Annotated Guide for Improving Adolescent Literacy: Effective Classroom and Intervention Practices

Purpose

This document was developed by the Agency of Education (AOE) to support supervisory unions and districts (SU/SDs), educators, and the Advisory Council on Literacy in performing their duties as defined in Act 28 of 2021. What follows is an annotated summary of Improving Adolescent Literacy: Effective Classroom and Intervention Practices from What Works Clearinghouse (WWC). This practice guide, as summarized below, is designed to help classroom teachers and specialists improve reading ability of adolescent students and contains recommended strategies to help students get more from reading tasks, increase motivation and engagement, and provide extra support to struggling readers.

Background

On page 1 of the guide, WWC states:

> *Although we draw on evidence about the effectiveness of specific practices in reading instruction, we use this information to make broader points about improving practice. In this guide we have tried to take findings from research or practices recommended by experts and describe how recommendations might actually unfold in school settings. In other words, we aim to provide sufficient detail so that educators will have a clear sense of the steps necessary to make use of the recommendations.*

Recommendations

The three recommendations that have the strongest evidence include:

- **Recommendation 1:** "Provide explicit vocabulary instruction" (7).
- **Recommendation 2:** "Provide direct and explicit comprehension strategy instruction" (7).
- **Recommendation 5:** "Make available intensive and individualized interventions for struggling readers that can be provided by trained specialist" (7).

Two recommendations with "moderate" evidence include:

- **Recommendation 3:** "Provide opportunities for extended discussion of text meaning and interpretation" (7).
- **Recommendation 4:** "Increase student motivation and engagement in literacy learning" (7).

Contact Information:

If you have questions about this document or would like additional information, please contact:

Emily Leute, Student Pathways Division, at emily.leute@vermont.gov.

More information about these recommendations can be found below, organized by level of evidence. A checklist to help educators implement these recommendations can be found on pages 9-10 of the guide.

Recommendations with the Strongest Evidence

Recommendation 1: Provide Explicit Vocabulary Instruction (pages 11-15)

Teachers should provide students with explicit vocabulary instruction both as part of reading and language arts classes and as part of content-area classes such as science and social studies. By giving students explicit instruction in vocabulary, teachers help them learn the meaning of new words and strengthen their independent skills of constructing the meaning of text. (11)

A summary of the evidence can be found on pages 11-13.

How to carry out the recommendation:

- "Dedicate a portion of the regular classroom lesson to explicit vocabulary instruction" (13).
- "Use repeated exposure to new words in multiple oral and written contexts and allow sufficient practice sessions" (13).
- "Give sufficient opportunities to use new vocabulary in a variety of contexts through activities such as discussion, writing, and extended reading" (14).
- "Provide students with strategies to make them independent vocabulary learners" (14).

Potential roadblocks and solutions can be found on pages 14-15, including a suggestion for how to select vocabulary words to teach.

Recommendation 2: Provide Direct and Explicit Comprehension Strategy Instruction (pages 16-20)

Teachers should provide adolescents with direct and explicit instruction in comprehension strategies to improve students' reading comprehension. Comprehension strategies are routines and procedures that readers use to help them make sense of texts. These strategies include, but are not limited to, summarizing, asking and answering questions, paraphrasing, and finding the main idea. Comprehension strategy instruction can also include specific teacher activities that have been demonstrated to improve students' comprehension of texts. Asking students questions and using graphic organizers are examples of such strategies. Direct and explicit teaching involves a teacher modeling and providing explanations of the specific strategies students are learning, giving guided practice and feedback on the use of the strategies, and promoting independent practice to apply the strategies. An important part of comprehension strategy instruction is the active participation of students in the comprehension process. In addition, explicit instruction involves providing a sufficient amount of support, or scaffolding, to students as they learn the strategies to ensure success. (16)

A summary of the evidence can be found on pages 16-18.

Annotated Guide for Improving Adolescent   Page **2** of **7**
Literacy: Effective Classroom and
Intervention Practices
(Revised: August 26, 2022)

VERMONT
AGENCY OF EDUCATION

How to carry out the recommendation:

- "Select carefully the text to use when first beginning to teach a given strategy" (18).
- "Show students how to apply the strategies they are learning to different texts, not just to one text" (18).
- "Ensure that the text is appropriate for the reading level of students" (18).
- "Use direct and explicit instruction for teaching students how to use comprehension strategies" (18-19).
- "Provide the appropriate amount of guided practice depending on the difficulty level of the strategies that the students are learning" (19).
- "When teaching comprehension strategies, make sure students understand that the goal is to understand the content of the text" (19).

Potential roadblocks and solutions can be found on pages 19-20, including what to do if teachers don't feel prepared to explicitly teach reading strategies:

Most teacher education programs do not prepare preservice teachers to teach strategies. In addition, teachers may find it particularly challenging to model their own thinking by providing think-aloud of how they use strategies as they read. Many teachers use various strategies automatically as they read and are not aware of how they use the strategies they are teaching. Professional development in direct and explicit instruction of comprehension strategies will assist all teachers, including language arts and content-area teachers, in learning how to teach strategies. One component of professional development should be coaching teachers in the classroom as they teach. In addition, it is often helpful for teachers to practice thinking aloud on their own. They can take a text and practice explaining how they would go about summarizing the text or finding the main idea. Teachers will need to become conscious of many of the reading processes that are automatic for them. (19)

Recommendation 5: Make Available Intensive and Individualized Interventions for Struggling Readers that Can Be Provided by Trained Specialists (pages 31-36)

Some adolescents need more support to increase literacy skills than regular classroom teachers can provide. Students who are unable to meet grade-level standards in literacy often require supplemental, intensive, and individualized reading intervention to improve their skills. Such interventions are most often provided by reading specialists or teachers who have undergone thorough training to help them understand the program or approach they will use and to deepen their understanding of adolescent struggling readers. The purpose of intensive interventions is to accelerate literacy development so that students are able to make substantial progress toward accomplishing reading tasks appropriate for their current grade level. Placement in interventions is often a two-step process, beginning with an initial screening assessment to identify those students who need extra help. This step should be followed by assessment with diagnostic tests to provide a profile of literacy strengths and weaknesses. Because the cause of adolescents' difficulties in reading may differ from student to student, interventions may focus on any of the critical elements of knowledge and skill required for the comprehension of complex texts. These elements include: fundamental skills such as phonemic awareness, phonemic decoding, and other word analysis skills that support word reading accuracy; text reading fluency; strategies for

VERMONT
AGENCY OF EDUCATION

building vocabulary; strategies for understanding and using the specific textual features that distinguish different genres; and self-regulated use of reading comprehension strategies. Determining students' skill levels, helping students learn specific reading strategies, and providing intensive and individualized instruction appear to be especially promising methods for improving the outcomes of struggling readers. For example, students who have difficulty using the skills needed to recognize words need different intervention than do students whose primary deficits are figuring out the meaning of unfamiliar words or comprehension of extended prose. (31)

A summary of the evidence can be found on pages 31-34.

How to carry out the recommendation:

- "Although classroom teachers can sometimes pinpoint students' learning needs by using informal assessment tools or even observation, a more reliable method for identifying struggling readers includes use of an initial screening test or a threshold score on a required reading test and subsequent use of a diagnostic reading test that must be administered, scored, and interpreted by a specialist" (34).
- "The identification of students' learning needs should be followed by the selection of an intervention that provides an explicit instructional focus targeted to meet those needs" 34-35).
- "Even though explicit strategy instruction and various forms of structuring effective strategy instruction show promise, it also seems clear that many struggling readers require more intensive efforts than do students who are performing at or near grade level" (35).
- "Additionally, intensive interventions might involve repeated reading, provision of adjunct questions to scaffold comprehension, and questioning for understanding to improve the reading outcomes of adolescents" (35).

Potential roadblocks and solutions can be found on pages 35-36, including how to support teachers who "do not possess the information or skills needed to teach reading and do not believe that it is their job to teach reading strategies":

Content-area teachers should not be responsible for carrying out intensive interventions for struggling readers. However, content-area teachers can be taught to use strategies designed to make content-area texts more accessible to all students, including those who struggle with literacy. Professional development sessions that provide clear, easy-to-understand information about the extent of the reading difficulties that students experience and about the steps that all teachers can take to address students' problems emphasize that a school faculty as a whole has responsibilities for meeting the needs of all students. Professional development, which needs to acknowledge the demands of all content areas, can include the modeling and reinforcement of effective strategies to increase students' abilities to comprehend their textbooks and other resource materials. Content-area teachers can use teaching aids and devices that will help struggling readers better understand and remember the content they are teaching. For instance, graphic organizers, organizing themes, and guided discussions can help students understand and master the curriculum content. If schoolwide coordination is achieved through professional development,

VERMONT
AGENCY OF EDUCATION

common planning periods, and informal opportunities for teachers to collaborate and communicate across the content areas, teachers can more easily provide mutually reinforcing reading opportunities to better prepare students to meet identified standards in all areas. Ideally, content-area teachers should work with language arts teachers, literacy specialists, and other content-area teachers to provide coherent and consistent instruction that enables students to succeed in reading across the curriculum. (36)

Recommendations with "Moderate Evidence"

Recommendation 3: Provide Opportunities for Extended Discussion of Text Meaning and Interpretation (pages 21-25)

Teachers should provide opportunities for students to engage in high-quality discussions of the meaning and interpretation of texts in various content areas as one important way to improve their reading comprehension. These discussions can occur in whole classroom groups or in small student groups under the general guidance of the teacher. Discussions that are particularly effective in promoting students' comprehension of complex text are those that focus on building a deeper understanding of the author's meaning or critically analyzing and perhaps challenging the author's conclusions through reasoning or applying personal experiences and knowledge. In effective discussions students have the opportunity to have sustained exchanges with the teacher or other students, present and defend individual interpretations and points of view, use text content, background knowledge, and reasoning to support interpretations and conclusions, and listen to the points of view and reasoned arguments of others participating in the discussion. (21)

A summary of the evidence can be found on pages 21-23.

How to carry out the recommendation:

- "Carefully prepare for the discussion" (23).
- "Ask follow-up questions that help provide continuity and extend the discussion" (23-24).
- "Provide a task, or a discussion format, that students can follow when they discuss texts together in small groups" (24).
- "Develop and practice the use of a specific "discussion protocol" (24).

Potential roadblocks and solutions can be found on pages 24-25, including how to help teachers who lack skills in facilitating effective discussion:

Leading instructive discussions requires a set of teaching skills that is different from the skills required to present a lecture or question students in a typical recitation format. It is also true that discussions can create challenges for class-room control that may not occur in other instructional formats. Most teachers will need some form of professional development to build their skills as discussion leaders or organizers. Within schools, it could be very helpful for content-area teachers to experience these kinds of discussions themselves as a way of learning what it feels like to participate in effective, open discussions. Also, a number of useful books on this topic can be the basis for teacher book study groups. (25)

VERMONT
AGENCY OF EDUCATION

Recommendation 4: Increase Student Motivation and Engagement in Literacy Learning (pages 26-30)

To foster improvement in adolescent literacy, teachers should use strategies to enhance students' motivation to read and engagement in the learning process. Teachers should help students build confidence in their ability to comprehend and learn from content-area texts. They should provide a supportive environment that views mistakes as growth opportunities, encourages self-determination, and provides informational feedback about the usefulness of reading strategies and how the strategies can be modified to fit various tasks. Teachers should also make literacy experiences more relevant to students' interests, everyday life, or important current events. (26)

A summary of the evidence can be found on pages 26-28.

How to carry out the recommendation:

- "Establish meaningful and engaging content learning goals around the essential ideas of a discipline as well as the specific learning processes students use to access those ideas" (28).
- "Provide a positive learning environment that promotes students' autonomy in learning" (28).
- "Make literacy experiences more relevant to students' interests, everyday life, or important current events" (28).
- "Build in certain instructional conditions, such as student goal setting, self-directed learning, and collaborative learning, to increase reading engagement and conceptual learning for students" (28-29).

Potential roadblocks and solutions can be found on pages 29-30, including how to support content-area teachers who "do not realize the importance of teaching the reading strategies and thinking processes that skilled readers use in different academic disciplines and do not recognize the beneficial effects of such instruction on students' ability to engage with their learning":

Too few content-area teachers know how to emphasize the reading and writing practices specific to their disciplines, so students are not encouraged to read and write and reason like historians, scientists, and mathematicians. Literacy coaches should emphasize the role of content-area teachers, especially in secondary schools in promoting literacy skills, and the role of reading skills in promoting performance in various content areas such as history, science and social sciences. This can be accomplished through a coordinated schoolwide approach that provides professional development in content literacy. Many resources available on the Internet provide information about strategic reading in content areas. Content-area teachers should also develop formative assessments that allow students to make their thinking visible and that provide evidence of the problem-solving and critical-thinking strategies students use to comprehend and construct meaning. Teachers can use these assessments to make informed decisions about lesson planning, instructional practices and materials, and activities that will be more appropriate and engaging for students. (29)

Resource

[Providing Reading Interventions for Students in Grades 4-9](#) (What Works Clearinghouse)

Citation

Kamil, M. L., Borman, G. D., Dole, J., Kral, C. C., Salinger, T., and Torgesen, J. (2008). *Improving adolescent literacy: Effective classroom and intervention practices: A Practice Guide* (NCEE #2008-4027). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc.

Annotated Guide for Improving Adolescent Literacy: Effective Classroom and Intervention Practices (Revised: August 26, 2022)   Page **7** of **7**

VERMONT
AGENCY OF EDUCATION