



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, and writing skills necessary to be successful at the postsecondary level and prepared for the global workforce.

ISSUE

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. 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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The challenges become greater as children enter and progress through elementary, middle, 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 has resulted in an increase of average NAEP reading scores for grades 4 and 8 since 1992; however, similar increases have not been 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 and high school students to ensure that they maintain the progress made at the elementary school level. A lack of resources at the state and local level for secondary schools caused many school systems to eliminate positions for reading teachers and literacy coaches at both the middle and high school levels. Compounding the issue is that the literacy demands for middle 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 and high schools lack the capacity to integrate literacy instruction across content areas. Therefore, secondary level teachers need professional development to embed literacy instruction in their content area and to find appropriate level texts for their students to ensure that they receive continued literacy instruction and support as they progress through the middle and high school grades. Results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) support the need for sustained and comprehensive literacy education. Only 38% 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, 2009). Trends also indicate that the literacy development of 13–17 year olds has not changed since 1971 (NAEP Trends in Academic Progress, 2008).

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, 2009). Furthermore, schools continue to see an increase in the number of children who speak a language other than English at home. NCES (2011) reports that from 1980 to 2009, the number of school-age children who speak a language other than English increased significantly from 4.7 to 11.2 million or from 10 to 21 percent of the population. 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, 2013), 4.7 million students in public schools are English language learners, which refers to students in

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language assistance programs. Since 2002, there has been a persistent achievement gap between non-English language and English language learners. At grade 4, the achievement gap between non-ELL and ELL students is 36 points. By grade 8, that gap widens to 44 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 to be 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 of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) by 45 states and the District of Columbia will require the reorientation of literacy education as a systematic progression of skills across all grades. The CCSS require increased text complexity and the inclusion of informational texts, which will require 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).



GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- NASSP is committed to providing all students with equitable educational opportunities, regardless of their language, cultural background, race, or socioeconomic status.
- 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.

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.



RECOMMENDATIONS

NASSP calls on Congress to:

- Provide adequate resources through appropriate federal policy and funding to states and school districts to address the literacy needs of all students from birth to grade 12 so that students graduate with the literacy skills necessary to be college and career ready.
- Fully fund and expand the Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy Program



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NASSP calls on states to:

- 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 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.
- 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.

Work with school districts to provide district-wide professional development opportunities that help middle level and high school teachers teach literacy.

NASSP calls on school districts to:

- 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 on-going 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 and high school level curriculum.
- 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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NASSP calls on school leaders to:

- Determine the school's capacity for literacy improvement.
- 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)