

1 Reading Achievement

Where Do We Stand?

Ten years ago it was visionary to assure that each student read at or above grade level by third or fourth grade. Today it is the law. Ten years from now it may be a civil right.

—Lynn Fielding in Fielding,
Kerr, and Rosier (2004, p. 150)

Many adolescents who struggle with reading have much in common with the Mexican revolutionary leader portrayed in the film *Viva Zapata!* His charismatic personality mesmerizes his followers, but he is powerless to conquer the printed page. In the film, we see him staring at a book, putting his hand across his eyes, pounding the desk, and shouting with frustration, “I can’t read.” (NOTE: Although I have viewed the film, I cannot take credit for noting the scene I describe here. Robert Karlin [1984] cited it in *Teaching Reading in High School: Improving Reading in the Content Areas*.)

Robert Uber, a young adult whose academic career I have followed closely for several years, can relate to the anger of the illiterate in this cinematic classic. By the time he entered high school in 1997, Robert had been in and out of a variety of self-contained classes for students with behavior difficulties. He was on course to become a dropout statistic when

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his academic trajectory took a sharp turn upward. What was behind this dramatic turnaround?

A gifted special education teacher in a small, northern Michigan high school learned the source of Robert's frustration when his older brother shared this remarkable insight: "All Robert wants is to learn to read." It seemed that when former teachers ignored Robert's inability to read, focusing instead on controlling his behavior, he became aggressive and unmanageable. On the auspicious day that Robert met his new teacher, she offered him a way out: If he would stick with her, she would teach him to read. During his high school career, Robert not only reached his reading goal, he also received a citizenship award, worked in the media center, and attended vocational school. (NOTE: Robert was taught to read by the Spalding Method, a multisensory, direct instruction approach [Spalding & Spalding, 1957/1990]. See Resource B for a detailed description of the program.)

Since his graduation in 2001, Robert has married his prom date, fathered a son, and realized his dream of owning his own business, All Vehicle Repair. A high school diploma, combined with the ability to read and write, changed Robert's life forever. His life story is still being written, but the first chapter has a very happy ending—thanks to a gifted teacher using a research-based methodology (R. Uber, personal communication, October 16, 2005).

The toll that illiteracy takes on dropouts can be seen in a variety of traumatic events—emotional, criminal, psychological, physical, and financial catastrophes that pervade their lives. Irrespective of what a high school diploma may represent for any given individual, for the majority of students, "*high school graduation has been a necessary (but not sufficient) prerequisite for making it in America*" (Rouse, 2005, p. 1).

Economists project the cost of school failure to be in the billions:

- A high school dropout earns about \$260,000 less over a lifetime than a high school graduate and pays about \$60,000 less in taxes. Annual losses exceed \$50 billion in federal and state income taxes for all 23 million of the nation's high school dropouts aged 18 to 67.
- The United States loses \$192 billion—1.6 percent of its current gross domestic product—in combined income and tax revenue losses with each cohort of 18-year-olds who never complete high school. Increasing the educational attainment of that cohort by one year would recoup nearly half those losses.
- Increasing the high school completion rate by 1 percent for all men aged 20 to 60 could save the United States up to \$1.4 billion a year

in reduced costs from crime. A one-year increase in average years of schooling for dropouts would correlate with reductions of murder and assault by almost 30 percent, motor vehicle theft by 20 percent, arson by 13 percent, and burglary and larceny by about 6 percent (Teachers College Columbia University, 2005).

There are potential dropouts in every school in America. We label them remedial, at risk, learning disabled, emotionally disturbed, or behaviorally disordered. You know who they are in your school. They achieve at levels far below their peers, often drop out of school, seldom attend college, and are frequently unable to obtain or hold meaningful jobs. However, these students are not the only reading underachievers.

There is a second category of readers who have mastered the science of reading (decoding) but still do not have the “art” (meaning and understanding). They believe that if they have read it once, they’ve read it, even if they have no clue about the meaning of the text. They have never received explicit instruction in how to access the cognitive strategies employed by skilled readers and often lack the vocabulary and background knowledge to tackle challenging textbooks with success. The solutions to the problems of these readers are more subtle and systemic. To teach all students to be more strategic readers, all teachers must be involved, not just a remedial teacher or two.

There is a third category of readers that is often ignored altogether. This group contains the students who are capable of reading far more than they do as well as reading books that are more challenging. Instead, these active adolescents are watching television, playing computer games, or hanging out at the mall. Granted, there are many teens who volunteer, participate in extracurricular activities, and hold down part-time jobs and are hard pressed to find time in their schedules to read. But unless we raise our expectations, our students will never make reading a priority in their lives. Take a moment to read the Teaching for Learning Tip 1.1. Thinking aloud for students regarding your personal processing of text is a practice that has the power to revolutionize your teaching of content.

RAISING ACHIEVEMENT EXPECTATIONS

The challenge before us is, as it has always been, to secure equal educational opportunity. Every American child should have the same opportunities for an excellent education. . . . The real issue . . . is whether the schools are good enough to prepare students for the challenges that confront them.

—Ravitch (2003, p. 36)

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TEACHING FOR LEARNING TIP 1.1

Think Aloud Daily for Students

How to Get Started

Select a piece of content-related text. Alternate reading aloud short sections of the text with thinking aloud about how you are mentally processing what you have read. Use the seven strategies of highly effective readers as described in Chapter 4. Make statements about your thinking similar to the following:

Activating: *What I just read reminds me of something I learned when I was in high school.*

Monitoring-Clarifying: *I got confused here because of the way the word was used, so I used the context to figure it out. It helped that I knew a related word in a foreign language.*

Questioning: *I wonder why the author chose this word to describe the Civil War. It seems to me that another word would have made more sense.*

Visualizing: *I pictured what was happening here, and it helped me understand how the crime was committed.*

Searching-Selecting: *I had a question when I read this section, and I'm either going to ask my friend John who knows a lot about this topic or I'll Google it later.*

Organizing: *To help me remember the order in which these events happened, I'm going to construct a time line in my notes.*

Inferring: *I'm sure I know what's going to happen next because the same thing happened to me several years ago.*

Your students will be mesmerized by hearing you speak your thoughts. Some teachers pair up with a colleague, combine their classes, and each read and think aloud from the same text to show students that readers process text in different ways based on their backgrounds, experience, and strategy usage.

Resist the temptation to teach, explain, and lecture about the text. The purpose of thinking aloud is to show students how *you* personally process and respond to what you read. In so doing, you become the "master reader-thinker-problem solver," and your students serve as *cognitive* apprentices.

Resources to Help You Implement

McEwan, 2004. *The 7 Strategies of Highly Effective Readers.*

Schoenbach, Greenleaf, Cziko, & Hurwitz, 1999. *Reading for Understanding*

Research on Teacher Modeling During Strategy Instruction

Afflerbach, 2002; Collins, Brown, & Holum, 1991; Duffy, 2002; Pressley, 2000; Pressley, Gaskins, Solic, & Collins 2005; Trabasso & Bouchard, 2000, 2002.

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Concerns about the quality of secondary schools rise to the top of the national agenda periodically. In fact, the country often looks to the public schools for solutions when anything goes wrong. The first such occurrence in my lifetime was precipitated by a cataclysmic current event. On October 4, 1957, the Russians launched the first satellite, Sputnik, into outer space. The happening stunned the nation. Politicians and pundits immediately launched an attack on the public schools for having fallen behind Soviet schools in training students for careers in the sciences and other fields. Congress quickly passed the National Defense Education Act (1958) that provided aid to education at all levels, both public and private. Its primary purpose was to stimulate the advancement of science, mathematics, and foreign language; materials flooded into classrooms and libraries to support instruction in these content areas. And as all too often happens, before long, most educators had shelved the books and materials, abandoned the special institutes and training programs for promising math and science students, and moved on to other more pressing priorities and enticing innovations.

In the early 1980s, a thought-provoking study triggered a flurry of activity focused on higher standards, revised curricula, and stricter high school graduation requirements. Titled *A Nation at Risk*, it not only sounded an alarm regarding quality, but it also called for equity. "All, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost" (National Committee on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 5).

In the twenty-first century, professional organizations, political coalitions, think tanks, and a variety of foundations have caught what appears to be a "new" wave of middle school and high school reform. The reports they have generated are impressive at first glance but offer more questions than answers. They all seem to agree on one thing, however: "Whether one looks at standardized test scores, at graduation rates, or at college admission test results, American high school performance [and middle school as well] has hardly budged over the past three decades. To say that improving high-school student achievement is like turning a supertanker around would be an insult to the speed and maneuverability of supertankers" (Greene, 2006, p. 1). Teaching for Learning Tip 1.2 suggests that helping students to comprehend the various types of text found in content classrooms is an assignment that *only* the teacher of that content can accomplish.

"Without professional development, ongoing formative assessment of students and programs, and ongoing summative assessment of students and programs as the foundation of any middle or high school literacy program, we cannot hope to effect major change in adolescent literacy achievement; no matter what instructional innovations are introduced."

—Biancarosa and Snow
(2004, p. 29)

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TEACHING FOR LEARNING TIP 1.2

Teach the Structure of Your Discipline

How to Get Started

There is no one better suited to teach students how to read and write about the disciplines of science, social studies, and mathematics than the teachers who teach those subjects. Here are some questions to consider in your planning:

1. How does your discipline typically present information? *For example, in social studies, history texts are organized in a chronological fashion. Economics and civics texts use a problem-solution or goal-action-outcome format. Geography texts emphasize description with an emphasis on comparing and contrasting various places and cultures. Science texts contain explanations of difficult concepts and complicated processes, descriptions of scientific experiments, and the juxtaposition of conflicting sources and theories* (International Reading Association, 2006, p. 31).
2. How might you explicitly teach students how to read the text of your discipline?
3. What are the essential literacy skills for your discipline? For example, in social studies, they include the abilities to
 - Locate and use primary and secondary source documents
 - Recognize and evaluate author perspective and bias
 - Synthesize information from multiple sources
 - Make connections across chronological eras, across geographical regions, or between civic and economic issues
 - Present findings in a variety of forms, including oral presentations or debates and written documents that may take the form of research papers, position papers, or writing from a specific role or perspective (International Reading Association, 2006, p. 32).

Resources to Help You Implement

Kobrin, 1996. *Beyond the Textbook: Teaching History Using Documents and Primary Sources*.
 Their & Daviss, 2002. *The New Science Literacy*.

Research on Teaching the Structure of Your Discipline

Alexander, 1997; Alexander & Jetton, 2003; Beck & Dole, 1992; Craig & Yore, 1995; Hand, Prain, & Wallace, 2002; Shanahan, 2004; Stahl & Shanahan, 2004; Wade & Moje, 2000.

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Despite the discouraging realities of secondary achievement, there are still commentators who delight in discounting stagnant test scores and cavernous achievement gaps. They pronounce our educational system competitive and blame achievement problems on inalterable variables or flawed tests (Berliner, 2005; Bracey, 2002, 2005, 2006; Kohn,

2000). Some even suggest that schools focus on developing an *aptitude* for learning (i.e., “the ability to process new information quickly and solve problems creatively”) rather than improving instruction so that *all* students can acquire the skills and knowledge they need to be successful in life (Klein, McNeil, & Stout, 2005).

The aforementioned individuals hypothesize that beleaguered students “are caught in an ‘achievement trap,’ an academic arms race that requires kids to demonstrate their ability to learn by actually learning more and more facts, at more and more advanced levels, all the hours of their young days that are not filled by such demonstrable time-eaters as soccer practice and violin recitals” (Klein et al., 2005, p. 32). Perhaps these commentators can afford to take this perspective because the students with whom they work have already mastered the basics of reading, writing, and mathematics. But for millions of students in this country, illiteracy and innumeracy are facts of life (Hanushek, 2003; Rouse, 2005).

THE STATE OF READING ACHIEVEMENT IN THE NATION

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is the only wide-scale and somewhat rigorous test of reading achievement in the United States. It is a federally sponsored assessment that is periodically given in reading (and other subjects) to a nationwide sample of students in fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades. Although all states have their own mandated reading assessments at various grade levels, these tests vary widely in content and difficulty as well as in their definitions of what constitutes a proficient reader. Therefore, NAEP is a critical tool for comparing reading achievement uniformly across the states and determining literacy levels in the United States as a whole at any given point in time.

The test is not without its problems, however (Cavanagh, May, 2005/June, 2005; Cavanagh & Robelen, 2004; Innes, 2005; Viadero, 2005a, 2005b). There are several troubling issues regarding the NAEP that make it challenging to draw subtle conclusions about current achievement levels and long-term trends, but there is one undeniable fact: Reading achievement hasn’t budged at the secondary level since the test’s inception in 1992. The first problem concerns the voluntary nature of the test. Prior to 2003, individual states could opt in or out of the NAEP testing, thereby resulting in a sample that although demographically representative was not drawn from the country as a whole. While that problem has been solved at the fourth-grade and eighth-grade levels by the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (2002) that mandates testing a representative sample from every state, one still cannot draw firm conclusions about state trends since 1992 except in individual states that have participated continuously.

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A second and related issue concerns the testing of twelfth-grade students. Although NCLB mandated testing at fourth and eighth grades, no such provision was included for the twelfth grade. The motivation and participation rate of high school seniors has been dropping over time, jeopardizing the credibility of the twelfth-grade results. Various solutions to the problem have been advanced, including publishing individual scores and offering incentive gifts to students who participate (Cavanagh, 2005, May 23).

A third and more perplexing problem is the wide variation in the percentage of students excluded from the NAEP testing in individual states, thereby skewing the results. For example, in 2004, an average of 35 percent of students with disabilities was excused from taking the 2004 reading test (Viadero, 2005a).

"The NAEP is a 'no-stakes' test. [T]here are no consequences attached to student performance on the NAEP exams, nor are instructional hours spent specifically preparing for the NAEP. Furthermore, while a national goal of academic excellence for all students has been implicit in previous surveys and analysis of the American education system, no explicit goals for student performance or progress on the NAEP have ever been articulated."

—*SchoolMatters* (2005, p. 1)

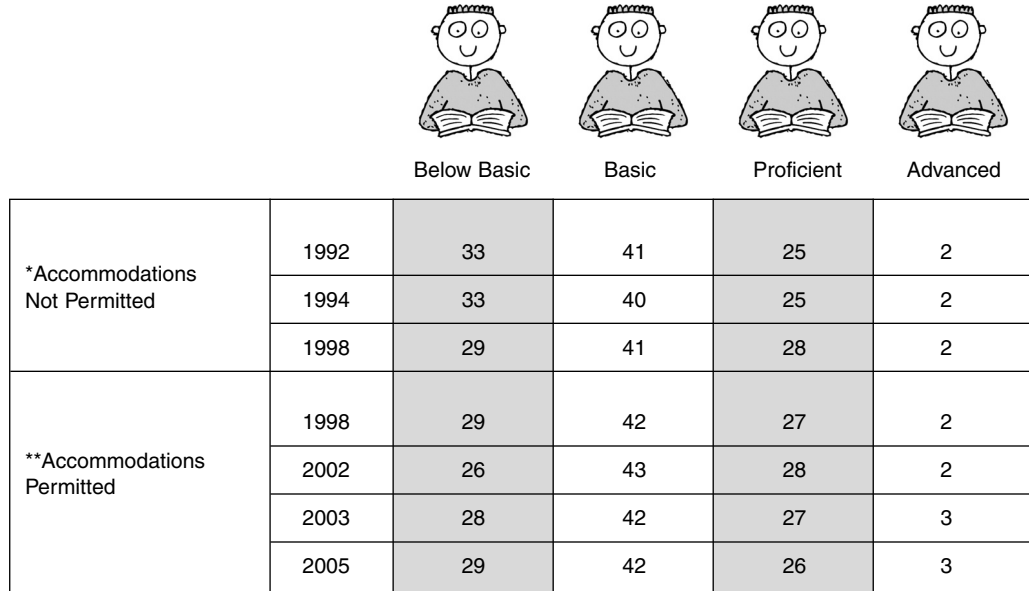
Despite its current flaws, the NAEP is the only nationwide test we have. It has the potential to level the playing field from state to state, giving educators and policy makers the ability to compare like schools in various demographic areas or compare individual states with each other. Figures 1.1 and 1.2 illustrate the overall proficiency levels of the students who have taken the eighth and twelfth grades Reading NAEP since its inception. Figure 1.3 describes the three categories into which students are placed based on their scores: Basic, Proficient, and Advanced. Students

whose scores fall below the cutoff point for Basic are placed in the fourth category, aptly titled Below Basic. The picture is dismal.

- There are far too many students whose reading levels consign them to failure in middle and high school—between one-fourth and one-third of the students tested fall in the Below Basic category.
- There are even more students—close to 40 percent at both grade levels—who have only a partial mastery of the knowledge and skills they need to be considered grade-level readers. With skilled teaching, strong motivation, and very hard work, these students might be able to make it. But motivation and hard work are not typical characteristics of struggling adolescent readers, and most secondary teachers do not have the expertise needed to work miracles.

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Figure 1.1 Percentage of Students in NAEP Reading Achievement Levels: Grade 8, 1992–2004



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, NAEP (1992, 1994, 1998, and 2002 Reading Assessments).

*Students with disabilities who took the test were not granted accommodations such as extended time, large print tests booklets, and so forth.

**Students with disabilities who took the test were provided with accommodations as recommended by their individual education plans (IEPs).

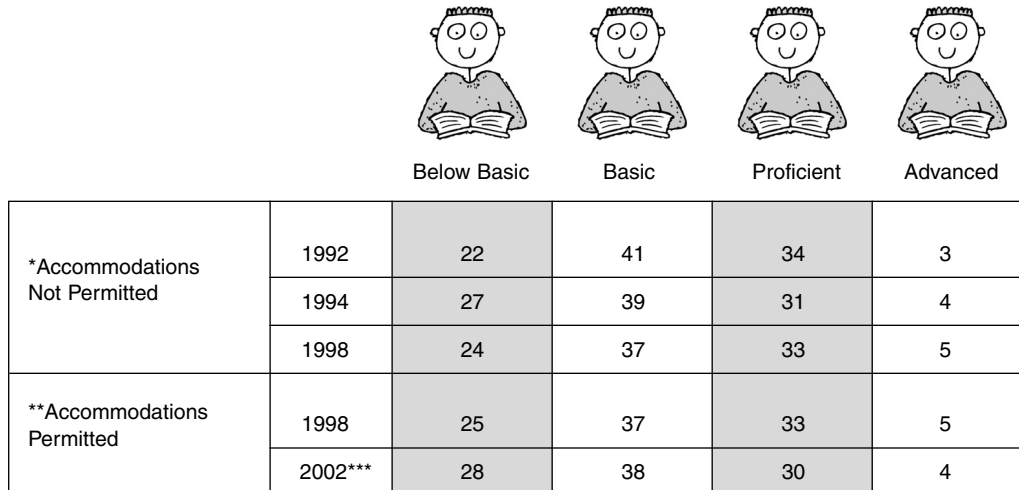
- If we add up the percentages of students at either grade level in the Below Basic and Basic categories, at least two out of every three students did poorly on the test.
- On the opposite end of the achievement continuum, only 5 percent or fewer of secondary students are Advanced: able to synthesize and learn from specialized reading material. That percentage is far smaller than the percentage of students who enter college every year, suggesting a possible reason why 53 percent of college students are forced to enroll in remedial courses (Greene & Forster, 2003; Swanson, 2004).

"In many states, standards are set far too low to ensure a [high] level of skills. . . Standards that don't set challenging goals for student learning ultimately stunt the academic growth of our young people."

—Education Trust (2005, p. 2)

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Figure 1.2 Percentage of Students in NAEP Reading Achievement Levels:
Grade 12, 1992–2002



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, NAEP (1992, 1994, 1998, and 2002 Reading Assessments).

*Students with disabilities who took the test were not granted accommodations such as extended time to take the test, large print tests booklets, and so forth.

**Students with disabilities who took the test were provided with accommodations as recommended by their IEPs.




***Testing results for 2004 are scheduled to be released in Spring 2006.

- Since the NAEP was first administered in 1992, there has been little significant change in achievement levels at either the eighth or twelfth grades.

THE RESPONSE OF EDUCATORS

What is the response of educators to this discouraging news? After the release of the 2004 NAEP Reading Test results, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) posted the following question on its Web site: *What is the most effective strategy for improving reading and math scores on assessments such as NAEP?* ASCD officials offered the following choices for respondents (in the same order as they are printed here) and provided a running total of the percentage of individuals who chose each answer (ASCD, 2005):

Figure 1.3 Levels of Student Performance on NAEP Reading Tests

 Basic	<p>Partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills. Includes the abilities to demonstrate a literal understanding of what students read, make some interpretations, identify specific aspects of the text that reflect overall meaning, extend the ideas in the text by making simple inferences, and recognize and relate interpretations and connections.</p>
 Proficient	<p>Solid academic performance at the tested grade level. Students reaching this level have demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter, including subject-matter knowledge, application of such knowledge to real-world situations, and analytical skills appropriate to the subject matter.</p>
 Advanced	<p>Superior performance includes the abilities to describe the more abstract themes and ideas of the overall text; analyze both meaning and form and support their analyses explicitly with examples from the text, and extend text information by relating it to their experiences and to world events.</p>

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, NAEP (1992, 1994, 1998, and 2002 Reading Assessments).

1. Embrace a whole-child philosophy (24.46 percent).
2. Improve teacher quality (32.45 percent).
3. Increase funding for education (15.74 percent).
4. Focus more closely on math and reading (22.11 percent).
5. I don't think assessment scores are important (5.25 percent).

This poll is not scientific (respondents self-selected into the sample), but the responses do suggest how some educators respond to unfavorable assessment results. The good news is that only 5.25 percent of the respondents felt that assessment scores aren't important. The bad news is that fewer than 25 percent of the respondents identified a more intense focus on math and reading as the answer to helping students master the challenges of reading and mathematics. Instead, respondents indicated that a solution to the lack of knowledge and skills in reading and math might be an ephemeral concept called the "whole-child philosophy." Recall that Robert's teacher did not promise to treat Robert as a "whole child" if he would stick with her for four years. She promised to teach him to read.

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When considering the results of a large-scale, summative evaluation like the NAEP, one can easily attack the test, overlooking the fact that the data represent not only the actual students who took the test but also those that the sample represents—millions of adolescents whose low achievement levels are predictive of their academic and vocational failures. It's not about test scores per se. It's about the ability of our students to “understand and use those written language forms required by society and/or valued by the individual” (Elley, 1992, p. 3), the ability to gain meaning from the printed page. Your students will approach the reading of textbooks and literature in a new way once you teach them how to question the author as described in Teaching for Learning Tip 1.3.

TEACHING FOR LEARNING TIP 1.3

Teach Students How to Question the Author

How to Get Started

Introduce students to the idea of a fallible author or, in the case of textbooks, a committee of fallible authors. Explicitly teach and model for students how to

- Identify difficulties with the way the author has presented information or ideas
- Question the author's intent or particular choice of vocabulary
- Zero in on the precise meaning an author is trying to convey
- Recognize when an inference about the author's intentions is needed because the author's conclusions are not clearly articulated

The purpose of questioning the author is to make public the *processes of comprehension*. This questioning ideally takes place immediately following a guided reading session in which the teacher encourages students to grapple with ideas in order to construct meaning.

Students can question authors of both narrative and expository texts. Questioning the author is a particularly useful approach when reading primary sources in history.

A Resource to Help You Implement

Beck, McKeown, Hamilton, & Kucan, 1997. *Questioning the Author: An Approach for Enhancing Student Engagement With Text*.

Although this book is written for elementary teachers, don't let that fact discourage you from reading it. Its thesis is a powerful one that all readers need to grasp: Every text has a human, fallible author with whom the reader can (and should) interact in a questioning mode.

Research on Questioning the Author

Underwood & Pearson, 2004.

The NAEP results do not engender passionate discussion during faculty meetings or even raise most teachers' levels of concern. The test is often viewed as an annoyance by administrators, teachers, *and* students. What is getting attention in the faculty lounge and the principal's office, however, is NCLB. The idea that low achievement among particular groups of students (e.g., minorities, students with disabilities, or English Language Learners [ELLs]) can put seemingly successful middle schools or comprehensive high schools in upscale suburbs on a "watch list" fills educators with both anger and anxiety.

Whether NCLB is unfair, underfunded, and unfocused (Sunderman, Kim, & Orfield, 2005) or the only logical way to bring about change in schools where expectations are low and teaching is ineffective is a question that is hotly debated in op ed pages, graduate classes and letters to the editor. The arguments are familiar ones.

Those who abhor the march toward accountability as measured by a group-administered, standardized test assert that the results of teaching and learning cannot be measured by a single test. "How can a paper-and-pencil assessment measure creativity, ingenuity, motivation, and perseverance?" they ask. Critics of the standards and assessment movement in the United States paint a bleak picture of where we are headed if we continue down the testing trail: cookie cutter educations, drill and kill, "ram, remember, and regurgitate" (Renzulli, 2000, p. 48), trivial pursuit, and back to the boring basics. If these naysayers are to be believed, there will be no joy left in learning when the "standardistos" (Thompson, 1999) take over. We will all be too busy "prepping for the test."

John Bishop (1993, 1995, 1998a, & 1998b) of Cornell University disagrees with this mindset. His research has shown that educational systems that have established content standards and then used curriculum-based tests to determine whether students have learned have improved achievement for all students, including those from less advantaged backgrounds.

"The . . . focus on literacy cannot end in third grade. To meet the requirements of colleges and employers in the 21st century, students must receive explicit literacy instruction throughout their adolescent years, defined in this guide as beginning in the fourth grade and continuing through the end of twelfth grade."

—National Governors
Association (2005, p. 4)

THE STATE OF READING ACHIEVEMENT IN THE STATES

Since the first edition of this book was published in 2001, almost all of the states have come online with reading assessments based on their own unique

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standards and curricula. Almost half of the states reported a jump in achievement in the number of eighth graders rating proficient on those tests from 2003 to 2005. However, the difference between the number of students rated proficient in reading on individual state assessments and those who received the proficient rating on the 2005 eighth-grade NAEP is startling. Seven states (Alabama, California, Idaho, Arizona, Maryland, Virginia, and Kentucky) reported an additional 5 to 11 percent of eighth-grade students receiving a proficient rating in 2005 than did in the 2003 testing. None of these states, however, showed any progress on the eighth-grade NAEP test from 2003 to 2005. In fact, five of the seven states actually showed a decline on the NAEP test (Dillon, 2005). We can only speculate about the reasons for the discrepancies between state results and the NAEP, but one issue that must be considered is the pressure states feel to lower their standards in order to appear successful in raising achievement. Although summative assessments seem to be dictating the agendas in many districts and schools, take a moment to discover the power of assessing your learning as described in the Teaching for Learning Tip 1.4.

ROADBLOCKS TO RAISING READING ACHIEVEMENT IN MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOLS

Raising reading achievement in secondary schools is undeniably difficult. To succeed, educators need to think outside the box and grapple with long-standing beliefs and practices that interfere with raising literacy levels.

Here are some restraining forces that are likely to impede or even prevent progress:

- Dysfunctional bureaucracies made up of transient, upwardly mobile superintendents; politicized school boards; and multiple layers of entrenched central office administrators (Haberman, 2003)
- Educators who doubt their abilities to make a difference with adolescents who are unable to read at grade level
- Educators who believe that someone else should have done it in the past
- Educators who believe that someone else should do it now (e.g., special education, alternative schools, special reading teachers)
- Educators who believe that they are already doing as much as they possibly can
- Educators who believe they deserve credit for trying, even if they don't get results
- Tentative principals who lack the courage, will, or knowledge base to lead for reading improvement

TEACHING FOR LEARNING TIP 1.4

Assess for Learning

How to Get Started

Teachers generally assess their students to gather grades for reporting their progress to parents. These assessments do nothing to advance learning. Instead, assess students with these two purposes in mind: (a) to determine the status of their learning and (b) to gain information regarding how to adjust your instruction. The power of formative assessment to increase learning and achievement lies in the immediacy of its impact on your teaching as well as on your students' learning. A test given at the end of a unit for purposes of assigning a report card grade is useless both to you as a teacher and to your students who need to know specifically what to do in order to improve. When students are compared to one another at regular intervals during the semester with no opportunity for a "do-over," you are creating a competitive classroom environment in which some students win and some lose.

Assessment for learning grows out of a mastery mindset in which teachers provide feedback to students so they can improve their work products and thereby achieve mastery of the content or process. Similarly, a test given at the end of the unit (when you have *finished* teaching the content) does not permit you to adjust your instruction to ensure higher levels of learning by your students or give students the extended opportunities they may need in order to be successful.

A Resource to Help You Implement

Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2003. *Assessment for Learning: Putting It Into Practice*.

Research on Assessment for Learning

Assessment Reform Group, 2002; Reeves, 2004; Wiliam, 2003.

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- Aggressive principals who mandate, order, intimidate, or harass their subordinates
- Marginal or ineffective teachers who do just enough to get by

Here are some common initiatives that are unlikely to result in meaningful or sustained change:

- Hiring one or two reading teachers to provide one class period of reading instruction for a year to struggling students
- Massive infusions of money into a school or system without instructional leadership and accountability

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- Reduced class sizes across the school
- Literacy and school improvement plans that do not include a data-based assessment component, meaningful and measurable goals, and realistic time lines
- Professional development for teachers that is not attended by and supported by *all* building administrators
- Mandated districtwide middle and high school literacy initiatives that do not involve staff, students, and parents in the planning
- Mandated strategy instruction programs for teachers that do not provide at least two to three years of intensive training and coaching
- Installation of a motivational reading program in the library
- Institution of a schoolwide sustained silent reading program
- Installation of a program to teach students how to read strategically in text that is unrelated to the content they encounter daily in their classes
- Installation of a program to teach students how to read strategically that is not also taught and supported by content teachers on a daily basis
- One-time workshops that are unrelated or even in conflict with ongoing professional development goals
- Hiring of untrained and unsupported literacy coaches who know little about secondary content instruction
- Professional development that is only available to teachers on a volunteer, unpaid basis

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF SCHOOL LEADERS

How do school leaders meet top-down regulations from outside their districts while still fostering an enhanced collegial on-line sense of initiative and control within their schools? The principal must be in charge to meet this challenge.

—Goldring and Rallis (1993, p. 18)

Educators have a difficult mission—to remain focused on the ability of their students to read and succeed in content-laden classrooms. If you permit yourself to be diverted by the often contentious debate surrounding standards, testing, and NCLB, you can easily forget that raising achievement is about helping individual students make quantum leaps in learning every single year of their academic careers. To keep yourself, your colleagues, and your students focused on learning while policy makers argue issues is like driving in a downpour. The experts may be predicting rain, but it's time for you to start building the boat (Harvey & Housman, 2005, p. 5).

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To raise reading achievement in the midst of a cacophony of excuses and distractions requires that educators zero in with laserlike precision on the following strategies:

1. Identify the instructional and environmental variables that need to be changed in your classroom or school, and develop a plan to change them.
2. Teach the students who can't read how to read (whether special education, ELL, at-risk, unmotivated, or behavior disordered students).
3. Teach all students how to read strategically.
4. Motivate students to read larger amounts of text as well as more challenging text while also being accountable for understanding and remembering what they have read.
5. Create a reading culture in your school or district.

"While the literature identifies instructional leadership (that is, efforts to improve teaching) as being key, principals spend time on necessary administrative tasks, such as maintaining physical security of their school, and on managing facilities, resources, and procedures. There is a disconnect between the more lofty goals articulated in the literatures and the realities of the everyday tasks required of an effective operations manager."

—Juvonen, Le, Kaganoff,
Augustine, and Constant
(2004, p. xviii)

Ron Edmonds (1981) was ahead of his time when he said,

We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need to do that. Whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't so far. (p. 53)

A similar visionary statement in *Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy* echoes Edmonds's long-ago challenge:

Enough is already known about adolescent literacy—both the nature of the problems of struggling readers and the types of interventions and approaches to address these needs—in order to act immediately on a broad scale. (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004, p. 10)

How do you feel about the fact that you and your colleagues haven't done it so far? If not you, then who? If not now, then when?

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REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the roadblocks standing in the way of reaching literacy goals in your school or district? What initiatives have been tried? What are the results?
2. What should be your response to the ever-increasing number of secondary students who are unable to read at grade level?
3. How do the expectations of your school, district, and state regarding reading proficiency compare to those in other states?
4. How might you better deal with the increasing numbers of special education referrals that are being made at the secondary level?
5. What does the trend data in your school or district show with regard to changing demographics, and how do you plan to respond to these changes?
6. What kind of professional development opportunities do teachers need in order to acquire the attitudes and skills to teach all students how to read to learn?