



POSITION STATEMENT: COMPREHENSIVE LITERACY EDUCATION

► PURPOSE

NASSP states its support for comprehensive literacy education from birth to grade 12 to ensure that all students graduate from high school with the oral language, reading, writing, and comprehension skills necessary to be successful at the postsecondary level and prepared for the global workforce.

► ISSUE

Research conducted by the Wallace Foundation in 2004 found that effective Research demonstrates 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 upon which future learning is built. Research also shows that low-income children are less likely to have access to literacy-rich environments.

In *The Family: America's Smallest School*, Barton and Coley (2007) reported that a child raised in an upper-income family is exposed to 20 million more words than a child in a working-class family and up to 35 million more words than a child in a low-income family. In *Double Dose of Disadvantage: Language Experiences for Low-Income Children in Home and School* (Neuman, Keefer & Pinkham, 2017), researchers found that parents in low-income neighborhoods shortened their sentences, had a less extensive vocabulary, and had lower reading comprehension than parents from working-class neighborhoods. In addition, children from low-income communities attended kindergartens that oversimplified language for students. Teachers 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.



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► ISSUE – CONTINUED

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 an increase of average National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) reading scores for grades 4 and 8 since 1992; however, similar increases were not observed at grade 12. The assumption has been that once students learn the mechanics of reading and writing (i.e., learn to read) in the early grades, they are equipped with the foundation for further literacy comprehension, writing, and critical thinking skills (i.e., reading to learn).

Unfortunately, less attention and investment has been concentrated on the literacy needs of middle level and high school students to ensure that they maintain the progress made at the elementary school level. And a lack of continued resources for the federal Reading First program and underinvestment in the Comprehensive State Literacy Development program 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 the 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 become essential to understanding content (Carnegie Council, 2010).

Furthermore, middle level and high schools often haven't focused on integrating literacy instruction across content areas. Secondary-level teachers need professional development to embed literacy instruction in their content area 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. Results from the NAEP support the need for sustained and comprehensive literacy education. Only 37 percent of 12th-grade students score at or above the proficient level in reading achievement. Further, the average reading score for 12th graders is still below the 1992 average (NAEP, 2015). More recent data is available for elementary and middle level schools, and average reading scores unfortunately decreased at grade 4 for approximately one-third of states between 2017 and 2019, while the 2019 reading scores were lower in more than half of states at grade 8 since 2017 (NAEP, 2019).

In addition, significant disparities persist among socioeconomic, demographic, and ethnic groups at the secondary levels. Although white and Asian/Pacific Islander students have made significant progress on the 12th-grade NAEP reading assessment since 2005, scores for Black and Hispanic students have declined since 1998, and significant achievement gaps still exist for American Indian and Alaska Native students (NAEP, 2015). Furthermore, schools continue to see an increase in the number of children who speak a language other than English at home. The U.S. Census Bureau (2017) reports that the percentage of school-age children who speak a language other than English at home

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increased from 18 to 23 percent from 2000 to 2017. 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 Condition of Education* (NCES, 2020), there are 5 million ELL students in public schools in language assistance programs. Since 2002, there has been a persistent achievement gap between non-ELL and ELL students. At grade 4, the achievement gap between non-ELL and ELL students is 33 points. By grade 8, that gap widens to 45 points. All these statistics clearly indicate the need to integrate academic language development and content learning to students of various demographic and ethnic backgrounds.

Colleges, universities, and employers want students who are able to acquire, evaluate, synthesize, and apply their skills and knowledge across content areas to solve real-world problems. Those expectations require schools to adopt more rigorous standards. The adoption or adaption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) by most states required the reorientation of literacy education as a systematic progression of skills across all grades. The CCSS required increased text complexity and the inclusion of informational texts, which required more literacy instruction and support from birth throughout all levels of education. (NASSP, 2013)

Lastly, research indicates that a student's level of literacy skills is indicative of their achievement in all content areas, including science, technology, engineering, and mathematics courses, and their level of college readiness (ACT, 2006).

► NASSP GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- NASSP is committed to providing all students with equitable educational opportunities, regardless of their language, cultural background, race, or socioeconomic status.
- NASSP is committed to being a major voice in supporting school leaders in their efforts to address literacy education, especially at the middle and high school levels.
- NASSP recognizes that successful schools, particularly schools serving large numbers of high-poverty students and students of color, have placed an emphasis on literacy instruction and achievement (NASSP, 2005).
- NASSP 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 access to professional development aligned with their areas of need.

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► RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FEDERAL POLICYMAKERS

- NASSP 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.

► RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATE POLICYMAKERS

- 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 district-wide 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, generally speaking, secondary teachers lack the 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 the 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 who are able to think critically and comprehend written material, to create partnerships with schools to help them implement successful literacy practices

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► 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.
- (NASSP, 2005)

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