

**new read on teen literacy.** Anne McGrath.

***U.S. News & World Report*** 138.7 (Feb 28, 2005): p68.

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Willard Brown teaches chemistry at Skyline High in Oakland, Calif. But what he really hopes his students master on their way to learning science is a skill most people, the teenagers included, assume they nailed long ago: the ability to read. Too often, he says, students have an incomplete notion of what reading actually means. "They think, 'My eyes passed over the page, and I pronounced all the words.' They don't notice that they really didn't get it."

So rather than simply lecturing and assigning chapters for homework, Brown asks his classes to tackle new material--on how atoms bond, for instance--by marking up written handouts and then wrestling as a group with what the text really means. What can they figure out from the wording and graphics about why atoms join together? What questions occur as they make their way down the page? What does the process look like--can they see it in their heads? What might strange terms such as "Coulomb force" and "covalent bond" mean, given the context?

On the other side of the country, Monica Ouly is taking a similar tack in her family and consumer-science class at Springhouse Middle School in Allentown, Pa. She recently asked students to read articles about calcium, salt, sugar, and gaining weight; underline what they found most important; jot down questions and comments; and note any connections to, say, their own caloric intake. "Hmm, the way I eat, it's probably a lot," she quipped to the class. Language skills are also being stressed by a surprisingly wide range of teachers at New York's Bronx Lab School: Not only do Karena Ostrem's ninth graders routinely translate math equations into word problems, but her colleague Kristin Smith has created a "word wall" in her art room to get students talking about the meaning of terms like "contour" and "perspective."

Underperforming. As President Bush and education policymakers turn their attention to fixing America's underachieving high schools, more districts nationwide will need to address one fundamental--but largely unheralded--cause of student failure: A huge number of teens simply can't make much sense of their textbooks. Close to 70 percent of eighth graders read below the "proficient" level, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, meaning they can't easily spot the purpose of a passage and find supporting evidence. So do nearly two thirds of 12th graders. In an economy increasingly reliant on workers with at least some postsecondary training, these stats have got plenty of people worried.

This week, when the country's governors convene with educators and business leaders in Washington for a summit on reforming high school, improving reading skills will be a key item on the agenda (alongside the more familiar priorities of rethinking the impersonal megaschool and beefing up coursework). "This isn't just about bringing kids up to grade level," says Matthew Gandal, executive vice president of the policy research

group and summit cohost Achieve. "If you don't have advanced literacy skills today, you don't have much of a chance at the good life."

The new focus on reading in the middle- and high-school years follows a period of intense efforts to tackle the problem in the early grades, when lagging readers typically still need help decoding words. Now there's a growing recognition that reading skills need to be nurtured well into adolescence, when students struggle with comprehension more than anything else. Most well-regarded programs share common elements: an intensive class on basic reading strategies for below-grade-level performers, more time devoted to building the habit of reading for pleasure, and an effort to get teachers schoolwide focused on comprehension and writing. In New York City, more than a third of ninth graders arrive unprepared to do college-prep work; henceforth, struggling sixth and ninth graders will take a double-period literacy class, and all students will be reading and writing more. At J. E. B. Stuart High School in Falls Church, Va., where President Bush last month announced his \$1.5 billion plan to raise high-school standards and performance (including \$200 million to support literacy instruction), 76 percent of students were reading below grade level eight years ago; today, only a handful are behind by 11th grade. "Ideally, I'd like every kid reading at the college level," says Principal Mel Riddile, who puts even honors ninth graders through reading instruction in the computer lab and gives every struggling student 95 minutes every day of either reading or English.

At many schools, including Stuart, all faculty members are being asked to become teachers of reading strategies appropriate to their disciplines. That can require a big adjustment when there's so much content to cover to prepare for state assessments, and when conventional wisdom says that reading is the job of instructors in kindergarten through third grade. ("My No. 1 problem at first was teacher resistance," says Riddile.) Math, science, and history teachers alike are trained to hit hard on new vocabulary, for example, and to help students find clues in root words, in similar words, in context. "So much of what we do outside of narratives is tied to vocabulary--a water table is different from a math table is different from tabling a motion," says Donna Alvermann, a literacy expert at the University of Georgia. "In literature, you can miss a lot of the words and still get the story. Students attack informational texts the same way--and miss the substance."

Strategies. To make sure that doesn't happen, teachers increasingly spend time in class on "prereading" strategies, examining headings, captions, photos, and graphics for a sense of where the author is going. They might sort out ideas using diagrams and think out loud as they make their way through a passage, demonstrating how good readers constantly question the author's intent, backtrack when they're confused, make connections to prior knowledge, and predict what will happen next. Those who try these techniques in their classes often realize that they're covering more content, and more successfully, notes Cynthia Greenleaf, codirector of the Strategic Literacy Initiative at WestEd, a San Francisco-based education research group whose approach is used by many schools, including Willard Brown's. When Brown began working on reading skills on his own several years ago, he found that other chemistry teachers typically got weeks ahead of him in the fall. "But I could get ahead by spring, because there was opportunity for independent learning--the text started to make sense," he says. Now, his colleagues are being trained in the same techniques.

The needs are clearly most urgent in failing big-city districts, where students often enter secondary school reading several years below grade level. But many literacy experts point out that even capable and advantaged kids benefit by learning strategies that enhance comprehension. "We all eventually hit a wall," says Sharon Kinney, the reading specialist at Springhouse Middle School (who underscores her point by handing skeptics an article on "Thermonuclear Reaction Rates in Stars"). According to John Guthrie, head of the literacy research center at the University of Maryland-College Park, only the top 20 percent or so of readers move through school automatically mastering the skills necessary to find meaning in difficult texts--to suss out causal relationships, evaluate relevance and bias, and draw conclusions using multiple sources, for example. Many of the rest, he says, begin to languish as their reading assignments become too formidable.

That's a syndrome all too familiar to college profs. One recent study by researchers at the Manhattan Institute found that only 34 percent of high school grads are equipped for the rigors of a four-year college; many of the rest are forced to enroll in remedial courses. When Achieve recently asked professors and employers how well prepared high school graduates are for college or work, 70 percent of professors (and 41 percent of employers) said students' inability to read and understand complicated material is a serious deficiency.

Progress. It's too soon to know how much of an impact these adolescent literacy programs will have on student achievement. Veterans caution that there's a long slog ahead. "I'm not going to tell you our reading scores [immediately] went way up," says Beth Lacy, principal of Cedar Ridge Middle School in Decatur, Ala., which saw only incrementally better results for several years after joining the statewide Alabama Reading Initiative in 1999. But Cedar Ridge, where all sixth graders take a reading class and content teachers reinforce what they've learned, has watched its writing scores improve quite sharply, and the most recent reading assessment showed significant progress, too. After introducing a literacy program plus extra instruction on Saturday and after school, Granite Park Middle School in South Salt Lake City has seen even its math and science scores--once the lowest in the district--rise considerably in the past two years.

There's a message in this reform movement not only for education policymakers but also for parents: If your son's grades in science or history have gradually slipped from A's to C's, the fix may lie elsewhere than a stern talking-to and a tightened social schedule (box). "Parents need to work with their kids until they're out of the house, making sure they're reading and comprehending," says Andres Henriquez, a program officer at the Carnegie Corp. of New York, copublisher with the Alliance for Excellent Education of a recent report on literacy. That's what Martha Machado did. When her daughter Stefanie entered seventh grade at Springhouse last year reading at a sixth-grade level and unhappy with her grades, Machado signed her up for Sharon Kinney's Reading Seminar, 45 minutes every other day of individual time with a novel and class deconstruction of a range of texts. By June, Stefanie was reading with the skill of a 10th grader--and in eighth grade, she's getting A's and B's.

## LAGGING LEARNERS

About two thirds of middle and high school students test below the "proficient" reading level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

[labels]  
GRADE 12 (2002)  
Below proficient 64 pct.  
    Below basic 26 pct.  
    Basic 38 pct.  
Proficient 31 pct.  
Advanced 5 pct.

GRADE 8 (2003)  
Below proficient 68 pct.  
    Below basic 26 pct.  
    Basic 42 pct.  
Proficient 29 pct.  
Advanced 3 pct.

Source: U.S. Department of Education

USN&WR

**Source Citation:** McGrath, Anne. "A new read on teen literacy." *U.S. News & World Report* 138.7 (Feb 28, 2005): 68. *General Reference Center*. Thomson Gale. DISCUS. 17 Oct. 2006 <<http://find.galegroup.com/itx/infomark.do?&contentSet=IAC-Documents&type=retrieve&tabID=T003&prodId=GRCM&docId=A128982084&source=gale&srcprod=GRCM&userGroupName=scschools&version=1.0>>.

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