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Adolescent Literacy: A National Reading Crisis



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Introduction

Every school day in America, 3,000 students drop out—the majority of them poor readers. According to the Alliance for Excellent Education (2003), one key risk factor for dropping out of school is reading achievement level. Students with below grade level reading skills are twice as likely to drop out of school as those who can read on or above grade level.

Adolescent illiteracy is quantified each year in “The Nation’s Report Card”—the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)—which reports that more than two-thirds of the nation’s eighth graders (68 percent) read below the proficient level and approximately one quarter are unable to read at even the most basic level (Grigg, Daane, Jin and Campbell, 2003). For African-American and Hispanic students the numbers more than double with almost half of African-American and Hispanic eighth graders reading below basic level. And according to a recent study by the Urban Institute, half of all African-American, Hispanic and Native American students who entered U.S. high schools in 2000 *will not* graduate this year (Swanson, 2004).

The landmark *No Child Left Behind* act has directed attention and increased funding toward improving *early* literacy at both the federal and state level. But far less attention has been paid to the middle and high school students who cannot read. Clearly, getting all kids reading on grade level by the third grade is an important national priority, as children’s early reading skills are strong predictors of long-term academic success. However, we cannot afford to let the six million adolescents who are already reading below grade level fall through the cracks. We know that students who are poor readers cannot succeed in other core subject areas such as English, social studies, science, and math, and are at increased risk of dropping out of school.

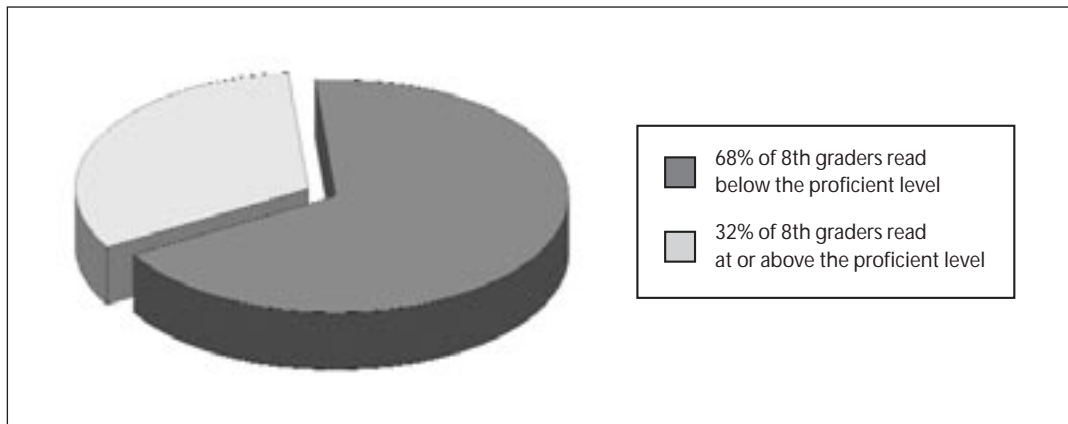


Figure 1: National Assessment of Education Progress 2003 Reading Achievement for Eighth Graders

*The National Assessment of Education Progress defines **proficient** as solid academic performance for each grade assessed. Students reaching this level have demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter, including subject-matter knowledge, application of such knowledge to real-world situations, and analytical skills appropriate to the subject matter.*

The societal implications of widespread adolescent illiteracy are sobering. Today's young adults who either graduate with low literacy skills or dropout of school have little chance for employment, even in low-paying jobs, and are more likely to end up on public assistance. Those who do find work are often stuck in minimum wage jobs that pay too little to support a family in today's society. Even more disturbing is the increased likelihood that high school dropouts, who enter society lacking work skills and life skills, will end up in a correction facility. (Coalition for Juvenile Justice, [CJJ] 2001).

The reality is that most at-risk adolescent students never receive the intensive reading instruction they need. Of the more than 16,000 school districts across the country, less than one in five have high school reading specialists designated to serve the most at-risk older, struggling readers, according to Quality Education Data (QED) research (2004).

Even as the nation seeks to improve early literacy, there must be a commitment of resources, time, and staff to provide reading instruction for adolescents with low literacy skills. Investing in age-appropriate, research-based reading intervention now will avoid future spending on public welfare, unemployment benefits, and the criminal justice system. It will also allow the current generation of adolescent students to experience success in school and in life.

Who are the Struggling Adolescent Readers?

Academic at-risk youth with low literacy skills come from all walks of life. They live in urban, suburban and rural communities, and represent all social and ethnic groups. However, certain student populations have significantly higher percentages of students reading below grade level. These students are becoming increasingly more apparent with the new accountability mandates of *No Child Left Behind*, which require detailed reporting of school achievement levels broken out by gender, race, ethnicity, income, and special needs.

- Almost half of all **African-American and Hispanic** eighth graders read below basic level. Only 13 percent are reading at or above proficient level compared to 41 percent of white eighth graders reading at or above proficient level (Grigg et al., 2003).
- Students who are learning **English as a second language** often struggle to meet the reading achievement level of their peers. They represent close to 4 million students in middle and high schools throughout the U.S. (Hoffman, 2003).
- Students living in families with incomes **below the poverty level** have an increased likelihood of low literacy (Alliance for Excellent Education [AEE], 2002).
- Six million students across the country have significant physical and emotional disabilities, as defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), and experience difficulties learning. **Approximately two million of those identified as *Special Education* students have been labeled special ed simply because they have not learned to read.** (The President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education, 2002).

Impact on Society

Adolescent illiteracy has profound economic and social consequences. According to a 2001 report of the Coalition of Juvenile Justice, the nation is drained of more than \$200 billion in lost earnings and taxes because of America's high dropout rate. Competition for low-skill jobs from low-wage countries is quickly reducing the number of employment opportunities for our nation's high school dropouts. Those who do find jobs earn significantly less than their peers who go on to earn a college degree. And the nation's prisons are crowded with high school dropouts and non-readers.

High School Dropouts

- Only 75 percent of the nation's 9th graders graduate from high school (AEE, 2002).
- Approximately 28 percent of Hispanic youths are dropouts and 14 percent of African American youths are dropouts (Kaufman, Alt, and Chapman, 2001).

Unemployment/Poverty

- According to 2001 National Census data, 42 percent of 16 to 24-year olds who failed to graduate from high school or earn a GED reported no employment income that year.
- According to the Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2001, only 4 in 10 adults who dropped out of high school are employed.
- Dropouts are three times as likely to face poverty and to receive public assistance than are high school graduates (AEE, 2002).
- In 2000, average earnings ranged from \$18,900 for high school dropouts to \$25,900 for high school graduates and \$45,400 for college graduates (U.S. Census Bureau 2002).

Criminal Activity

- More than one third of all juvenile offenders (median age 15.5 years old) read below the fourth-grade level (CJJ, 2001).
- The Coalition for Juvenile Justice (2001) reports that 82 percent of prison inmates are high school dropouts, and a very high proportion of them cannot read.

Addressing the Adolescent Literacy Crisis

Several major organizations at the policy and practice levels are taking serious action on this urgent educational crisis.

The Department of Education in Washington D.C. held an important national conversation about high school education this past fall and has planned regional events across the country to continue to raise visibility on the issues around high school reform, reading being a central element of that effort.

Realizing that there is no single strategy for how best to educate low-performing adolescent students, several not-for-profit organizations have taken bold steps in developing a variety of innovative initiatives that are proving effective solutions to this growing crisis.

For example, **The Alliance for Excellent Education** (2002), a policy, advocacy and research organization dedicated to assuring that all American students have the opportunity to get an excellent education and graduate from high school prepared for college and a productive future, has developed a comprehensive “Framework For An Excellent Education,” which includes a four-pronged approach: Adolescent Literacy, Teacher and Principal Quality, College Preparation, and Smaller Learning Communities to improve student achievement and attainment.

The Alliance’s Adolescent Literacy Initiative recommends the expansion of the Federal Reading First program (currently focused on K–3) to include adolescent literacy (students in Grades 4–12 reading below the proficient level) to its mission. A piece of this expansion would be a literacy specialist in every middle and high school across the U.S. who can train teachers to identify those students with reading and writing difficulties and ensure that they can receive extra support. Additional funding would be allocated to pay for research-based diagnostic assessments, proven-to-work curricula, and training for all teachers that are eligible to receive Title 1 funding (AEE, 2002).

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (2003) has taken a serious position on the adolescent education crisis as an essential element for sustaining the workforce of our democracy. They have called for a sea change in how we look at high school education, and are advocating for small learning communities that offer rigorous academics and prepare every student with the skills needed (such as reading, writing, and problem-solving) to succeed in life. The Foundation is committed to the idea that students should be able to choose from several small innovative public schools. As a result, the foundation is providing grant money for start-up high schools and conversions of larger high schools to smaller, more personalized learning communities.

Central to the Gates Foundation mission is the premise that all students must prepare for college. This demand would set new expectations for learning, from both the student and the school perspective. An overhaul of high school curricula, including reestablishing school mission and standards, must be outlined in order to be effective (2003).

The Carnegie Corporation of New York (n.d.) is also dedicated to affecting policy, practice and research around adolescent education for three reasons. First, high stakes tests have determined over the past decade that the reading scores of fourth graders have changed very little. Second, the growing influx of immigrants whose native language is not English will require an increased focus at all grade levels on the teaching of English language as well as reading and comprehension skills. And finally, the marketplace for employment is governed by a new knowledge-based economy, requiring better educated, highly literate and technologically fluent high school graduates.

Over the next three to five years, Carnegie's Education Division will work to advance literacy by affecting policy, practice, and research in the following areas:

- Establishing a Carnegie Corporation of New York Advisory Council on Reading to Learn, which will examine both research and reading policies and make further implementation strategies.
- Stimulating demand from the public for better literacy practice in Grades 4–12.
- Creating incentives for schools of education and school districts to add professional development programs that would teach teachers how to integrate comprehension strategies within the content domains.
- Supporting research and practice for adolescent English-language learners.

These and other interventions are designed to increase public awareness of the need to address intermediate and adolescent literacy, strengthen our knowledge about effective theory and practice to improve literacy, and disseminate practices known to be effective in significantly improving the comprehension skills of children and adolescents.

***READ 180*[®]: A Solution It's Never Too Late To Teach Reading**

Despite widespread illiteracy throughout the country, it is, in fact, never too late to teach reading, whether to students in middle and high school, juvenile detention centers, Job Corps sites, after-school programs, or alternative learning centers. Studies show that when students receive intensive, comprehensive instruction from scientifically research-based programs, they make significant improvements in reading achievement (Scholastic, 2002, 2004b).

To address the unique needs of adolescent readers, researchers and educational experts have developed new programs that have been proven effective in raising the reading scores and achievement levels of youth who had previously suffered years of reading failure.

At Scholastic Inc., one program that has been garnering national attention is *READ 180*, a research-based reading intervention program. The program has a proven track record of delivering measurable learning gains for older, struggling readers in Grades 4–12.

READ 180 was developed in collaboration with Vanderbilt University, and is based on ten years of research by Dr. Ted Hasselbring, who explored the power of technology in reading intervention.

Hasselbring's findings concluded that struggling readers face three major problems: an inability to decode text, an inability to read fluently, and an inability to create mental models from text (form pictures in their minds of what they are reading) (Hasselbring and Goin, 2004). Because they don't read, they never develop the background knowledge that helps them make sense out of the text they are reading. Technology can play an important role in helping fill the gaps of older students—from offering video anchors to providing individualized instruction and continuous monitoring and feedback (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000).

Motivation is Key

Research shows that by the end of the first grade, substantial decreases in children's self esteem, self-concept and motivation to learn can be noticed if they have not been able to master reading skills. By the time students who struggle with reading enter middle and high school, they exhibit extremely low self-esteem levels, in addition to a lack of interest in school (Guthrie and Wigfield, 2000).

What Makes *READ 180* Different?

READ 180 addresses the needs of students of varying background and abilities through a multifaceted and comprehensive array of instructional components—including a combination of computer-assisted learning, whole- and small-group teacher-led instruction, and independent reading of high-interest books. It is a premier reading intervention program that employs both computer instruction and print materials that are specifically designed for the older, struggling reader.

In addition to using technology to constantly monitor and adjust the instruction for each individual student, the program offers a unique collection of literature that reflects the real lives of the students, is written on topics of interest to adolescents, and is “leveled” to student’s abilities so all students are successful in reading. Moreover, students experience the joy of reading, often for the first time, through use of audio books that each offer an imbedded reading coach who guides the students through critical passages, while exposing them to popular grade-level literature that they might not be able to read on their own.

READ 180 shows respect for the older struggling reader by presenting age-appropriate materials that engage them at all reading levels (from beginning reader and up). The software’s on-screen host, Ty, provides a patient, non-judgmental feedback and continuous encouragement. In fact, students who have used the program have shown significant increases in motivation resulting from their experiences, success, and enjoyment of reading.

Motivation and engagement are critical for adolescent readers. If students are not motivated to read, research shows that they will simply not benefit from reading instruction. As much of the work in motivation and engagement shows, these are critical issues that must be addressed for successful interventions. In fact, motivation assumes an important role in any attempt to improve literacy for students of all ages, not just adolescents.

— Michael L. Kamil
*Adolescents and Literacy, Reading for
the 21st Century*
Alliance for Excellent Education



Proven to Work

READ 180 was developed in both clinical and classroom settings through more than a decade (1985–1999) of research and the collaboration of reading experts. Research shows conclusively that *READ 180* students outperform control group students in numerous studies. *READ 180* has proven effective with all types of struggling older readers, including English-Language Learners (ELL), and those receiving special education services.

Los Angeles, California

In the Los Angeles Unified School District, *READ 180* was implemented during the 2000-2001 school year as part of a district-wide Intensive Academic Support (IAS) initiative for eighth graders who were not performing well. *READ 180* students' reading scores showed a gain of 3.1 NCEs (Normal Curve Equivalent) compared with a decline of 6.6 NCEs for students who were not involved in the *READ 180* program.

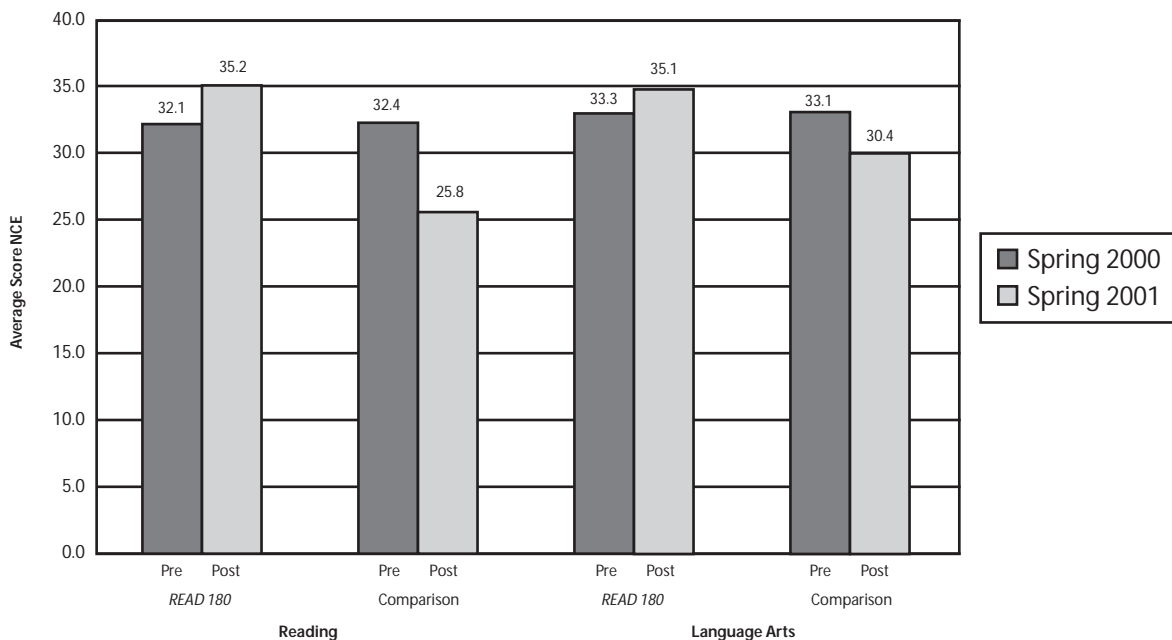


Figure 2: Los Angeles Unified School District: SAT-9 Scores for *READ 180* and non-*READ 180* Comparison Students

Scores are expressed in Norm Curve Equivalents (NCEs), an equal-interval scale. Positive NCE gains represent improvement compared with the national norming sample, a gain of zero represents staying in pace with the norming sample, and negative NCE gains represent falling behind the norming sample. A gain of one to two NCEs is considered significant growth (Scholastic, Inc., 2002).

Department of Defense Schools

In the study of *READ 180* in the DoD schools, which are located in the United States and abroad, students in *READ 180* classrooms made substantial gains on the Terra Nova standardized reading and language arts tests. In Reading, students in fully implemented *READ 180* classrooms moved from an average score of 39.9 NCEs to 47.3, a gain of 7.4 NCEs. At the same time, similar students in classrooms with “off-model” implementation moved from an average score of 37.7 NCEs to 39.1, a gain of 1.4 NCEs. In Language Arts, students in fully implemented *READ 180* classrooms gained from an average score of 41.2 NCEs to 45.9, an increase of 4.7 NCEs. During the same period, students in “off-model” classrooms declined on average from 39.8 to 38.2 NCEs.

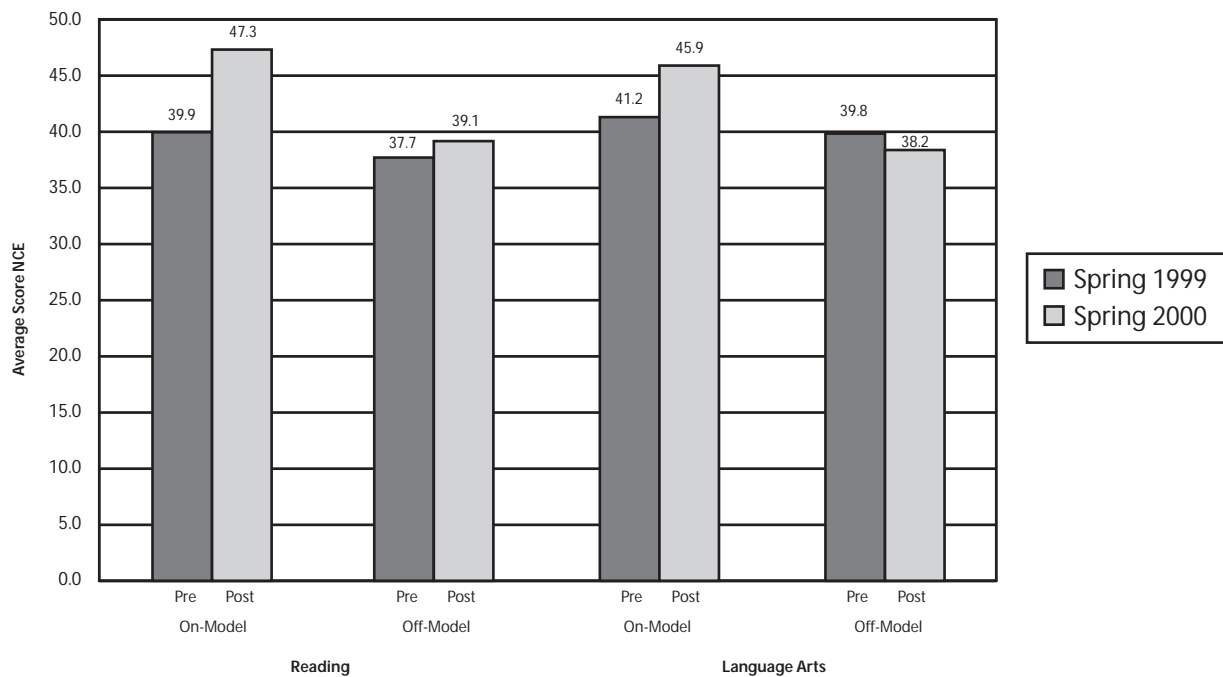


Figure 3: Department of Defense Education Activity: Terra Nova Scores for *READ 180* On-Model and Off-Model Classrooms

Scores are expressed in Norm Curve Equivalents (NCEs), an equal-interval scale. Positive NCE gains represent improvement compared with the national norming sample, a gain of zero represents staying in pace with the norming sample, and negative NCE gains represent falling behind the norming sample. A gain of one to two NCEs is considered significant growth (Scholastic, Inc., 2004b).

Des Moines, Iowa

In the Des Moines, IA study, the students in *READ 180* are special education students with goals in the area of reading. Up to this point, they have made an average of two to three months progress in reading per year, based on their current early- to mid second-grade reading levels. After using *READ 180*, one quarter of the students in the program made gains significantly greater than this, and **approximately 18% of the students made enough progress so that they no longer needed special education support in the area of reading.**

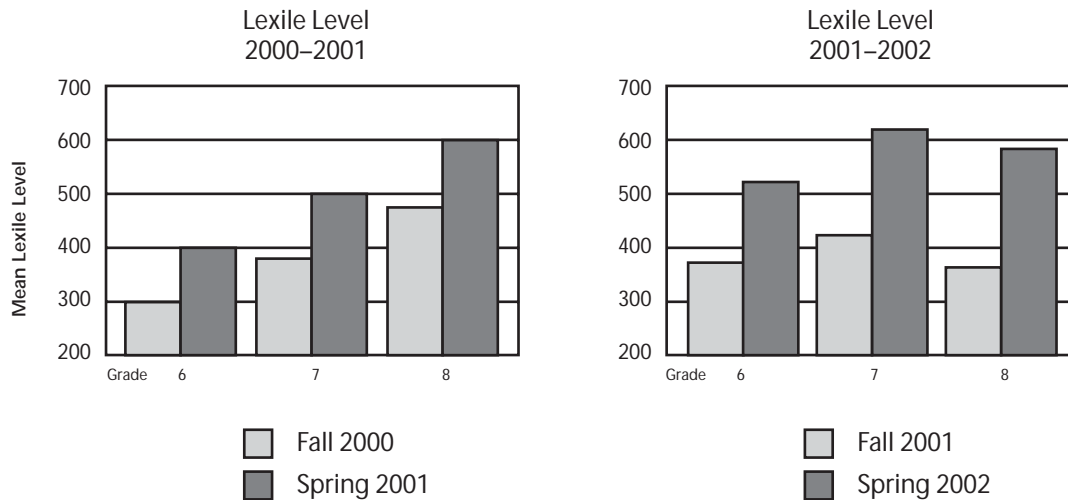


Figure 4: Des Moines Independent Community School District: Mean performance in Lexile scores for two consecutive years

Job Corps

In the 2002-2003 academic year Guajome Park Academy in California studied the effectiveness of *READ 180* with students at Job Corps sites in Los Angeles, San Jose, Sacramento, and San Diego. The students in Job Corps are those adolescents and young adults (ages 16-24) who have dropped out and, by and large, have been given up on by the traditional public and private school system.

The impact of *READ 180* in Job Corps is significant. Students took the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE 7-8) both before and after instruction with *READ 180*. An overall analysis of the TABE scores revealed a statistically significant gain from pre- to posttesting. The data also revealed that the longer students were in *READ 180*, the greater their TABE gains. Job Corps students in *READ 180* for nine or more weeks showed, on average, **four years gain in reading-grade level** in this study.

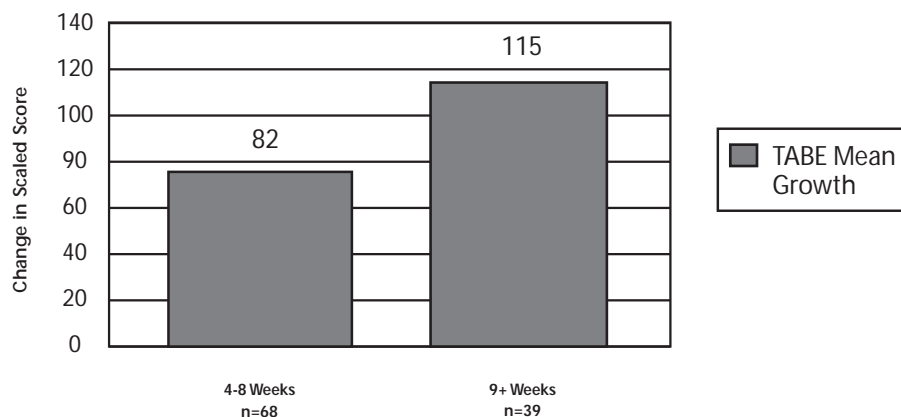


Figure 5: Guajome Park Academy/SIATech Job Corps: 2002-2003 TABE gains by length of students' time in program

Changing Attitudes Toward Reading

In the study of *READ 180* in DoD schools (1999–2000), students were asked to write about their feelings toward reading at the beginning of the year. Statements that indicated a dislike of reading, a negative feeling such as embarrassment about their reading skills, or feeling stupid because of a lack of reading skills were scored as a negative response.

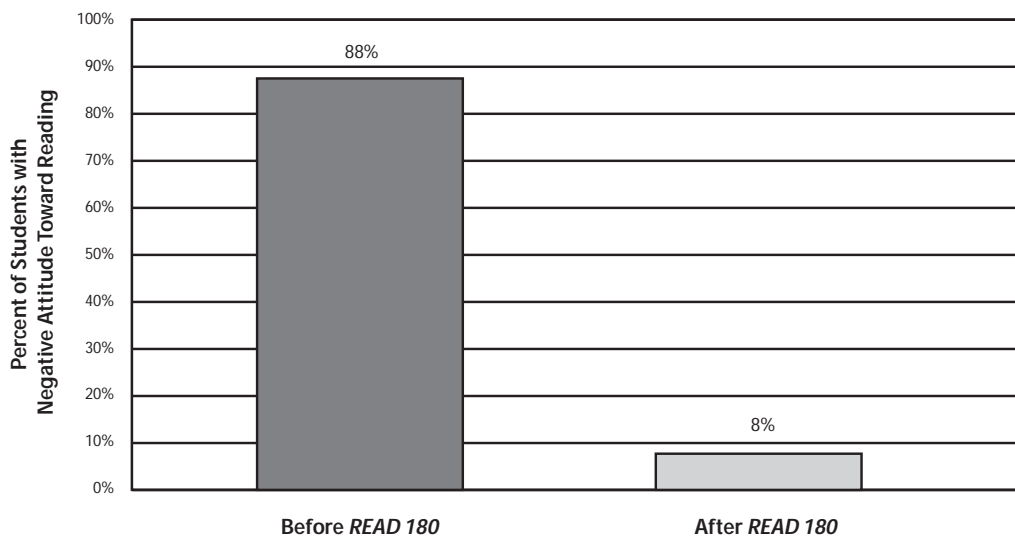


Figure 6: Percent of students with negative attitude toward reading or self before and after *READ 180*

Eighty-eight percent of the students surveyed indicated a negative response toward reading or self at the beginning of the school year. At the end of the year the number of negative responses dropped to 8% as shown above. Ninety-two percent of the students indicated a positive attitude toward reading or positive self-esteem as a reader after participating in the *READ 180* class. A sample of the student responses appears in Table 1 below.

Student	Attitude Response before <i>READ 180</i>	Attitude Response after <i>READ 180</i>
A	"I didn't really care for reading and I was reading at a third-grade level. I did not even want to touch a book."	"Well, now it easier for me to pick up a book and read. I used to not pick up a book unless I needed to. I even have a favorite author." (Walter Dean Myers)
B	"I was nervous. It was hard and I did not like to read."	"I like to read now. I can spell better and now I read better. ...now I can read better or as well as everyone."
C	"I did not want to read at all."	"I feel like I can read more on my own time and have fun."
D	"I did not like to read at the beginning of the school year because it was hard."	"I love to read now because I know I can do it. I am confident that I can do it."
E	"I did not like reading at the beginning of the year. I only read when my parents told me to or my teacher told me to."	"I feel much more confident about reading. I am reading books I would have never read at the beginning of the year."

Table 1: Student attitude responses regarding reading and self-esteem

We all know that reading is the key that unlocks success in school, but students who have experienced failure after failure for many years often become frustrated and angry, disengaged and disillusioned about themselves and their abilities. Success with reading can turn around negative attitudes and self-esteem 180 degrees, and help students see success in all other academic areas including math, science, and social studies.

A Call to Action

Leaders at all levels of our society, including federal and local government, business and community, need to make literacy as much a priority for older students as it is for younger ones.

Together we can:

1. Increase awareness of the crisis;
2. Provide funding resources for programs with proven results to close the achievement gap;
3. Provide professional development that is focused on literacy for teachers at the middle and high school levels as well as for Literacy Coaches that support them with ongoing training;
4. Develop research-based intensive reading intervention programs with proven results to close the achievement gap for students in Grades 4–12; and
5. Provide more support and funding for teacher development, particularly for teachers who teach reading to older students.

In order for America to stay competitive with countries abroad, we must make bold and sweeping changes in how we educate middle and high school students—providing the essential reading skills and rigorous standards needed for workforce preparedness, and to make meaningful contributions to our communities. Only then will we have accomplished the measure of *No Child Left Behind* and fulfilled our responsibility of educating every child.

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He joined Scholastic in 1989 after serving as Superintendent of Schools for twenty years in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Connecticut. Dr. Fleishman began his career as an English teacher. He received an Ed.D. in Administration from the Harvard Graduate School of Education and is a graduate of Williams College, which also awarded him an Honorary Doctor of Letters.


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