ERIN ROGERS IS ON A MISSION TO CHANGE TEACHERS’ MINDS. As a literacy coach at Skyview High School in Vancouver, WA, she advises other teachers on how to infuse literacy into lessons across the curriculum. It’s not an easy job: many secondary school instructors see themselves as content experts and believe that teaching reading is best left to their elementary school colleagues. Rogers observed, “We’re trying to change a paradigm and a way of thinking that not everyone’s comfortable with moving to that quickly.”

At Skyview and Vancouver School District’s five other high schools, however, more teachers are starting to get on board because of an intensive districtwide literacy campaign. During the last four years, literacy classes have become as much a fixture in Vancouver high schools as biology, history, and math. Meanwhile, teachers of those core subjects are getting the tools they need—such as individual coaching, school-based study teams, and embedded professional development—to champion reading in their classrooms.

“We began with a real focus on helping everyone understand that if they wanted kids to read to learn, they had to support their literacy development,” said Layne Curtis, the school district’s curriculum director. “If reading assignments are part of how someone learns math or science content, you don’t just assume that kids come to you reading and you can tell them, ‘Read the chapter and answer the questions at the end,’ and expect that learning will occur.”
A National Issue
Vancouver is not alone in its concerns over high school literacy: national statistics reveal a persistent problem. Kamil (2003) notes that “the reading scores of high school students have not improved over the last thirty years. Although mathematical scores have improved, reading scores stubbornly remain flat, and in recent years, twelfth graders’ scores have decreased significantly” (p. 2).

Levels of Support
In most middle level and high schools, roughly 5%–10% of the student body has significant struggles with the basic components of early reading (Balfanz, McPartland, & Shaw, 2002; Curtis & Longo, 1999). Poor word identification skills prevent this group of students from decoding quickly enough to focus on meaning as they read, and they need support with early reading skills as well as intensive and extensive support to improve their reading in content classes. Intensive support includes actual instruction in reading and could take the place of electives for up to two periods a day.

If diagnostic assessment shows that students already have basic reading skills (beyond grade 3 in overall reading ability) but are reading at least two years below grade level, those students will profit from instruction in fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. The type of instruction offered should be determined through diagnostic assessments. Depending on the size of the school and the severity of student need, a one-semester or full-year reading class that is designed to accelerate student reading skills and abilities may be appropriate.

Other students who are proficient—or very close to it—shouldn’t need additional assistance outside their normal schedules. However, they will profit from a schoolwide effort to increase the use of comprehension strategies and vocabulary instruction across the curriculum. Because almost all students—regardless of their reading ability—take content-area classes that require reading, teachers in these classes must be receptive to struggling readers.

Strategies That Work
So what does the research say about school practices that make a difference for adolescent readers? Studies have shown that the improvement strategies schools adopt must have two characteristics: a commitment to long-term, permanent, and measurable change and an inclusive, collaborative framework of actions that involves all stakeholders—teachers, students, parents, administrators, and others—in raising the performance levels of struggling students (Underwood & Pearson, 2004).

In a study of schoolwide improvement efforts that were focused on reading, Sunderman, Amoa, and Meyers (1999) found that schools with positive gains in reading (as measured by SAT-9 scores) shared all or some of the following factors:
- Reading and writing across the curriculum was a focus throughout the building, and in-school independent reading was a regularly scheduled activity.
- A reading class existed for students who were identified as having difficulties. This was an elective in ninth grade at most schools.
- After-school tutoring in reading was provided by teachers at the school who were familiar with the students and their requirements.
- There was a three-period block for reading and language arts, during which trained teachers taught reading skills to...
students who needed intensive support. This was prevalent in middle level schools.

- Teachers received strong professional development to support reading instruction.

A Balanced Approach

The Vancouver School District has followed the advice of the research and developed a balanced approach to improving literacy for its secondary school students. Each Vancouver high school has at least one literacy specialist who coaches other staff members and teaches Academic Literacy classes. There is no fixed formula for eligibility for the two-period Academic Literacy block, but several factors are taken into account when determining whether a student is a candidate. These factors include a low score on the reading portion of the Measures of Academic Progress, failure to meet the reading standard on the eighth-grade Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL), and a recommendation by a teacher. The teacher recommendation is especially important. But Rogers—who uses such classics as The Outsiders in her course—emphasizes that this is no “dummy class.” She said, “I tell the kids they are simply lacking some skills. This class is designed to help them fill those gaps.”

The Academic Literacy curriculum builds on the foundation of Reading Apprenticeship, an instructional framework developed by WestEd. This model encourages students to read for recreation, gain insights into their own reading processes, and develop problem-solving strategies. It also calls on the teacher to assume the role of master reader by mentoring students and making his or her own reading process visible. For example, Rogers shared with her class how she struggled with the technical texts in her graduate-level ESL courses.

Students can move on to Academic Literacy II in their sophomore year. The curriculum further develops reading skills they learned the previous year and focuses on what they need to know to pass the WASL. That’s a pressing concern for the class of 2008—the first class that must pass the test to graduate. For students who don’t meet the state reading standard as sophomores, there’s Benchmark Literacy, a junior-level class that focuses even more intensively on the WASL target.

In addition to Academic Literacy classes, high school students in Vancouver have a range of options that correspond to their development as readers. Students who are reading close to their grade level receive benchmark instruction, and advanced students are given work that extends and enriches their learning. Students who need intensive interventions—typically those reading at the third-grade level or below—are offered a course that emphasizes decoding words as well as phonological awareness, phonics, comprehension, fluency, and vocabulary building. Using Read 180, a program offered by Scholastic, the class is structured to facilitate flexible grouping: whole-class sessions, small-group guided instruction, and individual computer sessions using software that is tailored to each student’s reading level.

Curtis has no doubts that the multitiered approach is working. Last year, 73% of Vancouver’s 10th graders met state
standards on the WASL test, up from 50% two years before that. “There’s no question that it’s this work [that’s responsible],” she said. “Four years’ worth of work is manifest in those data, and I expect to sustain and increase the gain.”

Getting There

It is important for school administrators to realize that change doesn’t happen overnight—especially in schools that are organized according to traditional structures. As Erin Rogers pointed out, “More than anything, the principal needs to be vocal in recognizing that reading improvement will often be a gradual process. Success will not be experienced immediately by students. By reminding staff and encouraging students, the principal can set the tone for the expectations of a literacy program and provide support for its implementation.”

Shifting schedules and altering school culture to focus on reading can often be difficult and time-consuming. Both NASSP and the National Middle School Association have called for modifications to traditional structures that can help reading improvement efforts. These modifications include organizing schools around the learning goals that students are required to master, ensuring that teachers implement a variety of instructional strategies and assessments, and creating schedules flexible enough to accommodate teaching strategies that are consistent with the ways students learn best. Both organizations recommend that school schedules allow teachers to have no more than 90 students to promote collaboration and relationship building (Jackson & Davis, 2000; NASSP, 2004).

If a school is committed to helping large numbers of students achieve more in reading, it must ensure that all of the adults in each student’s life have opportunities to help that student achieve. Many parents want to be involved, but it’s not always clear to them how to be involved; consequently, it takes some coordination efforts on the part of the school to tap into this resource. Parent involvement has been shown to make a difference in student achievement in dozens of studies at the middle and high school levels (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

When reaching out to parents, schools should consider the following questions:

- How thorough is your schoolwide attempt to communicate with parents?
- Are you communicating with families about teachers’ expectations for learning in classrooms?
- Are you telling parents what they can do to enrich educational experiences and support learning at home through their homework policies and expectations for effort and grades?

Although there are typically fewer volunteers at the secondary school level than in elementary schools, there are still parents and community members willing to help in secondary schools. With training, these volunteers can assist with reading-related activities, such as tutoring students or leading book discussion groups.

The Principal’s Role

In the end, if a middle level or high school principal is committed to making literacy achievement a priority, he or she must be transparent about that goal. “When decisions are made about resources, scheduling, and assignments for both teachers and students, literacy needs to play a significant role,” said Layne Curtis. “If I—as a principal—say my goal is literacy, but all of the time we spend together as a staff and the decisions about how resources are allocated appear to be driven by something else, that is a mixed message that will make it hard to be successful.”

References