



# NEWSLETTER

## Reading Is Vital!

**R**EADING IS THE FOUNDATION FOR LEARNING AND SUCCESS IN SCHOOL. THE LITERACY RATES FOR SO MANY YOUNG PEOPLE IN OUR SCHOOLS TODAY ARE UNACCEPTABLY LOW AND ARE ONE OF THE MAJOR CONCERNS OF THOSE INVOLVED IN DROPOUT PREVENTION. WHEN WE SEE THE IMPACT OF FAILURE TO READ ON STUDENTS' ABILITY TO DO WELL IN SCHOOL, WE SEE IT SEEPS INTO EVERY ASPECT OF THEIR SCHOOL LIFE. IF YOU CANNOT READ, HOW CAN YOU DO WELL ON THE BASIC TESTS OF READING AND MATH? ALL REQUIRE NOT ONLY DECIPHERING WORDS, BUT UNDERSTANDING THEIR MEANING. THEN, READING IS NEEDED IN THE OTHER CONTENT AREAS, E.G., SCIENCE AND SOCIAL STUDIES. READING IS NEEDED TO FOLLOW DIRECTIONS. READING IS NEEDED TO UNDERSTAND WHAT IS ON THE INTERNET OR TV. READING IS NEEDED TO FILL OUT A JOB APPLICATION. FAILURE TO BE ABLE TO DO ANY OF THESE THINGS, AND MORE, ALSO HAS A MAJOR IMPACT ON A STUDENTS' FEELINGS OF SELF-WORTH AND SUBSEQUENTLY, LIFETIME OUTCOMES.



**S**everal of the individual risk factors that were identified in *Dropout Risk Factors and Exemplary Programs* are connected to poor reading skills: retention and overage for grade; poor attendance; low educational expectations; lack of effort; low commitment to school; and even misbehavior and early aggression can frequently be traced to the frustrations unsuccessful readers are experiencing.

We are often asked about dropout prevention programs: What programs are classified as prevention? Which are intervention strategies? And finally, which are dropout retrieval? Over the years, we have defined prevention strategies as what needs to be done for all students, a universal approach to good teaching and learning; intervention approaches are targeted to specific groups or individuals, for when things are going wrong; and retrieval programs exist to bring back those who have left the educational system, giving them another chance. We can also point to the various approaches to teaching students to read through these three lenses.

**Prevention:** The ideal time to learn to read begins in the preschool years. Children who are exposed in their first years to books, to identifying letters, and to hearing stories, for example, will come to kindergarten and first grade more prepared to become readers. Following up on that are the elementary school years where reading is the major focus.

During the preadolescent and adolescent years, reading instruction begins to become part of other curricular areas. Vocabulary for specific areas of study, whether in biology or geography, must be taught in content areas. This expands a student's ability to read, naturally, yet how many science teachers understand that they are their students' reading teachers!

**Intervention:** Students begin to experience difficulties in reading, first in decoding, but later in actual comprehension. Fortunately, there are research-based approaches to helping students overcome their educational difficulties. One of the major points to emphasize here is to use high-interest materials as the first step in effective teaching.

**Retrieval:** Students who come back to gain a diploma may also have reading difficulties, and the programs effective as interventions can also be used at this stage.

This issue offers you many perspectives and resources on our theme of literacy. Our first article, by Susan King Fullerton, looks at three early literacy programs for elementary school children that have shown favorable evaluations. We also have articles on middle school literacy, by William Bintz, which provides practical suggestions for teachers; and on high school literacy, with Renee Murray describing High Schools That Work and its successful approaches with high school students. Finally, Victoria Ridgeway Gillis shares research from three Content Area Literacy Projects.

It is reassuring to know that although this is an extraordinary challenge, there are proven resources that can make a difference. All children can learn. But first, they need to learn to read.

# The Significance of Early Literacy Efforts in Preventing Later Failure

by Susan King Fullerton

*The most urgent task our generation now confronts is to ensure literacy, not just for the most advantaged, but . . . for all children.*

—Ernest Boyer

If children do not develop adequate literacy skills by the end of first grade, research suggests that there is a strong likelihood that they will remain at risk of failure at the end of third grade. We also know that inadequate literacy development impedes overall school progress; successful literacy learners are able to capitalize upon this early success and continue to achieve while struggling readers continue to lose ground. Without successful intervention, the educational trajectory for at-risk learners is bleak, and the likelihood of poor progress in the upper grades is probable. In fact,

studies suggest that educational difficulties and the likelihood of dropping out of school are highly correlated with early literacy progress and print exposure as early as grades one to three. Low reading achievement is a significant risk factor for lack of academic success, delinquency, and dropping out. These findings suggest that literacy failure is a core factor within a negatively spiraling cycle that leads to low self-concept as well as poor behavioral and academic patterns. It is imperative that we find ways to support struggling readers at every juncture in their education, but doing so within the early grades holds the most potential in improving self-concept, motivation, and academic achievement.

Fortunately, there are early literacy interventions (school-based in grades K-3) that have the potential to close the gap and prevent diminished achievement. There are many early interventions; it is important that administrators make informed decisions in selecting proven, research-based programs. To assist in evaluating education research, including reading interventions for students in grades K-3, the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) was established by the U.S. Department of Education in 2002. In *Education Week* (Manzo, August 15, 2007), only **Reading Recovery**, a one-to-one intervention for at-risk first graders, was noted as having positive effects (the highest rating) or potentially positive effects (the next highest) across the four areas of alphabetics, comprehension, fluency, and general reading achievement. Both **Success for All**, a whole-school-reform program, and **Early Intervention in Reading** (EIR), a classroom-based program, also received favorable ratings. Other program reviews may be examined at the Beginning Reading WWC site, <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/>.

Of particular interest are the factors that contribute to the success of Reading Recovery (RR), Success for All (SFA), and Early Intervention in Reading (EIR). While different in their instructional context, these interventions have shared features:

- Highly trained professionals with intensive professional development (RR requires the most extensive training with initial yearlong, weekly sessions, then continuing professional development.)
- Regular, ongoing assessment of learners
- Daily, individual tutoring (SFA and EIR to a more limited extent than RR)
- Quality texts with natural language (SFA and EIR initially use specially written texts or summaries but transition to literature.)
- Balanced text and word level strategies (All three include instruction in phonemic awareness, repeated reading, fluency, and word identification strategies along with reading connected texts.)
- Home-school connections
- Data collection and program evaluation

These characteristics are intended to assist school decision-makers as they consider appropriate interventions. Intervening early is a critical aspect of promoting school success for at-risk learners, but quality classroom instruction is also essential. Success is unlikely, however, if either of the two is ineffective or they are not working in concert. Only when there is a partnership of highly effective classroom literacy instruction and early intervention is there the potential to diminish the numbers of children who are at risk of literacy failure and poor success in later grades.

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National  
Dropout Prevention  
Center/Network

## NEWSLETTER

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# Network Notes

## Our Guest Editor

■ Network member Patrick J. O'Connor is on the faculty in the College and Graduate School of Education, Health and Human Services at Kent



State University. Dr. O'Connor teaches, conducts research, and publishes in the areas of high-performance workforce, career-technical teacher education, and at-risk youth. He is a frequent speaker and presenter to community, business, and professional organizations.

He is the author of two college marketing textbooks as well as numerous journals and monographs including the NDPC/N publication, *The High-Performance Workforce and the At-Risk Student*. He also authors books to motivate "reluctant" readers. Dr. O'Connor has held similar positions in Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Georgia.

## Solutions News

### Solutions to the Dropout Crisis

■ The interest in the radio webcast, *Solutions to the Dropout Crisis*, continues to grow! For the May broadcast, listeners learned about bullying and engaged in conversation with Dr. Susan Limber about bullying prevention. This program is now archived on our Web site, [www.dropoutprevention.org/webcast](http://www.dropoutprevention.org/webcast), and is an excellent professional development opportunity available to you and your colleagues whenever you want!

The June program will be on engaging youth through service-learning, and this broadcast ends the school year. Like all the other broadcasts, this will be archived on our Web site for you to listen to when you have the time.

We will resume *Solutions* again in August. Stay tuned and do let us know what dropout prevention solutions you would like for us to highlight for next year's programming schedule.

## Meet the Authors

■ With this mailing, you will receive a copy of the latest publication of the National Dropout Prevention Center—*Bouncing Back: Strengthening Resilience Through Service-Learning* by Marty Duckenfield, Sam Drew, and Rebecca Flood. The book introduces the reader to what resilience looks like: Relationships, Independence, Competence, Creativity, and Optimism (RICCO) and how the effective strategy of service-learning can foster the development of these traits in all young people.

The authors have collaborated together on many service-learning projects over the past 10 years, from an intergenerational service-learning project in South Carolina, to serving as the Southern Partner in the National Service-Learning Exchange. In addition, all three have developed and presented at NDPC's Summer Institute as well as at national conferences on the topic of service-learning and resilience.

Marty Duckenfield is Public Information Director at the National Dropout Prevention Center; Dr. Sam Drew is Associate Director of the NDPC; and Rebecca Flood works with the NDPC on a variety of service-learning projects.



Pictured left to right: Rebecca Flood, Sam Drew, and Marty Duckenfield.

## Come to Atlanta

■ Have you put the dates of November 16-19, 2008, on your professional development calendar? Those are the dates of the next National Dropout Prevention Network Conference to be hosted in Atlanta, Georgia, this year. Come learn about Georgia's Graduation Coaches, who are in every school district in Georgia. Meet colleagues from across the United States and beyond, and share your best practices with them. An outstanding conference is being planned, and you can learn more about it by going to our Web site today!



## Update on Update

■ How many of you are aware that every month the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network puts out a timely document, online, known as *Dropout Prevention Update*? This free online newsletter is chock-full of information regarding the latest in grants, publications, research reports, and news from the international arena. If you would like to subscribe to this excellent resource, contact us at [ndpc@clemson.edu](mailto:ndpc@clemson.edu) and we will add you to our subscription list. Expect each issue to come to your email doorstep on or about the first day of every month.

## NDPC/N Strategic Planning

■ Under the leadership of Board Chair, John Murray, the NDPC/N is working on a strategic plan for the Center/Network. There are six strategic goals: research, information services, knowledge transfer, evaluation activities, professional development and technical assistance, and resource development.

The Strategic Planning Committee, composed of John Murray, Stu Udell, Sandy Addis, Wanda Creel, Andrea Foggy-Paxton, Debra Duardo, and Center staff, will be convening in Clemson this July to take the next steps needed to make these strategic plans a reality.

# Middle School Intervention Strategies For At-Risk Youth

by Bill Bintz

*Very few older struggling readers need help to read the words on a page; their most common problem is that they are not able to comprehend what they read. Obviously, the challenge is not a small one. (Reading Next, p. 3)*

The challenge of improving reading achievement continues. The National Association of Educational Progress (NAEP) has been assessing reading achievement since 1971. The results indicate that reading achievement has been mostly flat for the past 35 years. In some years, reading scores improved; in others, they declined. In either case, scores were insignificantly higher or lower, especially with respect to closing the achievement gap between racial/ethnic and gender gaps. What's the problem? Teachers and students can provide some insights. Teachers often state: "My students can read, that is, they can read words. But they can't comprehend what they read." Similarly, students often state: "I hate reading. I can read the words, but I don't understand what I read." What can we do about this in middle school? Many ideas come to mind but the following four are particularly important. Middle school teachers can improve their student's reading ability by incorporating all four into their teaching.

1. **Reading Aloud:** We've known for some time now that listening comprehension precedes, or at least goes hand-in-hand, with print comprehension. Think about "lap reading" and "bedtime reading." As parents read, children are listening to stories and in the process are learning about stories, characters, and illustrations. They are also learning what adults mean by the word "reading." That's why it is so important that parents read to preschool children and continue reading to them during elementary school. It is also important that

reading aloud continues into middle and high school. Among other things, teachers can read aloud to older students in order to demonstrate how to comprehend the difficult informational texts that are so prevalent in the upper grades. For parents and teachers interested in learning more about reading aloud, *The Joy of Reading Aloud* by Jim Trelease is an excellent resource.

2. **Selecting High-Interest Materials:** What teachers ask students to read really does matter. Reading materials that are boring and uninteresting can be quite harmful to students. Typically, students who are unable to comprehend what they read become convinced they are just poor readers. In many cases, the students will then avoid reading at all costs. Being asked to read materials that are interesting, meaningful, and relevant has exactly the opposite effect. Students comprehend these materials much better, have better discussions about the material, and develop more positive attitudes about reading. For parents and teachers interested in learning more about selecting good reading materials, I recommend looking at the American Library Association Web site ([www.ala.org](http://www.ala.org)).
3. **Strategies Are Important:** Selecting high-interest materials is a good start. But students also need learning strategies to use with them. By learning strategies, I mean guides that students can use before, during, or after reading that will help them comprehend what they are reading. One good



example is a graphic organizer. Fortunately, there are hundreds of books and resources on reading strategies. For those interested in learning more about this topic, I recommend *Strategies That Work* by Stephanie Harvey and Ann Goudvis.

4. **Reading Creates Vocabulary:** Reading is the best way to develop a good vocabulary. Students who read extensively have extensive vocabularies. The opposite is also true. Middle school teachers can help students by using vocabulary strategies before, during, and after reading. For more information about vocabulary strategies, I recommend *Words, Words, Words* by Janet Allen.

These ideas are not magic bullets, but they can help improve student reading achievement in middle school students, especially for students who are at risk. These suggestions are also easy and inexpensive to implement. I hope they will start some new conversations between parents and teachers on how to work together to do just this.

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# Helping All High School Students Read Better

by Renee Murray

It's not about the test, but too often the little reading instruction that happens in high school is intended only to help students "pass" the state graduation test or an English end-of-course test. Even students who cross this obstacle often read at levels too low to be ready for college and careers. According to ACT, only half of high school graduates read well enough to be ready for the next steps.

Schools must simply become more focused on the six million American middle and high school students who read at a "below basic" level, a level that closely mirrors the percentage of students dropping out of high school.

Although there is not a great deal of research about literacy for high school students, it is consistent. We know enough to help students improve their reading skills and thereby improve their performance in every other content area.

Some students need intensive interventions. A few high school students—in most schools, less than 10%—still need help with decoding and basic fluency. These students need "pull-out" daily assistance with a reading specialist. However, many more students are reading one to three years below grade level. They have the word-level skills, but need help in comprehension.

High Schools That Work (HSTW) has piloted an approach to help underprepared high school freshmen

who are reading two to three years below grade level quickly "catch up." Entering freshmen take a first semester elective English course that focuses on essential literacy skills. Unlike other drill-and-kill models, the instruction in this course happens within the context of

high-interest reading materials and activities. In one semester, virtually all students improve their reading and writing skills at least one grade level equivalent and some as much as five levels. More importantly, over 90% are successful in a college-preparatory English course second semester.

Often the senior year transition can be just as difficult. HSTW has worked with a group of schools to implement a transitional senior English course that takes a different approach from the typical British or world literature survey. Focused on mastery of essential reading and writing skills, the course actively engages students in real-world texts as well as the classics. Although students are asked to comprehend, analyze, and synthesize complex texts, they do so in the context of writing that goes beyond literary essays. Students who successfully complete the course raise their scores on college placement tests so that they avoid non-credit-bearing college courses.

Certain classroom practices pay huge dividends for all students, no matter what their income level or ethnicity. When schools adopt these practices, achievement in reading, mathematics, and science all improve significantly. A special analysis of over 20,000 high school seniors in HSTW schools showed that students who reported a common set of practices were more likely to be proficient readers.

In English classes, students were more likely to

- Read an assigned book outside of class
- Discuss what they read with other students
- Draft and revise a paper that was graded

Across all classes, they were more likely to

- Word-process a paper
- Revise their writing several times
- Complete short writing assignments every month
- Complete research projects
- Read at least six books

- Develop and analyze tables, charts, and graphs
- Complete written lab reports
- Solve "word problems"

Beyond these changes, all teachers need to support students in their reading tasks. Students daily encounter multiple content areas that have their own vocabulary; textual formats; stylistic conventions; and ways of understanding, analyzing, interpreting, and responding to words on the page. Teachers must help students develop strategies to deal with a variety of texts. Numerous studies have demonstrated that it is most helpful to teach comprehension strategies, text structures, and word-level strategies while students are engaged in reading challenging, content-rich texts. Such skills don't stick when practiced for their own sake. Rather, students learn those skills best when they have compelling reasons—such as the desire to make sense of interesting materials—to use them. However, as the Alliance for Excellent Education reports: "Most (teachers) devote little if any class time to showing students, explicitly, what it means to be a good reader or writer in the given subject area. And most students engage in very little discussion of what they have read."

Everyone has a role in helping all students become proficient readers.

1. Schools need to scaffold support for struggling readers by offering the right level of intervention.
2. Teachers need to become more aware of the textual challenges in their courses and provide support for students before, during, and after reading.
3. Administrators need to provide professional development to help staff members consider effective literacy practices and then monitor schoolwide practices to ensure that students are getting the right experiences to become better readers.

—Renee Murray

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# Book Review

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*Endangered Minds: Why Children Don't Think and What We Can Do About It.* Jane Healy, 1990. Touchstone Books, New York. [ISBN No. 0-684-85620-4]

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This book may have been written in 1990, but its message is even more relevant to today's world. *Endangered Minds: Why Children Don't Think and What We Can Do About It*, by Jane Healy, does a masterful job of taking scientific knowledge and educational expertise and showing readers what could be a root cause of the educational crisis today, particularly in regards to reading. Today's society is actually changing our children's brains, which are physically shaped by experience.

Consider these troubling statistics. Healy cites a study by Dr. Bernice Cullinan of New York University. A large group of typical fifth graders were queried about the average amount of time they spent reading outside of school. Fifty percent (50%) read four minutes a day or less, 30% read two minutes a day or less; and 10% read nothing. Yet the same children watched an average of 130 minutes of TV per day.

The conclusion? Our society is becoming increasingly alliterate, i.e., a person who knows how to read but who doesn't choose to read.

How can this be? Healy shows us that "experience—what children do every day, the ways in which they think and respond to the world, what they learn, and the stimuli to which they decide to pay attention—shapes their brains. Not only does it change the ways in which the brain is used (functional change), but it also causes physical alterations (structural change) in neural wiring systems." Just like in computers, hardwiring needs to be in place, and if the wires aren't there, the child is not able to carry out the function.

Healy makes the case that although children's minds are malleable, we know what things we can do to create an environment for children so their brains will grow. And the bottom line is if the child is interested, curious, asking questions, challenged, and stimulated by active involvement in their learning, they are indeed growing their brains.

With so many children coming to school without the most basic early learning experiences foundational to literacy, this book addresses one of the most important issues in dropout prevention today. Parent educators, as well as early childhood teachers, play a major role in true dropout prevention. The lessons from this book can do much to ensure that the first steps in our children's education—what happens before kindergarten—are taken with the care they deserve.

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## Resources

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There are many organizations that support the development of effective literacy skills to prepare people for success in all aspects of life. Though literacy is developed over the lifespan, most organizations believe that effective literacy development begins before a child reaches school. The following organizations are excellent resources to learn about literacy across the lifespan that begin with the pre-school years.

### Center for Literacy Studies

Center for Literacy Studies, located at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville, conducts research and offers practical guides for schools, parents and teachers. [www.cls.utk.edu](http://www.cls.utk.edu)

### National Institute for Literacy

Affiliated with the U.S. Department of Education, this organization is the most comprehensive source of research, data, and best practices associated with literacy development across the lifespan. [www.nifl.gov](http://www.nifl.gov)

### Evenstart

Evenstart is an educational service program focused on family literacy designed to break the cycle of illiteracy and poverty. Two Web resources to contact: [www.evenstart.org](http://www.evenstart.org) and [www.ed.gov/programs/evenstartformula](http://www.ed.gov/programs/evenstartformula)

### Headstart

Headstart is a well-established program with successful history to support literacy for children and families in pre-school settings. Two Web resources to contact: [www.acdf.hhs.gov/programs](http://www.acdf.hhs.gov/programs) and [www.ehsnrc.org](http://www.ehsnrc.org)

### America Reads

America Reads is an organization connecting tutoring with schools and communities with the goal to assist every child to learn to read by the end of the third grade. [www.ed.gov/inits/americanreads](http://www.ed.gov/inits/americanreads)

### National Institute for Family Literacy

National Institute for Family Literacy is an organization dedicated to improving literacy of underprivileged children and families. Many resources are available which can be viewed at the Web site [www.familit.org](http://www.familit.org)

## Events

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Nov. 16-19, 2008 Atlanta, GA  
20th Annual National Dropout Prevention Network Conference, *Carrying the Torch of Dreams: Every Student Graduates*  
[www.dropoutprevention.org](http://www.dropoutprevention.org)

Sept. 18-19, 2008 Anaheim, CA  
National Mentoring Summit  
*Mentoring—The Magic of Connections*  
[www.regonline.com/nationalmentoringsummit2008](http://www.regonline.com/nationalmentoringsummit2008)

# Research

National data provide evidence that a crisis in adolescent literacy exists. Although NAEP scores from 2005 and 2007 increased in the percentage of students scoring basic and above at the 4th and 8th grade, they were not significant. Further, there was no change at the 8th grade in the percentage of students scoring proficient and advanced from 2005 to 2007, and the percentage of students scoring proficient and advanced actually declined from 4th to 8th grade.<sup>1</sup> This does not bode well for the economic health of this nation. Proficient and advanced levels of literacy will be entry levels of competence for most jobs in the 21st century. How did we get to this point in adolescent literacy, and what can schools and districts do about it?

As students move into middle and high schools, narrative text is increasingly scarce and expository or informational text becomes the norm. Literacy demands, both in the amount and difficulty of reading, increase. At the same time, literacy instruction decreases or ceases to be a visible part of students' learning landscape.<sup>2</sup> Reading instruction offered at middle and high school levels tends to be a separate course in the curriculum taught by teachers educated in reading, but not in any specific content area. Lack of transfer to subject matter contexts renders such literacy instruction less than effective.<sup>3</sup> In short, literacy instruction cannot be provided in isolation. It must be infused through all content area classes. Yet, secondary teachers are educated in specific content areas, not in reading, and are often resistant to content area reading strategies. The link between the quality of instruction and student achievement suggests that professional development in literacy for content area teachers is critical to advancing levels of student literacy.<sup>4</sup> What are some sources of professional development in adolescent literacy?

A recent publication by the Regional Educational Lab, Southeast, compared a variety of initiatives aimed at improving adolescent literacy, including professional development.<sup>5</sup> The report is an excellent source of information about resources

to help improve adolescent literacy. Two professional development projects from this publication are of interest because they both involve content area teachers in activities to develop teacher understanding of literacy across the curriculum. A third project is funded by the South Carolina Commission on Higher Education and is involved in similar activities targeting content area teachers. These projects, summarized in Table 1, involve three principles of adolescent literacy: (1) Content determines process, that is, the content to be read determines the kinds of cognitive processes involved in comprehending the text. (2) Assessment drives instruction, that is, teachers use formative assessment to determine where students are on the trajectory of learning. (3) Active engagement is key to learning, that is, students must be actively engaged in learning the material. What are some guidelines, in addition to the three just mentioned, that teachers can use to make their instruction more effective for all learners, but particularly for struggling adolescent learners?

Three suggestions, if employed consistently, result in more effective instruction. First, pay attention to prior knowledge. Using brainstorming, chapter previews, or anticipation guides helps students activate their prior knowledge and helps teachers determine if it is appropriate and sufficient. Second, provide enough support so that students can be successful learners; this may be in the form of charts students complete as they read. A chart telegraphs what is important to pay attention to as students read the assignment. Finally, provide time for reflection on content being learned and the process used

to learn it. Building in time to discuss the content as well as the process involved in learning helps develop crucial metacognitive thinking. Ultimately, involvement in content area reading professional development helps content area teachers and faculties develop expertise that is reinvested each year in students who are becoming independent learners.

## Endnotes

1. National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). (2007). *The nation's report card*. Washington DC: National Center for Educational Statistics. Retrieved May 2, 2008 from [http://nationsreportcard.gov/reading\\_2007/r0001.asp](http://nationsreportcard.gov/reading_2007/r0001.asp)
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Table 1. Content Area Literacy Projects

Project	Website for additional information
Creating Independence through student owned strategies [CRISS]	<a href="http://www.projectcriss.com/index.php">http://www.projectcriss.com/index.php</a>
Strategic Literacy Initiative at WestEd – Reading Apprenticeship	<a href="http://www.wested.org/cs/sli/print/docs/sli/home.htm">http://www.wested.org/cs/sli/print/docs/sli/home.htm</a>
Center of Excellence for Adolescent Literacy and Learning	<a href="http://www.clemson.edu/ceall">www.clemson.edu/ceall</a>

# Viewpoint

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A recent report from America's Promise, *Cities in Crisis*, is the latest report to chronicle the sad situation of dropout and at-risk youth in the U.S. The report focused mainly on the critical nature of the situation in 50 major urban areas such as Detroit, Baltimore, and others. The report calls the nature of urban at-risk youth a "catastrophe" for America. This report is consistent with other reports that also focus on the problem in rural and suburban communities. In short, the dropout crisis exists everywhere. It is just worse in some communities. It truly is a national challenge.

The high costs associated with dropout are well documented. The statistics tell us loud and clear how serious the situation is. We are now even using terms like "dropout factories." And, there is considerable evidence that the problem gets worse regardless of the best efforts of many to address it. Something is critically wrong.

We have a situation that is well understood. We direct extensive resources dealing with it head on as well as billions related to the resulting

costs associated with it. In the end, the problem just seems to fester. In some cases, our best efforts may actually be contributing to the difficulties. So, what could possibly be so wrong?

A starting point to examine this challenge is for leaders to understand and accept a few basic, underlying concepts. First, this is a very complex situation that evolves over a long period of time. In fact, the roots of dropping out begin before a student even arrives at the school door. Second, it involves parents, community, school, and learner. Each contributes to the problem as well as to the solution. Third, because of the first two points, the problem is multifaceted and thus solutions must be multifaceted. In many cases, the solutions we advance and fund are single in nature and only address individual pieces of the dilemma. Finally, the inability to effectively read is lurking in the shadows at each critical point along the dropout continuum. In this respect, reading is both the problem and the solution.

There is hope though. I suggest there are three major reasons to be optimistic. First, we have a great deal of knowledge about dropout

as it has been extensively studied and researched. Second, we have a wealth of talent in many dedicated, hard-working professionals already on board trying desperately to alleviate the struggles of at-risk youth. Finally, dropout prevention is receiving more media and national attention in recent years than it ever has. These three factors combined—knowledge, talent, and attention—give us our best shot at really making a difference in this critical area.

However, it is now up to us all to act on the opportunity. This will require addressing some serious, and possibly uncomfortable, questions and answers. Our success will be related to our ability to confront one of the most difficult aspects: literacy.

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The purpose of Viewpoint is to allow professionals to express their opinions about issues related to dropout prevention. The opinions expressed by these authors do not necessarily reflect those of the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network.

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 National Dropout Prevention Center/Network



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