



# NEWSLETTER

## Engaging the Disengaged Learner

**F**INDINGS FROM A RECENT REPORT BY THE CENTER FOR EDUCATION POLICY RESEARCH AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY HAVE STARTLED MANY PEOPLE. ARE THERE INDICATIONS AS EARLY AS FIRST GRADE THAT CHILDREN MAY BE AT RISK OF DISENGAGING FROM SCHOOL? THE NATIONAL DROPOUT PREVENTION CENTER AND OTHERS CERTAINLY BELIEVE THAT THERE ARE.

**T**he Harvard report is titled *Dropping Out: Is Your First Grader At Risk?* (Sapers, 2014). Among the many findings is that first-grade students are at risk of disengaging from school and potentially dropping out later based on certain factors. The report concludes that by the third marking period of the first grade, students who are absent nine or more times, are below grade level in reading, and/or have a grade point average less than 1.2 are at risk. This group of students may become part of the 47% of dropouts identified in *The Silent Epidemic* (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006) who reported lack of engagement as a primary reason they left school. This report and numerous others inform us that student engagement, or lack thereof, is a multifaceted problem including student motivation to engage. As such, it requires a multifaceted solution among many players including schools, students, families, and communities. No single strategy will work to motivate all students. Motivating students often requires a combination of strategies that address the specific reasons why a student has become disengaged from school (Usher & Kober, 2012).

The Harvard report also mentions the importance of reading on level by the third grade. In most schools, students learn to read in grades K-3 and read to learn after that. In some respects, the die is cast for fourth-grade

students who are behind in reading. They often spend the next few years trying to catch up to their peers, and academic disengagement can be a by-product. Many school districts think of graduation as a high school problem. In reality, student engagement is a function of many elements over a long time period.

The costs of dropping out (the end result of disengagement) are very high. One lament is “when the school door closes, the prison door opens.” This student population has less chance for higher education, high-wage/full-time work, quality of life, and is less likely to vote or volunteer in their communities. They also drain many resources. Statistics indicate it is less expensive to send students to college than to incarcerate and/or rehabilitate them. An investment in keeping students engaged and in school is a valuable investment.

This issue of the newsletter examines a few of the dimensions to student engagement. Schools, students, policymakers, families, and communities are all part of the solution. Our hope is this issue will lift up various aspects of this multifaceted problem. Moreover, it may be most valuable to prompt all of us to ask the tough questions and be willing to address the tough answers on how we can



work together to increase student engagement. If we are to address the needs of all members of our society, we need to increase the engagement of those most in need.

—Patrick J. O'Connor  
Guest Editor

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# Reengaging Middle School Readers and Writers With Flash Fiction

by Kathy Batchelor

Middle school students are consumers and creators of texts. They tweet, blog, email, text, and post to social media sites, which makes writing part of their “personal” lives. When these students later become working adults, writing will also become part of their “work” lives. Over 80% of blue-collar workers and 90% of white-collar workers use writing as part of their jobs (National Commission on Writing, 2005). Despite the need for strong writing skills, many students do not develop this ability in the education system (Graham, Capizzi, Harris, Hebert, & Morphy, 2013).

The combination of effective reading and writing instruction can assist student engagement and motivation in school, preventing them from falling further behind their peers. Popular culture is one way to provide meaningful reading and writing opportunities. What if teachers brought in out-of-school literacies, such as digital texts,

magazines, fan fiction, graphic novels, video game manuals/cheat codes, and online flash fiction forums into the classroom? Two excellent strategies to engage students are flash fiction forums and mentor texts.

I’ve had the pleasure of working with many middle and high school students identified as “struggling” readers and writers. Their motivation and engagement with in-school literacies is low. However, student interest and engagement increased when I introduced them to flash fiction. Flash fiction refers to a fictional short story (typically consisting of 250-750 words) connected to the human condition. Currently, there are many online flash fiction forums, and new flash genres, such as flash sci-fi and flash nonfiction, appear daily. The Internet has certainly expanded the interest in flash fiction in all its forms. Great flash pieces can be found in *Flash Fiction Forward* (Thomas & Shapard, 2006).

Reading high-quality flash fiction pieces, students abandoned their dislike for reading and writing and transformed into a laudable community of readers and writers. This was done with mentor texts. Mentor texts are exemplar models of work in a genre. Mentor texts allow students to study how writers craft their sentences and can assist in understanding new text structures. Furthermore, mentor texts can serve as a “powerful tool for helping students contextualize and situate their own language and experiences within the stories of other writers” (Newman, 2012, p. 25). Incorporating mentor texts teaches students that reading is an integral part of writing (Batchelor & King, 2014).

When struggling students reflected on their reading-writing connections with flash, many stated they viewed themselves as readers and writers. Students were drawn into flash, lingering within the text. They explained they could not stop thinking about certain stories. Students who rarely shared their understanding of a reading suddenly



felt the urge to ask questions, make predictions, and to find out if other readers felt the same way they did about many of flash’s ambiguous endings. They also realized that they could reread the text several times, developing new meaning with each

new reading. These are all qualities of a successful reader.

Additionally, students who asked how long a piece of writing needed to be, found themselves revising to condense their own work. Students who rarely turned in assignments suddenly could not decide which story to submit to the class anthology out of the four or five they authored.

Most importantly, students became risk-takers with their written content, modeling their writing after mentor texts they enjoyed. They became active readers and writers. Suddenly, via mentor texts, students who disliked reading and writing grew more confident, found playfulness in a process they formerly found agonizing, and gained firsthand experience with the power of words.

—Kathy Batchelor  
Assistant Professor  
Miami of Ohio University

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National  
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## NEWSLETTER

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# National Dropout Prevention Specialist Certification Program Launched

The first series of sessions toward earning a National Dropout Prevention Specialist (NDPS) certificate will be offered during the 2015 Annual At-Risk Youth National FORUM, February 15-18, 2015, in Myrtle Beach, SC. Announced at the recent National Dropout Prevention Network (NDPN) conference in Louisville, KY, “the NDPS certification program will enhance and verify participants’ knowledge and expertise in executing strategies for raising graduation rates and assisting at-risk youth,” said Dr. Elizabeth P. Reynolds, Executive Director of the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (NDPC/N).

Teachers, counselors, administrators, and anyone working with or on behalf of at-risk youth services are eligible for the certification program. Registration requires submission of an application and one-time fee of \$350. Detailed program information is at [www.dropoutprevention.org](http://www.dropoutprevention.org).

The long-awaited NDPS certification program was “greeted enthusiastically when announced in Louisville and generated tremendous interest in addition to on-the-spot registration commitments,” said Reynolds. The program’s purpose is to broaden NDPN’s impact in urban, suburban, and rural areas while positively impacting graduation rates and intervention on behalf of at-risk youth. “Few organizations have a membership as committed and passionate as ours,” said Dr. Sandy Addis, NDPC/N Associate Director. “Our certification program verifies that our professionals are informed, networked to fellow experts, and up-to-date on the latest proven strategies in dropout prevention,” he added. “We also hope that program graduates will make their expertise available to school districts that are striving to reduce dropout.” The need for the program is evident in districts throughout the country. “It is tremendously important that schools and communities continue to collaborate in developing solutions for the challenges they face,” said Addis.

The NDPS program incorporates the NDPC/N’s 15 Effective Strategies, which have provided the foundation of the organization’s 28-year history and relevance in dropout prevention, intervention, and recovery. Those strategies include: active learning, after-school opportunities, alternative schooling, career and technology education, early childhood education, early literacy development, educational technology, family engagement, individualized instruction, mentoring/tutoring, professional development, safe learning environments, school-community collaboration, service-learning, and systemic renewal.

Program sessions will be offered at NDPC/N events, beginning with the 2015 At-Risk Youth National FORUM. Further opportunities will be offered at the 2015 National Forum on Dropout Prevention for Native and Tribal Communities, April 26-29, 2015, in Prior Lake, MN; and the NDPN conference in San Antonio, TX, October 25-28, 2015. Registrants can take up to 24 months to complete the professional learning and field project requirements to receive their NDPS certificate; however, “fast track” program graduates could receive their certificate as soon as the 2015 Network Conference in San Antonio.

Mark R. Cheatham  
Editor

## Network Notes

### Solutions to the Dropout Crisis

■ The second Tuesday of each month, link to [www.dropoutprevention.org](http://www.dropoutprevention.org)/webcast at 3:30 PM ET for a free, hour-long professional development video webcast. **December 9**—Shanan Chappell discusses preliminary findings on strategies schools can use to address dropout issues specific to their challenges. **January 13, 2015**—Pat O’Connor and Bill Kist discuss *New Literacies for the Engaging Classroom*.

### Save These Dates!

■ Our **2015 Annual At-Risk Youth National FORUM** is themed *Success Within Reach: Strategies for At-Risk Youth*, and takes place February 15-18, 2015, at the Embassy Suites at Kingston Plantation in Myrtle Beach, SC. Conference strands include juvenile justice and law enforcement; student, family, and community engagement; interacting with specific populations; leadership

and policy; literacy for life success; behavioral support; digital and new ways of learning; and career and transitional preparation.

Initiatives and programs for increasing graduation rates within cultural communities will be shared at our **2015 National Forum on Dropout Prevention for Native and Tribal Communities**. This Forum takes place April 26-29, 2015, at the Mystic Lake® Casino Hotel in Prior Lake, MN. Forum workshop topics include addressing the opportunity gap, instructional strategies to increase learning, emotional supports, school climate—safety and student wellness, service-learning and restorative justice, digital communication and engagement, reengagement and recovery strategies, and culture and language. For updates on these and other NDPC/N events for more information, or to register, please visit [www.dropoutprevention.org/conferences](http://www.dropoutprevention.org/conferences)

### Meet Our Guest Editor

■ Dr. Patrick “Pat” O’Connor coordinates the teacher education programs in Career-Technical Education at Kent State University, Kent, OH. A previous and welcome *Newsletter* guest editor, Dr. O’Connor is also the author of *Improving Reading for Academic Success: Strategies for Enhancing Adolescent Literacy*, with Bill Bintz and Renee Murray. In addition to teaching, Dr. O’Connor conducts research in the areas of high-performance workforce, career-technical teacher education, and at-risk youth. He is a frequent speaker and presenter on education issues for community, business, and professional organizations.



## Creating a Culture of Engagement Across the Educational Spectrum

by Joshua Cramer

Since 1989, the National Center for Families Learning (NCFL), formerly the National Center for Family Literacy, has helped more than one million families make educational and economic progress by pioneering—and continuously improving—family engagement programs at more than 90 sites across the country. The body of work of NCFL ranges from building, supporting, and sustaining family literacy and family engagement initiatives, to the creation of digital family learning platforms such as [www.wonderopolis.org](http://www.wonderopolis.org) and [www.familytimemachine.com](http://www.familytimemachine.com). The center also provides comprehensive professional development consultation and services for school districts, libraries, and nonprofit organizations. The staff at the center are driven by their experience fostering dual generational change and family engagement ideals into effective dropout prevention practices.

It is well documented that effective family engagement efforts increase academic achievement and, in turn, graduation rates. The first step for any organization seeking to effectively engage families in the educational process is an exploration of its beliefs about parents. This is especially true for dropout prevention efforts. Many parents of students at a statistically higher risk of academic failure—including some low-income and ethnic minority groups—have an historical distrust of the school system. With education professionals who believe all parents want what is best for their children and who are ready to share power with parents as they work to support student achievement, dropout rates will decrease.

Once the foundational belief that parents are partners in their children's education is firmly in place, it is incumbent upon school- and community-based education professionals to identify family engagement practices that are culturally, linguistically, and

developmentally appropriate. While it is beyond the scope of this discussion to identify all the possible dropout prevention practices for different age groups, the following examples represent two of many best practices supported by NCFL. In both cases the organizations have adopted the belief that all parents are essential to the educational process. The result has been greater student engagement.

### Springdale Public Schools, Springdale, Arkansas

Springdale Public Schools (SPS) is dedicated to high-quality family engagement. In fact, they devoted an entire goal of their 2013 Race to the Top District (RTT-D) grant award to “developing parents as partners in the educational process.” A significant portion of the \$26 million SPS RTT-D award was expended on family engagement strategies, such as the addition of five new comprehensive family literacy sites (building, in part, on the successful implementation of an NCFL-led Toyota Family Learning grant); the implementation of student-led conferencing; expansion of parent information nights; additional parent leadership opportunities; and college and career readiness seminars for families. SPS reports the following successes as a result of their evidence-based family learning program:

- Increased percentages of proficient scores for all ELL students
- Improved self-efficacy among parents
- Improved parent attendance at school events
- Statistically significant increases by parents on the BEST literacy assessment
- Increased percentages of parents reading to their children four times and five times per week (39% and 42%, respectively)

### Toberman Neighborhood Center, San Pedro, California

Since 1903, Toberman Neighborhood Center (TNC) has provided critical services to families living in some of the poorest communities in the Los Angeles area. The organization's mission is to assist Harbor Area families and individuals by delivering asset-based, life-changing services that encourage, inform, educate, and empower them to live healthy and purposeful lives. In 2013, TNC was chosen as one of five sites in the U.S. to implement NCFL's Toyota Family Learning initiative, which includes the implementation of parent skill-building courses, Parent and Child Together (PACT) Time, family service-learning, and family mentoring. After the 2013 program year, Toyota Family Learning results indicate:

- Participants in Toyota Family Learning are more likely to read to, read with, and listen to their children read
- Technology usage for educational purposes increased
- Parent engagement in schools increased, with particular growth seen in the area of parent volunteerism
- Community involvement and leadership increased by 30-50 percentage points
- Sibling and father involvement increased significantly

—Joshua Cramer

Director of Family Engagement  
National Center for Families Learning

For more information about NCFL and the work done in numerous communities across America to engage the entire family in the learning process, please contact Joshua directly at [jcramer@familieslearning.org](mailto:jcramer@familieslearning.org) or visit [www.familieslearning.org](http://www.familieslearning.org)

# Using Social Media to Engage Learners

by William Kist

We all have had the experience of being in conversation with someone, perhaps someone younger than ourselves, either at a mealtime or even during a meeting, when the other person suddenly fumbles for his or her cell phone, wanting to respond to a text or email that has just come in. While this can be maddeningly disruptive and disrespectful to the conversation at hand, this kind of attachment to social media should be of interest to K-12 educators. The Pew Internet Research Project has conducted much amazing research in this area and one of their startling recent findings is that teens ages 14-17 are sending a median of 100 texts per day. (For more information on teens and their uses of social media, see [www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheets/social-networking-fact-sheet/](http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheets/social-networking-fact-sheet/))

Why aren't we educators making more use of the engaging nature of social media? The evidence is compelling that these new media are engaging. In particular, these media can be effective for students who struggle academically. Also, most of our students will have to take some kind of online course after high school that involves some form of social networking. Some 6.7 million postsecondary students took at least one online course in 2012 (Allen & Seaman, 2013).

The good news is that these social media are relatively easy to incorporate into a teacher's daily classroom

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routines. I wrote about many of these ideas in my book, *The Socially Networked Classroom* (Kist, 2010). For teachers who are in classrooms with wireless access, here are some ways to make the best use of our society's preoccupation with social media.

## *Using Twitter for Exit Slips and Back-Channel Discussion*

This social media platform is famous for allowing "tweets" that may only be 140 characters in length. But the pithy quality of this social medium makes Twitter well suited for "exit slips"—checking for student understanding of a difficult concept. Simply ask the class a question that they are required to tweet to answer and don't forget to add a hashtag phrase (such as "#KistPeriodTwo") so you can find their answers. Teachers might also want to set up "back-channel" discussions, encouraging students to tweet during a lecture or activity to ask questions and make clarifying comments.

## *Using Texting for Instant Polling*

Online services such as PollEverywhere.com allow teachers to do quick orienting questioning, asking students their opinions or knowledge of subjects to be covered. Students use their cellphones to text the answers to questions the teacher displays on a whiteboard. The poll results show up instantly, giving a sense of the

students' prior interest in a topic or concept.

## *Using Blogs*

Assigning students to blog encourages them to keep a running account of their own learning. Blog posts don't have to be lengthy, but they allow each learner to make his or her learning public and comment on each other's posts.

## *Using Wikis*

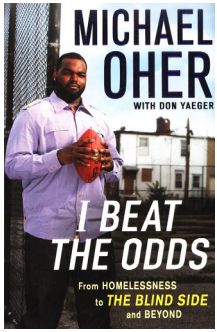
Setting up a classroom wiki is easy, perhaps taking only about 15 minutes on the part of the teacher, using free sites such as PBWorks.com and Wikispaces.com. A wiki can be used for an entire year as a collection site for all of the research work and all other work that the class does. In fact, student blogs can also be set up on the wiki, making, essentially, for a complete online "learning management system" (LMS) similar to those in existence in most college classrooms. Being able to display learning and collaborate on projects in such a visible manner is increasingly a part of most postsecondary experiences.

Finally, it's worth noting that one of the best ways for teachers to begin using social media is to use it themselves, outside of school. Experimenting with such sites as Twitter, Pinterest, and Vine are likely not only to be addicting, but also to pay off big dividends in the classroom. Social media can be an effective way for teachers to reach all students including those who struggle.

—William Kist  
Associate Professor  
Kent State University



# Book Review



*I Beat The Odds: From Homelessness, to the Blind Side, and Beyond.* (2012). Michael Oher with Don Yaeger, Gotham Publishers. [ISBN: 978-159240-638-8, paperback; ISBN 978-1-59240-612-8, hardcover]

This book should be read by coaches, teachers, counselors, judges, police officers, parents, school board members, parole officers, government leaders, and anyone else charged with the well-being of our society. Praised by *USA Today* for its “harrowing, first-person account . . . of the Dickensian conditions many American kids endure,” Oher’s autobiography provides a look at how one young man was able to turn his life around when all the odds seemed stacked against him.

The words of encouragement Oher held to like a mantra and shares in the book include: “Just because statistics say we’re likely to fail doesn’t mean it has to be true for us”; “My mother’s failures do not have to be mine”; and “I was trying to get somewhere better than where I was.”

National publicity about Oher’s life generated letters from youths in similarly desperate circumstances who, instead of dropping out and giving up, found inspiration in this young black man’s tale of success in the classroom and on the football field.

Now 28 years old and an offensive tackle for the National Football League’s Tennessee Titans (he was drafted by and played for Super Bowl Champions the Baltimore Ravens from 2009 to 2013), Oher grew up in Memphis, TN. He was one of 12 children born to an alcoholic, crack-addicted mother and a father who was murdered in prison. Oher was in foster care at the age of seven. As he notes in *I Beat the Odds*, because he rarely spoke and observed life instead of participating in it, he was misdiagnosed as having “repressed rage” and briefly hospitalized. Also experiencing homelessness as a teenager, life turned

around for Oher when he reached out and received help from the Tuohy family who, through a series of circumstances, took him in and later legally adopted him.

As chronicled in the Oscar-winning film *The Blind Side*, Oher seized the opportunity to complete his education and use his athletic gifts. In high school, he excelled in football, basketball, and track and despite a disadvantaged academic start, he was able to raise his grade point average from 0.76 to 2.52 and become eligible to attend college. Earning scholarships from six schools, Oher chose the University of Mississippi where he earned a degree in criminal justice, with honors.

As he shares in *I Beat the Odds*, Oher had more than his share of difficulties, tragedies, and challenges to overcome. His story isn’t the familiar “rags to riches” tale, as it is one grounded in heartbreak and self-doubt as well as determination and redemption.

One of his final chapters, “Breaking the Cycle,” provides wisdom on how Oher fought his way to a better, more successful place. The section includes his guidance for others who wish to do the same, along with his wish that the chapter could be “copied and placed under the pillow of every kid in poverty in this country.” Oher stresses the importance of goals, friendship, faith, hard work, mentoring, and persistence. In a society where wealth and fame seems to come easily to those with marginal talent and little exertion, Oher cautions that “success isn’t just handed to you,” while exemplifying the fact that he “beat the odds . . . and so can you.”

—Patrick J. O’Connor  
Associate Professor  
Kent State University

# Resources

**Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy—Comprehensive national resource promoting family reading**  
<http://barbarabush.org/>

**Family Reading Partnership—Listing of Web sites promoting literacy education**  
<http://www.familyreading.org/i-web-org.htm>

**International Reading Association—Fact sheet and resources on literacy from infancy to high school**  
[http://www.reading.org/downloads/parents/pb1044\\_involved.pdf](http://www.reading.org/downloads/parents/pb1044_involved.pdf)

**Parent-Child Home Program—Grass-roots outreach promoting at-home reading**  
<http://www.parent-child.org/>

**National Center for Families Learning—Resources to create a culture of family engagement across the educational spectrum**  
<http://www.familieslearning.org/>

**National Coalition for Literacy—Clearinghouse on national literacy organizations and activities**  
<http://national-coalition-literacy.org/>

# Events

**Feb. 15-18, 2015 Myrtle Beach, SC**  
2015 At-Risk Youth National FORUM:  
*Success Within Reach: Strategies for At-Risk Youth*  
[www.dropoutprevention.org](http://www.dropoutprevention.org)

**March 16-18, 2015 Houston, TX**  
National Center for Families Learning Summit with Innovation Showcase and Family Teacher of the Year honors.  
[www.familieslearning.org](http://www.familieslearning.org)

**March 21-23, 2015 Nashville, TN**  
75<sup>th</sup> Annual National School Boards Association Conference  
[www.nsba.org](http://www.nsba.org)

**June 26-27, 2015 Philadelphia, PA**  
National Association for Media Literacy Education Conference, *Celebrating Connectivity Across Cultures*  
[namle.net](http://namle.net)

# Literacy Motivation and Engagement: Policies, Trends, and Practices

by Linda B. Gambrell, Jacquelyn A. Malloy, C. C. Bates, and Kathy N. Headley

Today's teachers and administrators face challenges that are characterized as unprecedented in complexity, particularly in the area of literacy education. They must constantly juggle the conflicting demands of instruction, assessment, and policy (Shanahan, 2014). The current standards movement in the U.S. is one catalyst affecting the need for literacy leaders who are well prepared to implement effective programs of instruction and assessment to ensure that students have the opportunity to become proficient readers and writers. U.S. states have either adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) or are developing their own state standards for English Language Arts (ELA) that represent a shared and consistent vision of what our students should know and be able to do (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of State School Officers, 2010).

ELA standards are designed to foster higher achievement in reading and writing, thus allowing our students to compete more successfully in our global society. The goal of having students meet these standards is critical if we are to enable them to develop the 21<sup>st</sup> century literacy skills needed for college and career readiness. Research continues to show the importance of literacy development to students' future academic and economic success (Shanahan, 2014). According to Ritchie and Bates (2013), second-grade reading achievement predicts what students' incomes will be when they reach adulthood.

In the current movement to develop and implement standards to increase college and career readiness, the role of motivation in learning is often overlooked; however, motivation to learn is vital to increasing literacy learning for our students. As we pursue the admirable goal of teaching to standards that will increase student success in college and careers, we must avoid the possibility that in successfully teaching to the standards, we fail to develop highly motivated literacy learners. Students who are motivated to read and

write will continue to be strategic and engaged readers, even when they are not in school. If students meet the ELA standards, but do not choose to read and write, they will never reach their full literacy potential. Thus, it is incumbent upon literacy leaders to promote and support classroom practices that encourage motivation to read and write.

Research suggests that the following classroom practices are associated with increased motivation to read and write.

- Literacy tasks are authentic and related to the real world (Brophy, 2004; Cunningham & Allington, 2011; Gambrell, Hughes, Calvert, Malloy, Igo, 2011; Guthrie, McRae, & Klauda, 2007).
- Literacy tasks provide students with choice and goal-setting opportunities (Cambourne, 1995; Guthrie et al., 2007).
- The classroom environment provides models, support, time, and materials necessary for literacy learning to flourish (Gambrell et al., 2011; Guthrie & McPeake, 2013).

Clearly, students' literacy motivation will be influenced, for better or worse, by the culture of the classroom. We suggest that literacy educators use the following questions to assess aspects of classroom cultures that support and nurture motivation to read and write.

- Is the classroom rich in appropriate reading/writing materials?
- Are students provided with opportunities to choose the books they read and the topics they write about?
- Is adequate time allotted during the school day for independent reading and writing?
- Is sufficient time devoted to teacher and peer sharing of reading and writing?

In working to assure that our students meet the challenging ELA standards, we must implement them in ways that promote a love of literacy and the development of lifelong

readers and writers. An awareness of motivation research can provide information for creating classroom cultures that foster motivated and engaged literacy learners.

—Linda B. Gambrell,  
Jacquelyn A. Malloy,  
C. C. Bates, and Kathy N. Headley  
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# NEWSLETTER

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## Viewpoint

Imagine you could determine the likely future of a child by the time she turned 3. You could visit her home and know whether she would lead a life of success and self-fulfillment, or a life of poverty. Sound far-fetched?

Well, it's not. Follow this progression: Some 61 % of low-income children have no children's books in their home. By age 2, poor children are already behind their peers in listening, counting, and other skills essential to literacy. Poor children hear as many as 30 million fewer words by the time they are 3 than their more affluent peers. As early as age 3, a child's vocabulary can predict third-grade reading achievement.

And third-grade reading achievement is, in turn, a critical milestone that affects how children fare in school and whether they eventually graduate. That's because third grade marks the point when children transition from "learning to read" to "reading to learn." We know that when children do not master reading by that point, they get left behind. They become disengaged.

In fact, children who are not reading by the third grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school than their peers, ensuring that they have trouble entering the job market or becoming productive members of society. Children living in poverty who don't read well are 13 times more likely to drop out than kids without these risk factors.

Now the clincher: Across our country, two thirds of our students aren't reading proficiently by the end of third grade. So improving early reading can help close achievement gaps, increase graduation rates, support our economy, and build a strong community. And the good news is, we know what to do.

We have to hold our schools accountable for teaching students to read, but we also have to recognize that schools can't do it alone. My organization is building local coalitions around the country—now numbering 152—to help ensure that low-income children arrive at kindergarten ready

to succeed, that they attend school regularly in the early grades, and that they keep learning through the summer.

While we know those are the right three elements of the solution, it takes a lot of partners to make it happen. You have to engage parents, childcare providers, community nonprofits, local community foundations, housing authorities, libraries and museums, city agencies, faith-based groups, local businesses, retirees, and volunteers. We also have to monitor a child's health to make sure development delays and vision problems aren't keeping him/her from learning.

It's not necessarily an easy slog. But the way to engage a disengaged student is to embrace a single goal—make sure he or she can read at the proper level by the end of third grade.

—Leslie Boissiere  
Chief Operating Officer  
*The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading*