How to Know a Good Adolescent Literacy Program When You See One: Quality Criteria to Consider

Learning to read is a complex task that many adolescents have not mastered by the time they reach high school. As a nation, we are only now beginning to understand the severity of this problem and the urgency with which we must address it. Low literacy levels are prevalent among American high school students, and according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 25 percent of ninth graders do not possess the reading skills necessary to do grade-level work. The students who struggle with reading are the same ones who have trouble with their grade-level classes and are at heightened risk of dropping out of school altogether.

The realization of this problem among educators and policymakers has created a new demand for programs intended to improve older students' reading skills to a point where they can participate in classes with their peers without the stigma and frustration that comes with struggling to read and write. The availability of such programs requires that practitioners as well as policymakers be better equipped to answer the question, "How can you know a good adolescent literacy program when you see one?"

While more research needs to be done in the area of adolescent literacy, there is growing agreement about some of the characteristics successful literacy intervention programs share. The purpose of this brief is to provide information to help policymakers, educators, parents, and others concerned with adolescent literacy make informed decisions about literacy programs for struggling readers and the programs' suitability for specific groups of students. The brief is not intended for an audience of literacy experts, and does not pretend to offer a comprehensive program evaluation guide; rather, it is designed to help decision makers ask the right questions when assessing literacy programs for selection for federal, state, and local funding.

We begin with three overarching premises:

♦ Programs should be appropriate for both the reading level and the age level of the students involved.
♦ Programs should be flexible enough to allow for students' different learning styles, abilities, backgrounds, and interests.
♦ It is unlikely that any single program will address all the literacy needs of a school; schools are complex institutions composed of many different types of students who require different types of instruction.

Additionally, a number of critical questions must be addressed in the assessment of any literacy program:

1)   For what age group is the program designed?
2)   For what reading level is the program designed?
3)   Is there independent research about the program; if so, what does it say about the program's effectiveness?

4) Has the program been demonstrated to be effective with the age group(s) and reading level(s) of the students in question?
5) What sort of support (such as training) does the program offer the teacher?
6) What level of expertise is assumed of the teacher?
7) What is the cost, both direct and indirect, of the program?
8) To what extent does the program require changes in the structure of the school or district?

The sections below provide more detail about some of the key elements to be considered in evaluating adolescent literacy programs.

How does the program address motivation?

Motivation is the desire an individual has to read. Engagement in reading—the extent to which an individual chooses to read rather than do other activities—is a crucial component of motivation. In addition, since adolescents are very social, group activities are crucial to motivating students in this age group. Discussion helps keep students engaged in the reading.

In order to address the important functions of motivation and engagement, programs should

♦ compel students to use reading to gain knowledge—the ultimate goal of any literacy program should be for students to use reading as a strategy for learning;
♦ address the question, "Why read?," with the goal of helping students establish a purpose for reading, read for pleasure, and discern what types of books, magazines, newspapers, and other material they prefer (that is, to form a "reader identity"); and
♦ include a cooperative learning environment designed for students to discuss readings.

How does the program address fluency?

Fluency refers to the ability to read quickly, accurately, and with appropriate expression.

To facilitate this, programs should include

♦ repeated reading, in which students are taught to read and reread relatively easy passages, and are given progressively more difficult passages to read;
♦ guided reading—that is, reading accompanied by feedback to correct errors; and
♦ the teaching of strategies for students to correct errors as they read independently.

How does the program address vocabulary?

Vocabulary refers to knowledge of words and their meaning and pronunciation. Students with larger vocabularies tend to be better readers.

Literacy programs should include

♦ strategies to identify and learn new words;
♦ concept development—strategies to help students build context and understand the words they encounter; and
♦ frequent contact with the same words (repetition), verbal and written use of learned vocabulary words (active engagement), and learning vocabulary through direct instruction and read-aloud sessions (indirect/incidental learning), using both storybook and informational texts.

Computer technology also has been found to be particularly useful in building vocabulary skills. Computer technology allows students to self-direct activities with words and be evaluated on their vocabulary skills without direct instruction from a teacher.

How does the program address comprehension?

Comprehension refers to understanding the meaning of written words and text.

Programs should include

♦ activities designed to access what the student already knows about a particular topic prior to beginning the reading (the activation of prior knowledge);
♦ cooperative learning environments designed for students to discuss readings;
♦ teaching components that enable students to evaluate a text based on its expository structure— structure helps readers discern the relative importance of different parts of the text and also connections between different portions of text (for example, expository structure contains a main idea with supporting details and persuasion skills such as comparison or contrast of ideas);
♦ teacher modeling that shows and teaches students effective strategies and thought processes to use when approaching difficult texts (metacognition);
♦ opportunities for students to generate and answer questions that encourage higher-order thinking about reading passages, which helps students own and become engaged in the text they are reading; and
♦ understanding through multiple perspectives or points of view to allow students to develop critical thinking skills.

How does the program address the issue of phonics and phonemic awareness?

Many programs geared toward adolescents assume that students already have mastery of the alphabetic principle. However, research shows that a small percentage of students—5 to 10 percent—enters ninth-grade testing at the third- or even second-grade level. This group of students still could benefit from instruction in the alphabetic principle.

The alphabetic principle refers to the skills needed to translate (decode) text into sounds (speech or oral language). The alphabetic principle can be broken down into a) the ability to manipulate sounds in oral language, and b) knowledge of the correspondence between letters and sounds.

In order to address phonics and phonemic awareness, programs should include

♦ direct instruction using complete and explicit instruction plans;
♦ instruction on frequently occurring sounds and their spellings (for example, "ph," "ing," "ion," and so on); and
♦ frequent practice of words in the context of their meanings and an emphasis on word recognition.

How does the program address writing?

Requiring students to write about what they are reading forces them both to pay closer attention to written text and to organize their thoughts. Writing is a crucial component of any literacy program. Effective literacy programs should facilitate

♦ an environment in which students' writing has an audience;
♦ reflection on relative importance—that is, how the subject matter relates to the student's life;
♦ a setting in which content is kept at the center of the writing process;

- an environment in which readers are compelled to explain what they have learned, not merely regurgitate what they are told; and
- an atmosphere in which writing is viewed as a five-stage process that requires outlining, drafting, revising, rewriting, and publishing.

How does the program address assessment?

Content teachers at the secondary school level typically do not know how to assess or diagnose the reading needs of their students. Literacy programs should include professional development to allow teachers to become skilled in determining and correcting the reading needs of their students.

In order to address the important function of assessment, programs should

- make assessment a regular extension of instruction;
- link instruction to the results of testing (using assessment outcomes to determine effective practice);
- monitor student performance on a regular basis so teachers are aware of student progress;
- provide useable feedback based on clear, attainable, and worthwhile standards; and
- include components to diagnose students' initial ability and also to assess how students are progressing.

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Adolescents entering the adult world in the twenty-first century will need to read and write more than at any other time in recorded history. They will need higher levels of literacy and skills to do their jobs, run their households, and perform their civic duties. They will need to be more literate if they are to effectively cope with the flood of information they will find everywhere they turn. In a complex and often perilous world, their ability to read with comprehension will be crucial. Persistent instruction beyond the early grades is needed.

While more work needs to be done in the area of adolescent literacy, research indicates that the public is beginning to understand the magnitude of the problem. At the same time that reading and writing demands on adolescent learners are mounting, low literacy levels are all too prevalent among American high school students.

This document is intended to serve as a starting point to aid decision makers who understand the importance of strong literacy skills for success in life but are unclear about the right questions to ask to help solve our nation's literacy dilemma.