

CRS Report for Congress

The Striving Readers Program

October 14, 2008

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Prepared for Members and
Committees of Congress

The Striving Readers Program

Summary

Many reports have been issued in recent years summarizing what is known about effective methods for improving adolescent literacy. These reports have also included suggestions for school level responses, as well as recommendations for federal and state actions to help improve adolescent literacy. These reports indicate that for some students, reading instruction solely in the early grades is not sufficient. This research suggests that some students need ongoing assistance in adolescence if they are to master the skills they need to succeed in the upper grades and in college and work settings. In particular, the research indicates that students must be fluent readers, have sufficient vocabulary and background knowledge, be able to comprehend complex material, and be motivated and engaged.

The most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress data on reading are 2007 data for 4th and 8th graders and 2005 data for 12th graders. According to these data, both 4th and 8th grade students performed significantly higher in 2007 than in 1992, the first year the test was administered. The percentage of 4th grade students performing at or above the Basic level in reading increased from 62% in 1992 to 67% in 2007. The percentage of 8th grade students performing at or above the Basic level in reading increased from 69% in 1992 to 74% in 2007. In contrast, data for 12th graders indicate that the percentage of students performing at or above the Basic level in reading decreased from 80% in 1992 to 73% in 2005.

In response to concerns about adolescent literacy, the Striving Readers program was initiated through appropriations measures in 2005 to evaluate and implement programs that have the potential to improve adolescent literacy. The U.S. Department of Education awards Striving Readers funds for the implementation and evaluation of reading curricula and professional development programs, as well as other activities intended to improve reading achievement for middle- and high-school students. Grants are awarded competitively to local educational agencies (LEAs) or to partnerships made up of LEAs, institutions of higher education and public or private non-profit or for-profit organizations with expertise in adolescent literacy or rigorous evaluation.

A growing body of research indicating a need for a greater focus on adolescent literacy issues has heightened interest in federal legislation on this issue. The Striving Readers program was initiated as a demonstration program to provide data on programs that are or have the promise of being successful in improving adolescent literacy skills. Congressional consideration of reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in the 111th Congress may include discussion of whether this program should receive a specific authorization in the ESEA and whether evidence from the demonstration program, in conjunction with other research data, supports scaling up the program and converting it to a formula grant program, or whether the evidence is insufficient to support continuation or expansion of the program.

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Overview of Adolescent Literacy Issues

In addition to Members of Congress, parents, reading experts, education professionals, and state and local governments have expressed concern about the current state of adolescent literacy. Data on college readiness indicate that many students leave high school unprepared to handle college-level work. A 2006 ACT report noted that

Only 51 percent of 2005 ACT-tested high school graduates are ready for college-level reading — and, what’s worse, more students are on track to being ready for college level reading in eighth and tenth grade than are actually ready by the time they reach twelfth grade.¹

To become a reader capable of understanding the complex material encountered in high school and beyond, adolescents must have a variety of sophisticated skills. These skills include the following:

how to read purposefully, select materials that are of interest, learn from those materials, figure out the meanings of unfamiliar words, integrate new information with information previously known, resolve conflicting content in different texts, differentiate fact from opinion, and recognize the perspective of the writer....²

Clearly, no single measure of a student’s literacy ability can adequately capture all these skills. However, for simplicity, the discussion of adolescent literacy in this report will use student achievement levels in reading as a measure of adolescent literacy. The data relied upon here to measure reading skills are published by the widely respected National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as the ‘Nation’s Report Card.’ NAEP is the only regular national assessment of student reading achievement.

This report discusses the NAEP achievement levels attained in reading by 4th, 8th, and 12th graders, summarizes some of the recent research literature on adolescent literacy, and discusses the Striving Readers program. It will be updated in response to legislative developments.

¹ *Reading Between the Lines: What the ACT Reveals About College Readiness in Reading*, ACT. 2008. Iowa City, IA.

² *Reading at Risk: How States Can Respond to the Crisis in Adolescent Literacy*, National Association of State Boards of Education. October 2005. Alexandria, VA.

National Assessment of Educational Progress Data

NAEP measures the academic performance of students in the United States in public and private schools in grades 4, 8, and 12. NAEP is administered by the U.S. Department of Education's (ED) National Center for Education Statistics, with oversight provided by the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB).³ The subjects covered by these regular assessments include reading, writing, math and science; in addition, NAEP conducts less frequent assessments in other subjects.

NAEP consists of 2 separate groups of tests. One is the *main assessment*, in which test items (questions) are revised over time in both content and structure to reflect more current views and practices. The main assessment also reports pupil scores in relation to *performance levels* — standards for pupil achievement that are based on score thresholds set by the NAGB. The performance levels are considered to be “developmental” and are intended to place NAEP scores into context. They are based on determinations by NAGB of what pupils should know and be able to do at a basic (“partial mastery”), proficient (“solid academic performance”), and advanced (“superior performance”) level with respect to challenging subject matter.⁴ For this discussion, this CRS report focuses on NAEP's main assessment data because the data are reported in relation to performance levels. These performance levels are useful for indicating what students should be able to do in reading at particular grade levels.

The most recent NAEP data on reading are 2007 data for 4th and 8th graders and 2005 data for 12th graders.⁵ According to these data, both 4th and 8th grade students performed significantly higher in 2007 than in 1992, the first year the test was administered. (See **Table 1**). The percentage of 4th grade students performing at or above the Basic level in reading increased from 62% in 1992 to 67% in 2007. The percentage of 4th graders performing at or above the Proficient level increased from 29% in 1992 to 33% in 2007. The percentage of 8th grade students performing at or above the Basic level in reading increased from 69% in 1992 to 74% in 2007. There was no significant change in the percentage of 8th graders students performing at or above the Proficient level in 2007 compared to 1992.

³ The National Assessment Governing Board is an independent organization whose members are appointed by the U.S. Secretary of Education. The Governing Board provides overall policy direction to the NAEP program. Its members include governors, state legislators, local and state school officials, educators, business representatives, and members of the general public.

⁴ The main NAEP assessments are based on subject area frameworks developed by the National Assessment Governing Board. The main NAEP reading test assesses students on three different contexts for reading: reading for literacy experience, reading for information, and reading to perform a task. NAEP also includes long-term assessments that have not changed in content or structure since they were developed in 1969. Long-term NAEP was originally intended to allow for more reliable comparisons from year to year. For more on NAEP, see CRS Report RL31407, *Education Testing: Implementation of ESEA Title I-A Requirements Under the No Child Left Behind Act*, by Wayne Riddle.

⁵ *The Condition of Education 2008*, U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Programs (NAEP), 2008.

In contrast, data for 12th graders indicate that the percentage of students performing at or above Basic decreased from 80% in 1992 to 73% in 2005, and the percentage performing at or above Proficient decreased from 40% in 1992 to 35% in 2005.⁶

In spite of the improvements in achievement levels of 4th and 8th graders between 1992 and 2007, 33% of 4th graders and 26% of 8th graders continued to read below the Basic level in 2007; that is, they had not attained the partial mastery of grade level reading required to perform at the Basic level. For 12th graders, the percentage of students performing below the Basic level increased from 20% in 1992 to 27% in 2005.

⁶ 2005 data are the most recent data available for 12th graders.

**Table 1. Percentage Of Students At Each Achievement Level in Reading,
Selected Years**
(percentage)

	1992 ^a	1994 ^a	1998 ^a	1998 ^b	2002 ^b	2003 ^b	2005 ^b	2007 ^b
Grade 4								
Below Basic	38	40	38	40	36	37	36	33
At or above Basic	62	60	62	60	64	63	64	67
At or above Proficient	29	30	31	29	31	31	31	33
At Advanced	6	7	7	7	7	8	8	8
Grade 8								
Below Basic	31	30	26	27	25	26	27	26
At or above Basic	69	70	74	73	75	74	73	74
At or above Proficient	29	30	33	32	33	32	31	31
At Advanced	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
Grade 12								
Below Basic	20	25	23	24	26	NA	27	NA
At or above Basic	80	75	77	76	74	NA	73	NA
At or above Proficient	40	36	40	40	36	NA	35	NA
At Advanced	4	4	6	6	5	NA	5	NA

Source: *The Condition of Education 2008*, U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Programs (NAEP). 2008.

Note: NA=Not Available.

- a. Testing accommodations (e.g., extended time, small group testing) for children with disabilities and limited English Proficient students were not permitted.
- b. Testing accommodations permitted. In 1998, testing accommodations were permitted for the first time. Because 1998 was a transition year, 1998 scores are reported both without testing accommodations and with testing accommodations.

Research on Adolescent Literacy

Many reports have been issued in recent years summarizing what is known about effective methods for improving adolescent reading and professional training. These reports have also included suggestions for school-level responses and recommendations for federal and state actions to help improve adolescent literacy.⁷ These reports indicate that for some students, reading instruction solely in the early grades is not sufficient. This research suggests that some students need ongoing assistance in adolescence if they are to master the skills they need to succeed in the upper grades and in college and work settings. In particular, the research indicates that students must be fluent readers, have sufficient vocabulary and background knowledge, be able to comprehend complex material, and be motivated and engaged.⁸

These reports also address the steps needed to help students acquire these skills. A frequently cited report titled *Reading Next — A Vision For Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy* was authored by a panel of 5 experts in education. The panel was created by the Carnegie Corporation and the Alliance for Excellent Education to come up with recommendations to improve adolescent literacy.⁹ The report includes fifteen instructional and infrastructure-related elements that the authors believe are important components of effective adolescent literacy programs. These 15 elements are direct, explicit comprehension instruction; effective instructional principles embedded in content; motivation and self-directed learning; text-based collaborative learning; strategic tutoring; diverse texts; intensive writing; a technology component; ongoing formative assessment of students; extended time for literacy; professional development; ongoing summative assessment of students and programs; teacher teams; leadership; and a comprehensive and coordinated literacy program.¹⁰

⁷ For recommendations for states, see *Reading at Risk: How States Can Respond to the Crisis in Adolescent Literacy*, National Association of State Boards of Education. October 2005. Alexandria, VA.

⁸ Torgeson, J. et al. (2007), *Academic Literacy Instruction for Adolescents: A Guidance Document from the Center on Instruction*. Portsmouth, NH: RMC Research Corporation, Center on Instruction.

⁹ Gina Biancarosa and Catherine Snow, *Reading Next — A Vision For Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy: A Report from Carnegie Corporation of New York*, Alliance for Excellent Education (Washington DC, 2004).

¹⁰ Three of these fifteen elements were listed in the Reading Next Report as the most crucial to building the foundation of any program to improve adolescent literacy, but the report concluded that these three elements should be viewed as just a starting point, not a complete program. These three elements are professional development, formative assessment (frequent ongoing assessment of student progress), and summative assessment (data collection and formal evaluation of program efficacy). Gina Biancarosa and Catherine Snow, *Reading Next — A Vision For Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy: A Report from Carnegie Corporation of New York*, Alliance for Excellent Education (Washington DC, 2004).

In addition, the Institute on Education Sciences of ED issued a practice guide in August of 2008 providing information on evidence-based¹¹ classroom and intervention practices for improving adolescent literacy. In particular, the guide focuses on how to improve reading proficiency. The authors categorized the evidence of effectiveness supporting the research studies they reviewed on adolescent literacy interventions into three categories: strong, moderate, and low. For evidence of the effectiveness of an intervention to be considered strong, the research supporting it must demonstrate a statistically significant finding of positive effects, and the intervention must be generalizable.¹² For evidence of an intervention to be considered moderate, the research supporting it must demonstrate strong causal conclusions, although it may not be generalizable, or the research must be generalizable, but may not support strong causal conclusions. Research considered to have low evidence of efficacy could be based on expert opinions derived from strong findings or theories. On the basis of an extensive review of the research, the Practice Guide recommended several actions to increase reading proficiency that are supported by either strong or moderate evidence.¹³

The Striving Readers Program

The Striving Readers program was initiated to evaluate and implement effective adolescent literacy programs. It was initiated, in part, in response to heightened public attention and an increasing body of research focused on adolescent literacy issues. It was first funded by the Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education FY2005 Appropriations Act under ESEA Section 1502, Title I demonstration authority; it does not have a specific authorization in the ESEA. Section 1502 is a broad, general authority for the demonstration of innovative approaches in the education of disadvantaged students. The Striving Readers program is focused on students in grades 6-12.

ED awards Striving Readers funds for the implementation and evaluation of reading curricula and professional development programs, as well as other activities intended to improve reading achievement for middle- and high-school students. Grants are awarded competitively to local educational agencies (LEAs) eligible for ESEA Title I, Part A grants, who also have significant numbers of middle-school or high-school students reading significantly below grade level or at risk of not making

¹¹ For research to be considered evidence-based, the report requires that “rigorous studies have shown the practices to be associated with improvements in students’ reading proficiency.” *Improving Adolescent Literacy: Effective Classroom and Intervention Practices: A Practice Guide*, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department Of Education (Washington, DC, 2008).

¹² The Guide defines generalizable research as including “... studies that in total include enough of the range of participants and settings on which the recommendation is focused to support the conclusion that the results can be generalized to those participants and settings.” *Adolescent Literacy: Effective Classroom and Intervention Practices: A Practice Guide*, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department Of Education (Washington DC, 2008).

¹³ See [http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practiceguides/adlit_pg_082608.pdf].

adequate yearly progress requirements. Grants may also be awarded to partnerships made up of LEAs, institutions of higher education and public or private non-profit or profit organizations with expertise in adolescent literacy or rigorous evaluation. State educational agencies may apply on behalf of eligible LEAs. Awards may be for up to 5 years, and to the extent feasible, are equally divided between projects that serve middle-school students and those that serve high-school students.

Because the program is new and relatively small, the emphasis is on funding projects likely to expand and improve the existing body of research data on effective adolescent literacy programs. Funded grantees are to focus on practices and programs that are having success in improving adolescent literacy or on innovative programs that are likely to improve adolescent literacy. All funded projects must include the following:

- (1) supplemental literacy interventions targeted to students who are reading significantly below grade level;
- (2) cross-disciplinary strategies for improving student literacy, which may include professional development for subject matter teachers and use of research-based reading and comprehension strategies in classrooms across subject areas; and
- (3) a strong experimental evaluation component.¹⁴

The Striving Readers program was adopted in response to an Administration budget proposal. The Administration requested funding of \$100 million for the program in FY2005, its first year of funding; the program received funding of \$24.8 million. For FY2009 the Administration has requested \$100 million in funding for the program. **Table 2** shows the entire funding history for the program.

Table 2. Striving Readers Funding: 2005-2009

Fiscal Year	Budget Request (\$)	Appropriation (\$)
2005	100,000,000	24,800,000
2006	200,000,000	29,700,000
2007	100,000,000	31,596,000
2008	100,000,000	35,371,000
2009	100,000,000	

Source: U.S. Department of Education budget justifications, selected years.

¹⁴ See [<http://www.ed.gov/programs/strivingreaders>].

Implementation Status

The first awards under this program were made to eight grantees in February of 2006.¹⁵ Each grant was awarded for a five-year period. Appropriations from subsequent years have been used to fund continuation grants for these award recipients. The first school year in which these programs were implemented was 2006-2007; the final school year of funding for these grantees will be 2010-2011. ED established two absolute priorities for the first round of Striving Readers grants:

(1) grantees will use program funds only to serve students who attend schools eligible to receive funds under Part A of Title I and who are in grades 6 through 12; and (2) grantees will (a) implement school-level strategies designed to increase reading achievement by integrating enhanced literacy instruction throughout the curriculum and the entire school, (b) implement an intensive, targeted intervention for students reading at least 2 years below grade level, and (c) carry out a rigorous, independent evaluation of the project that must include an evaluation of the targeted intervention and must use an experimental research design.¹⁶

Both the intensive, targeted interventions (focused on students reading two or more years below grade level), and the school level activities, are to be in place each year of the grant. The school level activities are to serve all the students in grades 6-12 who attend the school(s) benefitting from the grant.¹⁷

Program Performance. Grantees are required to submit annual performance reports to ED. In addition, grantees are required to hire independent evaluators to conduct implementation and impact evaluations of their programs. Implementation reports based on data for the school year 2006-2007 were to be submitted to the Department by September of 2008. These reports are available on ED's Striving Readers website.¹⁸ Grantees are also required to submit an impact report to ED in 2009. In addition to data on the program's impact, these reports are to include updated information on the implementation (for years 1 and 2) of the project. Grantees are also required to provide a final evaluation report at the end of the grant that includes comprehensive impact and implementation data.

ED's Institute of Education Sciences issued an adolescent literacy guide in August of 2008; it also intends to issue two reports (in 2010 and 2011) analyzing the

¹⁵ The current grantees are District #299 of the Chicago Public Schools, Kentucky's Danville School District, Oregon's Multnomah County School District #1, Newark, New Jersey Public Schools, the Ohio Department of Youth Services, the San Diego Unified School District, Massachusetts's Public Schools, and Memphis City Schools.

¹⁶ U.S. Department of Education, *Fiscal Year 2009: Justifications of Appropriation Estimates to the Congress*.

¹⁷ For example, if a grant is for a middle school serving grades 6-8, then the school level activities must serve all three grades.

¹⁸ Per conversations with Marcia Kingman, Striving Readers Program Officer. Implementation reports are available at [<http://www.ed.gov/programs/strivingreaders/performance.html>].

evidence provided by the current grantees' projects. And, the Administration has stated that at its FY2009 funding request (\$100 million), there would be sufficient money to begin an independent evaluation of the program.

Thus far, the only performance data available on the program are based on ED's Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) measures. Striving Readers currently has two performance measures — the first is a measure of the intensive targeted intervention, the second is a measure of the whole school program:

- (1) the percentage of adolescent students reading significantly below grade level who demonstrate a gain in their reading achievement at a minimum of one grade level or its equivalent after participating in an intensive literacy intervention over an academic year.
- (2) the increase in the percentage of students participating in the Striving Readers program who score at or above Proficient on the State's assessment in reading/language arts.

Data on these measures are currently only available for the first year of the program's implementation (for 7 of the 8 grantees). At the end of the 2006-2007 school year, 30% of the students participating in an intensive, targeted intervention had gained at least one grade level in reading achievement. The percentage of participating students scoring at or above Proficient in reading/language arts increased from 59% in the spring of 2006 to 61% in the spring of 2007.

Issues for the 111th Congress

Congressional interest in legislation focusing on adolescent literacy is based in part on the growing body of research indicating that for some students reading instruction in the early grades is not sufficient to ensure that adolescents will be proficient in the reading skills they need for high-school-level work and beyond. The Striving Readers program was initiated as a demonstration program to provide data on programs that are or have the promise of being successful in improving adolescent literacy skills. During reauthorization of the ESEA,¹⁹ Congress may consider whether this program should receive a specific authorization in the ESEA and whether the current demonstration program, in conjunction with other research data, supports scaling up the program and converting it to a formula grant program or whether the evidence is insufficient to support continuation or expansion of the program.

Many existing federal programs can support, among other things, reading instruction for adolescents. However, Striving Readers is the only program solely devoted to this purpose. Other federal education programs that include reading programs as part of the services that can be provided are ESEA Title I-A, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and ESEA Title III, Language Instruction

¹⁹ The ESEA authorization expired with FY2008. Reauthorization may be considered by the 111th Congress.

for Limited English Proficient and Immigrant Students. The Literacy Through School Libraries program (ESEA Title I-B, Subpart 4) provides competitive grants to help LEAs provide up to date library services. Finally, ESEA Title II authorizes programs for teacher training, although the emphasis is on mathematics and science.

Among the issues Congress may grapple with in conjunction with an ESEA reauthorization is whether existing programs can adequately address adolescent literacy issues or whether a dedicated adolescent literacy program with sufficient funding is necessary to help foster improvements in adolescent literacy.