

POLICY ISSUE BRIEF: COMPREHENSIVE LITERACY EDUCATION

Issue at a Glance

Research has consistently found that a high-quality, literacy-rich environment is an important prerequisite for academic success. This is especially true in early childhood when children are developing the foundation for future learning. Research also shows that children from low-income families are less likely to have access to literacy-rich environments.

According to the National Literacy Institute, approximately 40% of students across the nation cannot read at a basic level, and almost 70% of fourth graders from low-income families cannot read at a basic level. Additionally, the need for ongoing support, collaboration with parents and communities, and the integration of social-emotional learning (SEL) programs into the curriculum are crucial components of a comprehensive approach.

According to “A Double Dose of Disadvantage: Language Experiences for Low-Income Children in Home and School,” published in 2017 in the *Journal of Educational Psychology*, children living in concentrated poverty were more likely to experience language of more limited complexity and diversity in both home and kindergarten contexts as compared to children living in communities on the poverty borderline. In addition, children from low-income communities attended kindergartens that oversimplified language for students. Teachers there offered limited language opportunities such as simpler sentences, less varied vocabulary, and fewer unique word types, potentially oversimplifying their language for students. Even before children entered kindergarten, a significant achievement gap in literacy and mathematics was observed on the basis of their socioeconomic status, race, and ethnicity. Children need a more expansive approach to intervention in language-building instruction to overcome these early disadvantages.

The challenges become greater as children enter and progress through elementary, middle level, and high school. Literacy instruction has been historically seen as an exclusively elementary school issue. Extensive state and federal investments have been made at the elementary level, which resulted in increased National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) reading scores for grades 4 and 8 from 1992 to 2022. But in the wake of the pandemic, scores decreased in 2022 and 2024. Reading scores for grade 12 have similarly fallen in the most recent post-pandemic assessments. The assumption has been that once students learn the mechanics of reading and writing in the early grades, they have the foundation for further literacy comprehension, writing, and critical thinking skills (i.e., reading to learn).

Unfortunately, less attention and investment have been focused on the literacy needs of middle level and high school students to ensure that they maintain the progress made at the elementary school level. A lack of continued resources for the federal Reading First program and underinvestment in the Comprehensive

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State Literacy Development program has also caused many school systems to eliminate positions for reading teachers and literacy coaches at both the middle and high school levels.

Compounding this issue is that the literacy demands for middle level and high school students are more complex and fundamentally different from elementary grades. For example, at the secondary level, word, sentence, and structural complexity increases, and reading texts and assignments are longer and vary significantly across academic content. In addition, the comprehension and application of increasingly complex concepts and graphic illustrations at the secondary level become essential to understanding content.

Furthermore, middle level and high schools often have not focused on integrating literacy instruction across content areas. Secondary school teachers need professional development to embed literacy instruction in their content areas and to find appropriate level texts to differentiate instruction for their students and ensure that they receive continued literacy instruction and support as they progress through the middle level and high school grades.

Schools are also continuing to see a large percentage of children who speak a language other than English at home. In 2024, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that figure was approximately 23%. With an influx of English language learners (ELL) at all levels of education, a comprehensive approach to the literacy needs of all students is necessary.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), there are at least 5 million ELLs in U.S. public schools. Since at least 2002, an achievement gap has persisted between non-ELL and ELL students, which indicates the need to integrate academic language development and content learning for students from various demographic and ethnic backgrounds.

National Principals Association Position

- National Principals Association believes in equitable educational opportunities for all students, regardless of language, cultural background, race, or socioeconomic status, and we are committed to being a major voice in supporting school leaders in their efforts to address literacy education.
- National Principals Association believes that a focused and sustained effort to invest resources in comprehensive literacy education at the local, state, and federal levels is needed to address the issue at hand.
- Schools were historically designed to “teach to the middle.” There is now a responsibility to shift the mindsets and practices that target the majority of students to ones that address the learning, physical, and social-emotional needs of each student.
- School leaders have a responsibility to ensure teachers have timely access to curriculum materials and training; set clear expectations and ensure that teachers are meeting those expectations by conducting, or delegating to others to conduct, classroom observations; and ensure that teachers receive feedback on their practice and have access to professional development aligned with their areas of need.

Recommendations for Policymakers

- Invest significant resources into comprehensive literacy education at the local, state, and federal levels.
- Align literacy standards with subject standards, become clearinghouses for best practices in literacy, and recognize and publicize successful programs.
- Support school districts in the capacity building and implementation of college and career ready standards as they relate to literacy instruction.
- Build the capacity of districts and schools to meet the needs of students who read below grade level.
- Work with school districts to provide districtwide professional development opportunities that help middle level and high school teachers teach literacy.
- Acquire robust data systems that help schools measure individual student progress.
- Encourage schools of education to incorporate literacy training and instruction into teacher education programs for middle level and high school teachers.

Recommendations for District Leaders

- Make literacy—reading, writing, listening, and speaking—a long-term priority and a shared responsibility of all teachers at all levels.
- Acknowledge that secondary school teachers need additional capacity to successfully integrate literacy instruction into various content areas.
- Provide resources in the form of literacy/instructional coaches and tiered interventions.
- Provide meaningful, job-embedded, and ongoing professional development programs for school leaders and teachers on literacy education.
- Support school leaders and educators in implementing schoolwide literacy initiatives to address the specific literacy demands of middle level and high school curricula.
- Support families and communities to make reading a priority and reinforce the efforts of schools to improve student reading competency. District leaders should collaborate with community leaders to provide families with literacy opportunities when needed. Through such programs, families would build their own capacity to offer the best reading environment for their children.
- Encourage business leaders, who recognize the importance of having employees think critically and comprehend written material, to create partnerships with schools to help them implement successful literacy practices.

Recommendations for School Leaders

- Develop a Literacy Leadership Team.
- Create a collaborative environment that fosters sharing and learning.
- Develop a schoolwide organizational model that supports extended time for literacy instruction.
- Analyze diagnostic assessment data to determine specific learning needs of students.
- Develop a schoolwide plan to address the professional development needs of teachers.
- Create a realistic budget for literacy needs.
- Develop a broad understanding of literacy strategies that work in the content-area classes.
- Demonstrate commitment to literacy and literacy instruction.