice is most crucial, also frequently and deliberately engage in avoidance behaviors, thereby



denying themselves any benefit that might follow from unguided, independent reading time. Even when students do conscientiously spend this time practicing reading, Shanahan (2002) cautions they may still be reinforcing bad habits. Teachers have no way of knowing or intervening when students make errors while reading silently, so the students may continually practice and habituate mistakes.

Several studies indicate a correlation between students' development of reading skills and their teachers' connection of free reading time with direct instruction in reading strategies or with reading extension activities (Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; Lawson, 1968; Wiesendanger & Birlem, 1984) but most of the experimental research—including the studies deemed the best designed and strongest by the National Reading Panel—found no clear benefit from devoting classroom time to unguided, silent reading (National Reading Panel, 2000). Every minute with a good teacher is precious to a struggling reader, and to the extent that independent practice time cuts into more effective instructional time, it can actually undermine reading success.

### Intrinsic Versus Extrinsic Motivation

Many schools have turned to more formalized reading programs designed to encourage independent, self-paced reading while attempting to provide more structure and accountability than the basic sustained silent reading initiatives. These programs contain mechanisms to help students both select appropriate materials and be accountable for reading them with comprehension.

In one popular reading program, for example, students first take an interactive vocabulary test that identifies their reading levels and the books that are at this designated reading level. Students are generally discouraged from checking out books above or below the reading level the program has defined for them; thus, at least in theory, students are only reading material that is challenging but still within their grasp. After finishing a book, students take an objective test over the material. This is intended to provide some measure of accountability for actually reading and understanding the book, as well as an ongoing means of monitoring their established difficulty range.

These programs have been referred to as *reading management tools* since a computer can keep track of the amount of reading each student does and, presumably, develop motivation to read more through a sense of competition or by simply quantifying achievement. However, this approach to motivation can be problematic. Students who are motivated by competitions are apt to show a

high degree of reading avoidance, particularly for more difficult reading tasks or reading outside of school requirements (Baker & Wigfield, 1999; Nicholls, Cheung, Lauer, & Patashnick, 1989; Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997). There is also a danger that quantifying reading performance in this way will instigate or perpetuate a system of extrinsic rewards. For example, some schools offer pizza parties or other prizes to students who read a predetermined number of pages or books. Extrinsic rewards, particularly tangible rewards like pizza parties, actually can reduce internal motivations to read, as Cameron and Pierce (1994) found in their meta-analysis of 96 experimental studies related to intrinsic motivation. Studies have shown that students who are offered extrinsic rewards often become dependent on the rewards for their motivation, subsequently need more prodding and cajoling to read, and read less frequently when the reward is discontinued. Conversely, a correlation has been found between students who have increased internal motivation to read and the frequency and breadth of their reading. (Guthrie et al., 1998). Although extrinsic motivators cannot be completely avoided in schools because grades must be assigned to work, the nontangible incentives of teacher praise and constructive feedback have proven more motivational than the tangible rewards (Cameron & Pierce, 1994; Deci, 1971; Lepper & Cordova, 1992). Students who struggle with reading need consistent and targeted feedback on their efforts, whatever their level of achievement.

### Matching Readers with Appropriate Reading Material

As discussed in the previous section, programs or reading management tools that limit the selection of reading materials do so with the best of intentions.

Without guidance, poor readers tend to overestimate their ability to read challenging text and usually select text that is beyond their independent reading level. So there is good cause for restricting students to a selection of leveled text for independent reading. However, as Renninger (1992) found, interest in the reading material enhances comprehension; therefore, students with high interest in a topic might be able to read more difficult material than an ability test might indicate. Conversely, students with little interest in a topic may demonstrate low comprehension of material that should be at an independent reading level for them. Hence, text leveling is not as formulaic as some reading programs suggest, and often readers are needlessly prohibited from reading high-interest material deemed too difficult for them to read independently.

*Students who struggle with reading need consistent feedback on their efforts, regardless of their achievement.*



Reading motivation is linked to setting goals and working toward those goals in an active, sustained manner (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996; Mosenthal, 1999). However, using the difficulty or reading level of a book, the number of words a book contains, or a student's performance on an objective comprehension test to calculate "points" in a competitive system does not accurately reflect progress and does little to inspire students. Subjected to this approach, a low-ability student who is working very hard will still not achieve a point score equivalent to her or his high-ability counterpart. Without acknowledging such a student's effort, it is easy to see why she or he would become discouraged and avoid further engagement in reading. Point systems have not proven to alleviate the disparity in reading practice times. In one study of a competitive reading program, participant readers in the top 5 percent of ability levels read 144 times more than those in the bottom 5 percent (Paul, 1996). Hence, neither reading volume nor motivation was positively impacted for those students most in need.

There is no simple method teachers can use to spur students to read more. Threats of failure or retention are as ineffective as extrinsic rewards (like points) in that they manufacture compliance rather than result in engagement. Instead, teachers may want to take suggestions from researchers and from the standards produced by the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association to foster motivation through a variety of more subtle behaviors, such as modeling reading, creating print-rich environments, encouraging word play, helping students set clear and specific goals,

providing effective feedback on their efforts, and teaching self-regulation strategies (Langer, 1999; Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999; National Council of Teachers of English and International Reading Association, 1996; National Research Council, 1998).

Based on their work developing principles for creating a classroom conducive to increasing motivation and implementing those principles in classrooms (using five experimental classrooms and five control classrooms), Guthrie and Alao (1997) suggest teachers may enhance motivation by

- using conceptual themes,
- providing real-world experiences and personal connections, and
- encouraging collaboration and discussion among students.

Teachers can also provide students a diverse selection of texts from which to choose. Texts should be culturally relevant and should target students' different interests and reading levels. This is especially important for struggling adolescent readers, who might need low-level, high-interest books. These books provide comprehensible text with topics more relevant to the adolescent, such as those that target differing cultures; deal with hardships or crises, death, and heroism; or include modern-day humor. Literature for teens should also target their stages of literary appreciation, which might include living vicariously through the book character's life, seeing characters who resemble themselves, or confronting philosophical issues of life (Carlsen, 1974; Early, 1960).

Ultimately, what motivates students to spend a lot of time reading are the same things that motivate people everywhere to engage in certain behaviors: They see a real-world value in the behavior, it provides pleasure, it is a means to a worthy end, or all three. Extrinsic controls may give the illusion of increased reading motivation, but it is fleeting at best. To be successful readers, students must develop a desire to spend their own time outside of school reading an hour or two a day. That kind of desire cannot be cultivated through any one simple program or approach. Instead, teachers need to constantly, subtly, creatively invite children into the world of literacy.

*continued on page 17*

## Tips for Motivating Students

Here are suggestions for motivating students that author Deborah Reed has used and drawn from numerous sources.

- Offer students choice in their reading materials.
- Arouse curiosity of books by previewing them with students, activating students' prior knowledge, connecting the book to students' lives or to popular culture, and helping students make predictions about possible outcomes.
- Allow students to respond to their reading through discussion with both peers and adults, through reflective writing, or both.
- Frequently and explicitly model reading, responding, and monitoring comprehension.
- Reduce the number of activities associated with the book to focus more on the reading itself and foster an aesthetic stance (as opposed to an efferent stance where students read to carry away information).

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# Adolescent Literacy

## *Beyond English Class, Beyond Decoding Text*

By Mary Neuman and Sanjiv Rao

**Editor's Note:** This article is reprinted with permission from *Voices in Urban Education* (Winter/Spring 2004). *Voices in Urban Education* is a journal published by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University — Robert Rothman, editor.

A respected, highly skilled practitioner in a large urban school system recently shared her observations on adolescent literacy issues in her district: “Not many high schools are willing to look into the core work of teaching reading, writing, and other forms of literacy as part of the everyday life of the student and the school. Of those that do, most only seem willing to look at reading—and that’s not enough.”

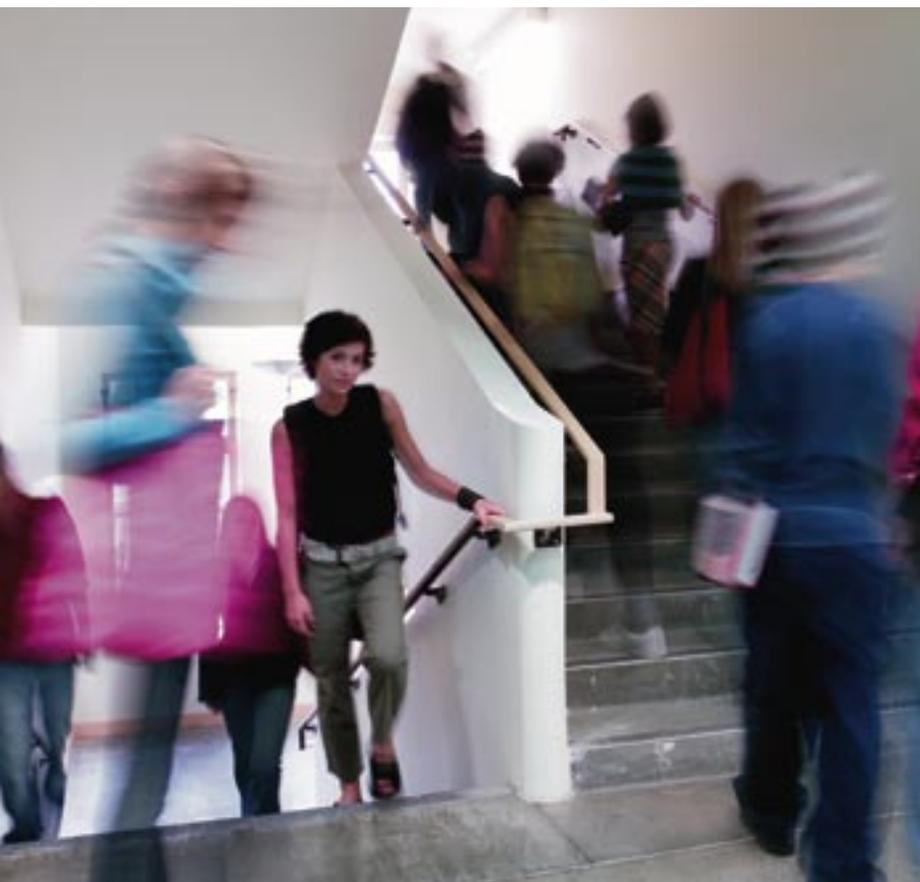
There is little dispute that the state of adolescent literacy is a problem. As commentators in education journals and newspapers and on television and radio continue to point out, many schools and districts are

failing to help all students become literate. Despite (or, some would argue, because of) the implementation of a bewildering variety of programs—many focused specifically on literacy—far too many students leave their educational experience disengaged and unprepared to meet the demands of higher education and the world of work, much less the loftier goals of education: to participate effectively in one’s community, make informed choices, and contribute to cultural well-being.

Yet, as the urban practitioner quoted above suggests, how schools view literacy—and how they view their responsibility for developing it—go a long way toward explaining these results. Many students require significant support in order to develop their literacy skills, but often teachers do not feel competent or adequately prepared to address those needs. In fact, though the vast majority of educators have the best of intentions, some secondary educators still feel it is the responsibility of the English teachers alone to solve literacy problems; others believe literacy is irrelevant to teaching in the content areas.

Moreover, schools and school systems too often limit reform efforts to some version of “breaking the code of texts,” to the exclusion of the complex communicative, functional, and socially embedded characteristics of literacy. According to the groundbreaking work of Paulo Freire (1970), reading and speaking the word is inseparable from engaging with the world.

To be sure, this broader view of literacy frequently bumps up against the political, fiscal, and policy realities of classroom life. Traditional high schools are ill equipped to integrate literacy instruction across the curriculum or to address much beyond basic decoding skills. Fortunately, though, reform efforts are paying increasing attention to adolescent learners and moving toward small schools and small learning communities in an effort to create relevant, rigorous, meaningful learning structures for students.



## What Is Literacy?

What exactly do we mean when we talk about literacy? Should literacy be narrowly defined as being able to read (i.e., decode and comprehend) a text, thereby risking a restrictive definition that excludes many aspects and assets of disciplines, students, and communities? Or should literacy be broadly conceived so as to include communication, technological literacy, mathematical literacy, scientific literacy, and the like, thereby risking a dilution of the concept that diminishes its power? We contend that these varied notions are not mutually exclusive, but rather embedded in each other. Colin Lankshear (1998) has established a framework that views literacy in three interrelated dimensions: “operational,” or breaking the code of texts; “cultural,” or participating in the meaning of texts and using texts functionally; and “critical,” or critically analyzing and transforming texts.

In our view, effective literacy also involves engaging with and creating a range of texts, building on the languages, experiences, cultures, and other assets of students, and communicating and expressing understanding in multiple ways, both independently and with others.

The traditional view of literacy as decoding and comprehending texts is too limited. For one thing, it is difficult to separate these basic skills from the broader purposes of literacy; making meaning and engaging with texts is integral to comprehension. As one Southern California high school student put it: “I do my homework every night. I sit and I find myself drifting away from the story. I can read it—I just don’t get it.” Like many adolescents, this student needs to be taught overtly the necessary strategies to connect with and make sense of the text in order to comprehend it.

In addition, without acknowledging literacy as a complex set of skills and practices rooted in social contexts, culture, and language, schools fail to provide equitable learning opportunities for young people. The creation of meaning involves social and cultural practices that enable teachers to meet the needs of every student, regardless of background. Moreover, literacy is not an end in itself but a means to empower young people to analyze and create all kinds of texts. To paraphrase Freire, the value of literacy is realized not merely through the ability to read and write, but through an individual’s ability to employ those skills in order to navigate, shape, and be an agent for his or her own life, as well as through the ability to change one’s knowledge, self, and situation through the use of texts (EDC, 2000).

Teaching literacy in this broad sense requires explicit instruction. In particular, metacognitive

skills—the ability to analyze and think about our own thinking—help good readers construct meaning. These strategies might include rereading the paragraph, using context clues, predicting, summarizing, connecting the text to prior knowledge, discussing and interpreting texts in collaborative groups, and asking questions of ourselves and others about text content and the reading and writing process. For example, a teacher might read a passage aloud to her class, articulating the questions, thought processes, and connections to her prior knowledge she is thinking about as she reads. One student defined this process as helping him “see into the teacher’s mind.” In turn, students are able to monitor their own thinking as they engage with texts.

## Literacy Across the Curriculum

An appropriately broad view of literacy also recognizes that literacy is the province of all content areas, not just English language arts. Literacy development in the content areas is critical to students’ literacy development in high school. It helps students engage with contextualized, meaningful material that leads to learning to understand academic texts and navigate the situations they will find outside the classroom walls.

Students need to be explicitly taught how to strategically and critically read a science textbook, a primary document in history, a Shakespearean sonnet, and a word problem in mathematics. Each of these texts requires a different set of strategies for attacking the text. They are written in different genres, with specific vocabulary, and they all have their own pattern of discourse that needs to be unlocked and deconstructed for students.

Beyond this “breaking of the code,” however, students must also engage in doing the work of science, history, and mathematics and expressing their learning in oral, written, and visual forms. For example, a student of science learns how to inquire, investigate, construct, solve problems, and interpret. In reading a science text, students need to think like scientists by learning how to ask meaningful questions, determine what they know, develop questions to perform related investigations, construct and interpret data, and decide the difference between fact and fiction. These habits of mind need to be taught explicitly, simultaneously with the content.

The challenge of developing literacy across the curriculum is particularly acute for English-language learners, who are learning a second language even as they learn different subject areas. Too often, school systems lack the appropriate structures, knowledge,

*Traditional high schools are ill equipped to integrate literacy instruction across the curriculum or to address much beyond basic decoding skills.*

*I am sick and tired of what we do in our ESL classes. We are always going to the supermarket, as if all we did in life was eat. . . . I need to get ready for other classes.*

and supports to meet the diverse educational needs of these students and understand the diverse educational and cultural contexts from which they come. The range of educational backgrounds and skills within a school or classroom among those learning to speak, read, and write English is immense. Some come from war-torn countries with little schooling while others are quite fluent and literate in their native tongue. Yet teachers often fail to capitalize on students' backgrounds in order to teach them to be literate effectively. As one 16-year-old Salvadoran girl said:

I am sick and tired of what we do in our ESL classes. We are always going shopping to the supermarket, as if all we did in life was eat . . . . I need to get ready for the other classes. I am lost in World History, for example. Why can't we study something like this in ESL? (Walqui, 2000, p. 87)

At the same time, teachers need to recognize that English-language learners' struggles with English do not necessarily reflect their understanding of the content. Consider this comment from a tenth grader originally from Mexico:

Sometimes it is hard for me to do things because of my English. There are times when I feel a lot of pressure because I want to say something, but I don't know how to say it. There are many times when the teacher is asking questions; I know the answer, but I'm afraid that people might laugh at me. (Walqui, 2000, p. 86)

Although many high schools have yet to take up the challenge of addressing literacy across the curriculum, some important efforts are under way. At one high school, for example, the principal presented to the entire school community an annual state-of-the-school report, including the school's literacy data. After the community examined the data, the principal asked all participants how they were going to increase the opportunities to engage in meaningful literacy tasks and the overall quality of the resulting work for their students. The expectation was that it was everyone's responsibility, and the solution was co-created by the staff and administration. The principal shared this data with all of her stakeholder groups, revisiting the data frequently. Teachers learned new strategies and shared them with department colleagues and, increasingly, in interdisciplinary teams. The school has begun to address the quality of the teaching and learning in all content areas.

## Making Literacy Relevant to Students' Lives

Other schools are taking the instructional approach of connecting literacy to students' lives. All of us, as educators, know of students who have literacy skills but who lose interest in reading and other literacy tasks and have difficulty engaging with the school-based curriculum. We recognize these struggling, disengaged readers and writers through their body language—bodies slumped down, hoods pulled over their heads, little eye contact. Well aware of their struggles, these students send us strong messages: "It doesn't matter!" or "This is boring."

Teachers can help students overcome these attitudes by getting to know the students well and connecting their interests and experiences to appropriate texts. They can also draw connections between real-world situations and the literacy demands of particular courses. As young people struggle with issues of independence, autonomy, and identity, it is all the more important that school-based literacy activities in every discipline are relevant—and that the learning happens by doing the work, not just reading about it. This is not to say that interesting material is sufficient; while we help students to understand texts at their grade level, we must also provide the necessary supports—time and access to master readers, writers, and content specialists (i.e., their teachers)—for students and teachers to meet increasingly high standards.

Another approach involves learning what the students and families of a school community walk into the school building with. Students, particularly adolescents, navigate, are shaped by, and learn from the world of work, home, language, community, and youth culture on a daily basis. Teachers who ask the right questions, rather than simply look for the right answers, are the ones who truly learn what their students know, what they are learning and how well, and how to change their teaching practice to maximize their students' learning opportunities. Like other approaches, learning and taking into account students' backgrounds requires the willingness on the part of educators to learn about, take stock of, and broaden the thinking about what counts as literacy learning and what it takes to support effective literacy development.

The efforts to engage students and their families need not be the sole responsibility of schools. After-school programs and learning outside of school nurture the academic and social development of youth. The structures and organization of such programs can help inform the ways in which teachers and schools rethink their own practice. Recent research by Kris Gutiérrez has shown the

sophisticated ways literacy learning can take place in after-school settings, even for those students who typically struggle in school (Hull & Schultz, 2002). In addition, teachers can inform themselves about these structures and learning opportunities by visiting, observing, and thinking about the learning that students engage in every day in their jobs, in community centers, in athletics, and the like. Reflecting on our own experiences in such settings, we find it difficult to deny the real, rigorous, creative kinds of literacy—from communication to analysis to expression—that takes place in such settings.

## A Community of Learners

To teach adolescents well and equitably, literacy development must be every teacher's responsibility. Some high school teachers do not see it as their responsibility, while others have not been taught how to teach reading comprehension, much less approaches to tap into students' rich linguistic, cultural, and community assets to create the bridge between what students already know and what they are expected to master in school. Still it is important to note that many teachers are learning how to use and teach a range of literacy approaches in their content areas. By becoming aware of the strategies they use to read difficult content and respond in multiple ways to a variety of texts in the workplace and in their own lives, teachers are learning how to teach students how to navigate hard-to-understand material. The expectation that each adult on the campus is responsible for the literacy skills of all students needs to become part of every school's culture and norms. No structural change can be successful unless the educators leading the efforts are continuously improving their own capacity to teach every student well and equitably.

Beyond instructional approaches and building knowledge, however, effective literacy teaching and learning requires sufficient time, appropriate physical space, sensible school structures, appropriate student placement and grouping patterns, attention to the habits of effective readers, writers, and thinkers, and actively committed, caring, adult learners who learn from, with, and about their students. For example, this may mean providing "intervention" classes in addition to grade-level classes. Students do not have enough time in a 50-minute period to close their gaps in literacy. The additional class time could allow explicit teaching of strategies, which students could use to catch up with their peers in the regular class. Ideally, within a school setting, all teachers would be incorporating these strategies across the curriculum. But to make that happen, schools need supports at the classroom, school, district, and community

level; a willingness to think creatively about how to organize and structure learning and its requisite supports; and a commitment to improvement at scale.

As educators, we can't fail any of our students. The approaches we describe may not be the only answers. But our challenge is to recognize the problem—and the role all of us play in its solution. Schools have an enormous role, and, at this point, schools have not done enough.

But important changes are under way. We hope we can look back in a few years and see that young people possess the skills, knowledge, and stamina necessary to become lifelong independent readers of, and actors in, the word and their world.

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*The expectation that each adult on the campus is responsible for the literacy skills of all students needs to become part of every school's culture and norms.*

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# Building Literacy

## *Word by Word*

By Pamela Porter

**Vo·cab·u·lar·y:** A sum or stock of words employed by a language, group, individual, or work or in a field of knowledge.

*The more we learn about teaching, the better the students do.*

Bobbie Stratton,  
Algodones Elementary  
School

This familiar, five-syllable noun appears to be one of the keys to unlocking student achievement—and increasing self-esteem—for two schools in New Mexico’s Bernalillo Public Schools that have been struggling to increase reading comprehension and pull state-mandated assessment scores out of the “teens” with the help of Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) professionals.

And it has been a challenge, especially since the diverse student population includes a high percentage of American Indian and Hispanic students, several of whom have been exposed to little, if any, English by the time they begin school. Their world is centered in the rural valley, mesa, and mountain landscape of New Mexico that borders bustling Albuquerque and historic, tourist-filled Santa Fe. But many of these children are shy, never having ventured far from their close-knit families and villages, and they could easily become lost in what they perceive to be an intimidating educational system.

After partnerships with Algodones Elementary School and Bernalillo Middle School were established in 2001 and 2002, respectively, SEDL program associate Ann Neeley, who is the site coordinator for Bernalillo, teamed up with a SEDL reading specialist to regularly visit the schools. They began the cyclic process of obtaining input from educators, parents, and community members; collecting data; setting priorities and identifying a problem; developing strategies to help students overcome that problem; providing professional development opportunities; monitoring teacher and student progress; reviewing data from the monitoring process; and having come full circle,

Marcus Garcia and Keenan Rednose place bookmarks for their fifth-grade class on a wall display at Algodones Elementary School. Each bookmark represents a book read and reported on by a student in the class.



identifying the next concern that requires attention.

“The beginning was rough. We had four administrators in six years, and everyone was in a survival mode,” recalls LaTricia Mathis, literacy coach for the 157-student Algodones Elementary School. “When SEDL came in, we saw that we needed to get our ducks in a row, but we didn’t even know we had ducks!”

A principal who stayed and recognized the necessity for a cohesive plan of action is Judy Casaus, who appreciates SEDL’s expertise and consistently supports her dedicated staff. She enabled development of a plan that has “turned this school around,” according to Mathis. That plan focuses on literacy—currently emphasizing vocabulary—in order to ultimately increase student understanding in all fields of study. Educators in both schools have included an oral language component in the curriculum that helps Native American students (who are raised speaking Keres—the sacred and unwritten language of the Pueblo Indians) learn the complexities of English. Mathis calls this oral component “absolutely critical for our Native students.”

“I cannot believe how we went from everyone doing his own thing to this level of collaboration,” Casaus says. Previously, “our teachers weren’t even looking at the data, but by the second year of working with SEDL, we just started flying.” The SEDL support “is what kept us going.” The principal points out that she and the staff appreciate the critical need for ongoing dialog. She praises her teachers’ level of commitment, noting that one summer most of them devoted two hard weeks of unpaid time to hammer out a process that would work for the school. As a result, “achievement is going up.”

Neeley is also pleased with the gains made at the elementary school. During her initial visits, there was an apparent lack of direction, with little tracking of students or addressing of their individual needs. “When I walk in that school now, I see reading is important. I see organization. Teachers have created data notebooks on each student, and they can see how the data relates to teaching and the standards,” she says. The site coordinator smiles as she describes walls now crowded with student essays and reading accomplishments: “It is not the same place. Teachers are planning more cohesively and study groups reflect that. . . .this is a growing, learning community.”

Interviews with Algodones staff reveal an optimism that is pervasive throughout the school. Several point to the administration’s emphasis on professional development, policies of inclusion, and the sharing of information as contributing factors in this progress.



“We have been working on breaking barriers,” notes first-grade teacher Bobbie Stratton, “and the more we learn about teaching, the better the students do.” Stratton enjoys the small-school environment, in which everyone shares concern for each child. “This staff is really good about meeting student needs; we have assessments in place to see what students need to be working on.” When they are evaluated as being at risk,” she says, “we assess more, . . . and really use those results and benchmarks to drive curriculum. Through working with SEDL, we have made a difference. And we can continue after the association ends because we know what we’re doing now.”

Diane Mechego, an educational aide with 27 years of experience, relishes the professional development opportunities she has been offered in the past few years at Algodones Elementary School. She believes that her exposure to the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) and information presented at other workshops has made her appreciate her role in the teaching process much more.

“If we understand the goals, we can be productive,” Mechego says. A member of the nearby Santa Ana Pueblo and a native Keres speaker, she understands the obstacles her students face: “Communication skills and vocabulary are just not there. These students haven’t been exposed to the English language, and transitioning from Keres thought to English thought is very difficult for them.” But she celebrates even the small achievements of

**SEDL program associate Stacey Joyner works with Brenda Chavez, one of three literacy coaches at Bernalillo Middle School.**

her group of at-risk students, whom she continues to teach as they advance to the next grade level.

Literacy coach LaTricia Mathis believes in letting all parents know exactly where their young students stand in terms of skills mastery; she provides older students with the same kind of information about themselves. If a fourth grader is reading at a second-grade level, that information is shared, and is often an eye-opening experience for parents. Most appreciate this candor and often make an effort to encourage reading at home.

It is obvious that something is working at Algodones Elementary School, where fifth graders in line for lunch examine how the competition is shaping up for the month's book-reading contest. They ask their teacher why the 49 books their class has read in the past 10 days are not posted on the colorful display that stretches down the hallway. Students who used to complain, "Library is boring," or ask librarian Teresa Miller "Are you almost done?" as she was reading a story, now gather to check out books when she arrives at school early each morning.

She sees anywhere from 18 to 53 eager readers daily now. And test scores continue to rise. In each grade level, Mathis points out growing numbers of students now classified as proficient in the New Mexico Public Education Department Accountability Report. Indeed, this year Algodones met Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) goals. Student proficiency in reading increased from 35.29 percent in school year 2002–2003 to 40 percent in 2003–2004.

Several miles south at Bernalillo Middle School, teachers are making similar gains in their efforts to promote literacy through vocabulary building. The percentage of middle school students proficient in reading rose from 43.26 percent in 2002–2003 to 48.19 percent in 2003–2004.

Principal Allan Tapia and his trio of literacy coaches—Brenda Chavez, Jody Marinucci, and Matt Montañó—huddle over a calendar with Ann Neeley and SEDL program associate Stacey Joyner to block

**Algodones Elementary School teacher Bobbie Stratton shows her class how to read a tape measure.**



time before the school year ends for classroom visits and ongoing meetings with the SEDL staff, each other, and language arts teachers at the 600-student school. They work to adjust their crowded schedules to accommodate the amount of work left to do before the partnership ends in May of 2005.

Neeley emphasizes that Tapia's is one of the few secondary schools that incorporates the literacy-coach concept for bettering student reading and comprehension. "And he did it with absolutely no money," she says, explaining that the principal did not receive funding for a new position, but called on three of his English teachers to each devote an hour of their days to become coaches.

Exactly what does a literacy coach do? Bernalillo Middle School teachers are learning that he or she becomes a mentor for teachers and provides continued, on-the-job training and guidance so

**Bernalillo Middle School principal Allan Tapia helps one of his students. His philosophy is "Bottom line—the instructor makes the difference."**

**SEDL program associates Stacey Joyner and Ann Neeley review data with Bernalillo Middle School literacy coach Matt Montano.**





**Bernalillo literacy coach Jody Marinucci models a lesson for one of the middle school teachers.**

all can become effective reading teachers. They concentrate on theory underlying instruction, demonstration of activities, observation of teachers practicing new lessons, feedback on instruction, and supporting collaboration among teachers. But never do they evaluate teachers. Instead, they provide a safe atmosphere in which to improve instruction.

This fits right into Tapia's philosophy of, "Bottom line: the instructor makes the difference. Delivery of instruction is what's most important." Studies support this reasoning and reveal that if students receive two years of reading instruction from strong, highly qualified, and informed teachers, they develop into successful readers, even if there is little parental reinforcement in the home.

He also maintains that students rise to the level of expectation, and these days, Bernalillo Middle School "has definitely raised the bar." Tapia resolves to keep expectations high and says, "For many years we were sympathetic because of the level of poverty. We thought we were doing students a favor by not demanding they complete homework because they may have to go home after school and spend hours working—for example, chopping wood or baby-

sitting." But, he stresses, "the key to their future is education."

The three literacy coaches have also applied their newfound knowledge to their own classrooms. Marinucci's students are engaged and eager to participate during a discussion of the different sounds vowel and consonant combinations make, which will ultimately improve writing and spelling skills. She challenges students when they make mistakes and encourages others in the class to point out errors in the fast-paced lesson, during which she is constantly keeping students on track and correcting small behavior problems before they escalate. With energy and enthusiasm still high, Marinucci directs her students' attention to a side board, where they identify and discuss prepositional phrases. The teacher makes sure all students understand the material before moving on. She says, "I have learned so much in my work with SEDL—and there is so much more to learn!"

Stacey Joyner, a reading specialist at SEDL, provides teaching materials to these literacy coaches in the Bernalillo Public Schools and offers suggestions on how to help students

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overcome vocabulary stumbling blocks. One of the publications SEDL reading specialists produced, “Effective Instructional Strategies for Vocabulary Development,” outlines general and specific methods shown to increase word usage and comprehension. A popular, but outdated, method that does little in mastering the approximately 88,000 words required for reading at a ninth-grade level is the copying of definitions from the dictionary, followed by a quiz at the end of the week. As Joyner explains, “It provides only surface-level meaning and often without supporting context.”

She suggests other strategies to build vocabulary, both incidentally, through reading and conversation, and directly, by focusing on direct instruction of words or word-learning strategies to extend meaning, gain information from context, teach word parts, and practice, encourage, and reinforce vocabulary knowledge.

Gains he’s seen in language skills “really lift my spirits,” Bernalillo Middle School literacy coach Matt Montaña says. “Now I access data to impact my teaching, and Ann and Stacey have provided me with information so we can use that data to improve as teachers. They are resources I never expected to have, and they encourage me to be a true leader, respected among my colleagues because of my knowledge.”

Leadership is indeed important, agrees Algodones elementary school principal Judy Casaus. For her, SEDL provided just the boost she needed to “look at the whole picture” and become the guide her staff needed in the challenging process of school improvement. “There has to be consistency there,” she maintains, “and you need to follow through on everything or else things can fall through the cracks.”

Principals at both these Bernalillo schools, armed with the knowledge that aligning curriculum, assessment, and instruction is vital for student achievement, feel confident that they will be able to continue their efforts, even without SEDL’s regular visits. “We know the lines of communication will remain open,” Allan Tapia says, referring not only to SEDL staff, but also to all involved in the ongoing effort to promote literacy.

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## Motivating Students to Read,

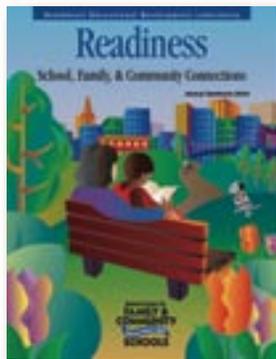
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# Early Experience in School Sets the Stage for Later School Success



*Readiness: School, Family, & Community Connections* is available online at <http://www.sedl.org/connections> or may be ordered from SEDL's publications department by calling 800-476-6861.

Children's earliest experiences in school often set the pattern for later academic success, according to the latest Southwest Educational Laboratory (SEDL) research synthesis.

"Young children enter kindergarten with a range of cognitive and social skills that contribute to their achievement during kindergarten," says Catherine Jordan, director of SEDL's National Center for Family & Community Connections with Schools. "According to our new synthesis of research studies related to school readiness, children who get off to a good start in kindergarten tend to maintain that advantage as they progress through school."

Jordan explains, "This finding points out the importance of readiness as a strategy for helping to close the achievement gap. In other words, the research suggests that the achievement gap starts early and persists. Our challenge is to find strategies that can help all children to experience that critical early success."

The research synthesis, *Readiness: School, Family, & Community Connections*, was written by SEDL program associate Martha Boethel and published in December. The report synthesizes information from 48 research studies and literature reviews—all published since 1998 and included correlational, experimental, and quasi-experimental studies—to answer three questions:

- What is known about differences in children's skills and performance at kindergarten entry and the contextual factors associated with those differences?
- What is known about early childhood or preschool interventions that include family or community components?
- What is known about children's transition to kindergarten, including transition beliefs and practices and patterns of family-school interactions?

The studies indicate that a variety of factors contribute to children's readiness for kindergarten, according to Jordan. "For example, the home environment is strongly associated with children's early skills and abilities," she says. "Though we still have a lot to learn about what works, there is evidence that early interventions not only can help children directly, they can also help families develop more effective supports for their young children's learning."

She notes, "Many of these findings aren't new, but they confirm previous research and lend support to the work of the National Center and other organizations focused on strengthening home and school connections and educating families and communities about their roles in their children's education. Other findings in the synthesis give us insight into needs for future research—we still have a lot to learn about the relationships among children, schools, families, and communities and how they affect young children's success in school."

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