



# SREB

*MAKING  
MIDDLE GRADES  
WORK*

## Literacy Across the Curriculum:

Setting and Implementing Goals  
for Grades Six through 12

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Regional  
Education  
Board

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**SITE DEVELOPMENT GUIDE #12**



## Foreword

Lengthy publications like this one are often put on a shelf where they take up space, look important but are forgotten. I don't want that to happen with this one because the crisis in student literacy across the curriculum is an issue demanding prompt attention — from you.

I encourage superintendents and principals to lead your faculty in studying this guide. The best way is to follow an eight-step strategy to gain the maximum benefits from what this guide has to offer.

**Organize a study group.** Get started by recruiting a representative group of faculty from a variety of disciplines with an interest in improving the literacy skills of your students to study the guide. If there needs to be a greater understanding of the literacy problem, **Chapter 1**, *Why We Need an Across-the-Curriculum Emphasis on Literacy*, is a good place to start. This will help the group realize that there is a need for action. If your group members are already aware that students need stronger literacy skills than they currently possess, they can start by reviewing **Chapter 3**, *Launching Your School's Literacy Campaign*. This chapter offers a blueprint for getting started and will spark a lively discussion about first steps.

**Gather data.** **Chapter 3** offers a detailed strategy for developing a literacy profile for your school that can serve as baseline information. By going through the exercises described in the chapter, the team will get a clearer picture of the school's problems and the areas of greatest need.

**Inform others.** Use a series of informal meetings to familiarize key groups of faculty, parents and others with the issues and to solicit their support. Some of the research findings presented in **Chapter 2**, *Why Students Don't Read and What Schools Can Do About It*, can help bolster your case and suggest strategies to consider in addressing identified problems.

**Organize school-wide study teams.** Organize a separate study team for each of the five literacy goals that are discussed in **Chapters 4 – 8**. Schedule a separate session for each team to report on what it learned from studying its assigned chapter. Once the reports are complete, work together to decide what might be the highest priority for your school. Will you choose to start with just one of the goals or will you take initial steps to implement them all?

**Arrange professional development.** Successful implementation of any of the goals will not occur unless teachers receive in-depth workshops, opportunities to see strategies modeled by master teachers, frequent chances to discuss implementation concerns with colleagues and regular chances to network with others inside and outside the school.

**Use forms, surveys and other resources.** This guide is filled with planning forms, sample surveys and suggested strategies that can make implementation of any of the goals much easier. Feel free to use them as presented or to modify them to meet your needs.

**Explore other resources.** Each chapter features a resources section at the end that directs readers to valuable publications, Web sites, software and other sources of help. Further, the Appendices list other publications and Web sites currently available to provide support for your literacy initiatives.

**Evaluate your efforts.** It is important to take time to evaluate what you have accomplished. Put the findings together in a report or PowerPoint presentation to share with the faculty, parents and students.

Don't let the guide be a dust-catcher on your shelf! Let it be a stimulus for new thinking, fresh ideas and concrete actions that result in more literate students who master reading and writing — the essential tools required for success in all aspects of our lives.

Gene Bottoms  
Senior Vice President  
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# Why We Need an Across-the-Curriculum Emphasis on Literacy

*By Gene Bottoms*

In this chapter, we explore —

- How literacy skills affect future success.
- Assessing the literacy skills of high school and middle grades students.
- Making a commitment to a literacy initiative for older students.
- Providing experiences that help students become Proficient-level readers.
- Why every school must meet the five literacy goals.

*Tater was what you would call an average student; well, honestly — below average. He came from a working-class family in a small rural community in Indiana. He was a good kid, according to his high school principal, but in his sophomore year, he decided he would quit football despite being a talented player. Quite frankly, he was thinking about dropping out of school entirely at age 16. Tater heard that he could make a decent wage in the area's woodworking industry. But Tater was lucky. He had a principal who cared enough to encourage him to return to the football team and to stay in school. He attended the Success Program before school twice a week where he got help to improve his literacy skills, among other things. He worked hard to meet the minimum requirements for graduation. During his senior year, the school won the state football championship with Tater playing a major role.*

*A few weeks before graduation, the principal ran into Tater in the hall at school. He was proudly wearing his football championship ring and seemed quite happy. "What did you enjoy most about your senior year?" the principal asked, thinking he knew the answer. "Thanks for talking me into playing football this year, but what I enjoyed most was reading 16 books. I'm really proud of that," Tater quickly replied. "Were these big books?" asked the surprised principal. "No sir," came the quick response. "But I read 16 books!"*

*Tater's experience is only one success story to come out of Heritage Hills High School in Lincoln City, Indiana, since it began its reading initiative almost a decade ago. Principal Al Logsdon sees what Tater told him in that brief meeting as having a profound impact on the young man's future. Because Tater developed a love for reading in high school, he now has different goals for after graduation. He will think differently about whom he will marry, most likely choosing someone who shares his love for reading, and he will read to his Tater tots. And they will develop a love for reading too! It has started a cycle that will continue through generations. That's what this school's literacy campaign is all about!*

There are thousands of Taters in high school today, but they are not all as lucky as he was. One in 20 students leave high school prior to graduation; most have difficulty with reading and writing. They are not alone. During the past 15 years, 15 million students have graduated from high school without the ability to read at the Basic level, First Lady Laura Bush reported in an address to Congress. Literacy is a national problem — an urgent education priority for the federal government and for educators across the nation.

Actions to date are not enough to help the millions of young people lacking adequate literacy skills. Most federal and state programs emphasize helping preschool, kindergarten and elementary students read and write better. While starting early to address these critical skills is appropriate, these programs do not help the multitude of students already beyond those early years who cannot read and write well enough to succeed in higher-level courses that prepare them for higher education or employment. **The notion that the development of reading skills does not extend into the middle grades and high school years is simply false.** Much of what students learn in the earlier grades is lost if it is not reinforced in the middle grades and high school. Students must continue to develop skills to comprehend, analyze and apply what they read.

Janet Angelis, associate director of the Center on English Learning and Achievement (CELA), said it best in the CELA fall 2001 *English Update*:

“In the current rush to support reading achievement in the primary grades, we as a nation are in danger of abandoning a generation of children. These are the students in grades four and higher who need to learn and practice a whole set of complex reading, writing and language skills so that they can handle the variety of texts they will encounter and produce as they go through school and beyond.”

**This guide is designed for middle grades and high school educators looking for ways to help their students overcome the reading and writing barriers preventing them from reaching their potential.**

## *How literacy skills affect future success*

### □ **Today’s jobs demand greater literacy skills.**

Reading and writing proficiency is a key to success in higher education and in the workplace. The transition over the last decade to an information-centered economy guarantees that the greatest rewards, both financially and personally, will go to those who communicate effectively. There are few jobs — and almost no high-paying ones — not requiring proficiency in reading for understanding and communicating clearly orally and in writing.

Auto technicians must read and interpret highly technical manufacturers’ manuals to repair modern computer-based vehicles. Engineers must not only be able to conduct design studies, they must be able to communicate findings and recommendations in non-technical language to lay audiences. For those working in the burgeoning service industries, their very livelihoods depend on how well they communicate with the general public. Job requirements are rising, especially in the manufacturing, wholesale and retail segments of the economy.

It’s hard to think of an industry not demanding high literacy levels. In the report, *What Jobs Require: Literacy, Education and Training, 1940-2006*, published by the Educational Testing Service (ETS), Paul Barton found that the 25 fastest-growing jobs today “have substantially higher prose/literacy requirements than jobs that are declining with a net effect of raising average literacy requirements.” Barton even found that within specific levels of education attainment, earnings of adults increase with literacy proficiency levels. For example, individuals with bachelor’s degrees having high literacy scores earn more than those with lower scores.

A 2001 report, *Youth At the Crossroads: Facing High School and Beyond*, prepared for the U.S. Department of Education’s Commission on the Senior Year by The Education Trust, stressed that high school graduates without postsecondary education are finding it tougher to qualify for good jobs. Failure rates on employer tests of literacy and mathematics skills grew from 19 percent in 1996 to 36 percent in 1998. The decrease in passing rates is attributed to rising workplace requirements.



Employers today are less likely to provide remedial programs. Only 15 percent of companies provided such programs in 1999, compared to 24 percent in 1993. This places greater importance on the level of skills applicants bring with them.

□ **Technology is demanding more.**

As if the demand for higher levels of worker literacy wasn't enough, advances in technology have added more pressure. Everyone today must learn new ways to read. Billboards now change messages as we drive. Internet reading requires new skills for maneuvering through the jungle of information and for manipulating it to suit an array of needs. We now rely on more tools in our homes and workplaces and the literacy demands they impose are far more complex than in the past.

Former Secretary of Education Richard Riley succinctly summed up the impact of technology on adult literacy requirements in a November/December 2000 statement posted on the TeachingK-8.com Web site:

“In some cases, e-mail and the Internet have actually allowed us to substitute reading and writing for the spoken word. In a rapidly changing workplace, reading skills continue to be important for adults. And lifelong learning — meaning lifelong reading — is more crucial than ever as workers move from one job to the next.”

**Technical Literacy: An Essential Focus for Career/Technical Studies**

One aspect of technical literacy — the ability to read, understand and communicate in the language of a technical field — is increasingly important to workplace success. Today's high-performance work environments demand employees who can read, gather and analyze information from many sources to solve problems and meet customer needs.

Unfortunately, most career/technical programs don't emphasize technical reading and writing skills. On the 2002 *High Schools That Work (HSTW)* Assessment, too few students said they were asked to read and write to complete career/technical assignments. Only one-third said they'd been asked to prepare a written report or research paper once a semester. Fewer than half — 46 percent — were asked to read a career-related article at least once or twice a month.

When career/technical teachers make frequent reading and writing assignments, students' reading scores improve as does their technical knowledge and ability to become independent, continuous learners. Students who experienced moderate to intensive emphasis on reading and writing in their academic and career/technical classrooms had reading scores significantly higher than students in classes with little emphasis.

□ **It pays to be educated.**

Recent government data illustrate the payoff from higher levels of education. A report released in July 2002 by the Commerce Department's Census Bureau shows people with doctoral and professional degrees make three to four times more than high school graduates over their working lives. Looking at annual mean earnings, the report, citing 1999 data, showed high school dropouts earned \$18,900; high school graduates, \$25,900; associate degree holders, \$33,000; college graduates, \$45,400; and those holding professional degrees, \$99,300.

## □ Higher literacy equates to more education.

The correlation of literacy to education is significant. The issues of low literacy standards and achievement gaps are addressed in *The Twin Challenges of Mediocrity and Inequality*, published in February 2002 by ETS. The authors analyzed results from the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) and the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS). These large studies, undertaken in 1992 (NALS) and from 1994 to 1998 (IALS), yielded similar results: the average literacy scores of U.S. adults are at best average compared to their peers in other high-income countries. For many subgroups, the United States ranks in the bottom half.

These findings would be less alarming, according to the authors, “if literacy proficiencies were not so strongly associated with social, educational and economic outcomes in our society.” They note the following influences:

“...young adults’ basic academic skills influence the types of courses they take in high school, the amount of homework they do, whether they graduate from high school or obtain a GED certificate, whether they attend college upon graduation, their choice of a major field of study, their persistence in college and the types of academic degrees they obtain.”

Further, the direct correlation between the education level of adults, the kinds of jobs they qualify for and the pay they receive makes the situation even more urgent.

### *Assessing the literacy skills of high school and middle grades students*

If literacy is so important in determining success in and graduation from high school and college, and if the education level attained affects earnings power, then how well are our schools doing in helping students become literate adults? The Education Trust’s *Youth At the Crossroads* presents a compelling case for more stringent standards for high school students and addresses the gap separating low-income and minority students from other students.

The report confirms that literacy is a major component of the problem when looking at students’ skills in the middle grades and high school. There have been slight declines among 17-year-olds on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading exam over the past decade. At the same time, scores on the verbal portion of the SAT have been flat. This is especially disturbing given students today are entering high school with somewhat better reading skills than their predecessors. In high school, the gains made in the elementary and middle grades disappear. By age 17, only about one in 17 students comprehend specialized texts like the science section of the newspaper. For students of color, the disparity is even greater. Only about one in 50 Latinos and one in 100 African-American students can read at this level. For whites, the ratio is one in 12.

The Southern Regional Education Board’s (SREB) experience with the *High Schools That Work (HSTW)* initiative over 15 years has provided additional convincing evidence that literacy is a problem facing high school graduates. Recent research from the *Making Middle Grades Work (MMGW)* network confirms that problems start well before high school and are worsening.

Sites in both networks are required to participate in a biennial assessment using NAEP-referenced exams plus teacher and student surveys. To help sites evaluate progress in raising student achievement, performance goals have been set for reading, mathematics and science exams. The reading goal is somewhat above the middle of the Basic level. (*Descriptions of what students in the eighth and 12th grades who achieve at each level and what those who meet the HSTW performance goals are able to do are on pages 15–16.*)

How well are students doing in reaching higher proficiency levels? On the 2002 *HSTW* and Middle Grades Assessments, more than one-fourth of the students tested scored below the Basic level. (*See Table 1.*) At the high school level, five percent more of the students tested scored at the Proficient and Advanced levels in 2002 than in 2000, and the overall mean reading scores of all students during that period increased from 274 to 277.<sup>1</sup> In contrast from 1998 to 2002, the mean reading score of students nationwide on NAEP showed a decline from 290 to 287.

<sup>1</sup> Mean reading scores on the *HSTW* Assessment are based on a range of 0 to 500.

**Table 1: Students' Reading Proficiency Levels**

	Below Basic	Basic	Proficient	Advanced
<b>Grade 8</b>				
2000	30%	42%	27%	1%
2002	28	43	28	1
<b>Grade 12</b>				
2000	26	40	30	4
2002	24	37	33	6

**Sources:** Special Analysis of 2000 and 2002 Middle Grades Assessments;  
2002 *HSTW* Assessment Report for Sites that tested in both 2000 and 2002.

On the 2002 *HSTW* Assessment, slightly over half (53 percent) of the seniors tested met the *HSTW* reading performance goal. On the 2002 Middle Grades Assessment, slightly less than half (44 percent) of the eighth-graders tested met the *MMGW* goal of 160.<sup>2</sup> The mean reading achievement scores for all students participating were 157 for eighth-graders and 277 for seniors. (See Table 2.)

**Table 2: Mean Reading Scores of Eighth and 12th Grade Students**

	Mean Score	Performance Goal	Percentage Meeting Goal
<b>Grade 8</b>	157	160	44%
<b>Grade 12</b>	277	279	53

**Sources:** 2002 Middle Grade Assessment Report and Special Analysis of 2002 Middle Grades Assessment data for all sites;  
2002 *HSTW* Assessment Report at All Sites

These data do not tell the entire story of literacy in these schools — almost twice as many males as females perform at the lowest reading performance level, Below Basic, in both middle grades and high school. (See Table 3.)

**Table 3: Percentages of Students Scoring Below Basic and at Basic or Higher By Gender**

	Males		Females	
	Below Basic	At or Above Basic	Below Basic	At or Above Basic
<b>Grade 8</b>	35%	65%	18%	82%
<b>Grade 12</b>	30	70	19	81

**Sources:** Special Analysis of 2002 Middle Grades Assessment at all sites; and 2002 *HSTW* Assessment Report for All Sites.  
Of all students participating in the 2002 Middle Grades Assessment, 52 percent were females and 48 percent were males.  
Of students participating in the 2002 *HSTW* Assessment, 51 percent were females and 49 percent were males.

<sup>2</sup> Mean reading scores on the Middle Grades Assessment are based on a range of 0 to 300.

In the middle grades, the racial/ethnic gap is even wider — 19 percent of white students scored in the Below Basic range, while nearly half (45 percent) of the African-Americans performed at this level. On the *HSTW* Assessment, one in five white students scored Below Basic compared to one in three African-American students. (See Table 4.)

**Table 4: Percentages of Students Scoring Below Basic and at Basic or Higher By Ethnicity**

	African-American		White	
	Below Basic	At or Above Basic	Below Basic	At or Above Basic
<b>Grade 8</b>	45%	55%	19%	81%
<b>Grade 12</b>	35	65	20	80

**Sources:** Special Analysis of 2002 Middle Grades Assessment; and 2002 *HSTW* Assessment Report for All Sites. Of students participating in the 2002 Middle Grades Assessment, 21 percent were African-American, 65 percent were white and 13 percent had other ethnic backgrounds. Of students participating in the 2002 *HSTW* Assessment, 23 percent were African-American, 64 percent were white and 13 percent had other ethnic backgrounds.

### *Making a commitment to a literacy initiative for older students*

In 1999, the International Reading Association (IRA) published *Adolescent Literacy: A Position Statement*. (See the IRA’s Web site at <http://www.reading.org>.) The statement says the ongoing literacy development of adolescents needs as much attention as that focused on beginning readers.

*Adolescent readers need support in seven specific areas:*

1. access to a wide variety of reading material that appeals to their interests;
2. instruction that builds skills and the desire to read increasingly complex materials;
3. assessment that shows strengths as well as needs;
4. expert teachers who model and provide explicit instruction across the curriculum;
5. reading specialists who assist students having difficulty learning how to read;
6. teachers who understand the complexities of individual adolescent readers; and
7. homes and communities that support the needs of adolescent learners.

SREB supports these goals. The literacy campaign envisioned in this guide addresses each of these areas. Older students have been neglected in the drive to make literacy a national priority. **This situation must change.**

## IRA's Adolescent Literacy Position Statement

In 1997, the International Reading Association (IRA) appointed 21 teachers, parents and researchers to work together on its Commission on Adolescent Literacy. The Commission was formed because IRA was concerned that almost all federal efforts on literacy were being focused on grades kindergarten through three, and it wanted to make sure that adolescents were not forgotten in terms of instruction, research and funding. One of the main tasks of the commission was to develop an action proposal to enhance adolescent literacy development and instruction. IRA's *Adolescent Literacy: A Position Statement* was approved by the Board of Directors in 1999 and disseminated soon after in the *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* and on the IRA Web site (<http://www.reading.org/>).

### *Providing experiences that help students become Proficient-level readers*

*High Schools That Work (HSTW)* has set an ambitious goal to help schools in the network get 85 percent of their career-oriented students to meet the *HSTW* performance goal in reading by 2006. This is achievable despite only 53 percent of seniors at *HSTW* sites meeting this goal in 2002.

However, this will not happen unless schools take concerted action to implement those practices that have a documented impact on raising reading achievement. A performance analysis of students exposed to certain experiences has allowed identification of the practices most effective in raising students' reading achievement scores. *MMGW* research indicates eight experiences that have a positive impact on students reading in middle grades and 10 similar experiences from *HSTW* research for high school students. (See *Table 5*.)

In the 2002 *HSTW* Assessment, students reporting seven to 10 of these were considered to have had intensive literacy experiences. Students reporting having four to six were considered to have had moderate experiences. Students with zero to three were considered to have had "low" literacy experience. High school students with intensive experiences scored 18 points higher than students with "low" experiences. **Only 18 percent of high school students reported having had intensive literacy experiences.**

Middle grades students with intensive experiences scored 22 points higher than students with "low" experiences. **However, only 23 percent reported having had intensive literacy experiences.** (See *Table 6*.)

**Table 5: Things That Raise Students' Reading Achievement**

<b>Action</b>	<b>Middle Grades</b>	<b>High School</b>
<b>Reading</b>	<p>Read an hour or more outside of school each day.</p> <p>Read 11 or more books each year.</p>	<p>Read two or more hours outside class each week.</p> <p>Read a book outside class and demonstrate understanding of the significance of the main idea each month.</p> <p>Read technical books or manuals to complete career/technical assignments each month.</p>
<b>Writing</b>	<p>Complete short writing assignments in English classes at least once a month.</p> <p>Revise written work to improve quality occasionally or often.</p> <p>Use word-processing software to complete assignments sometimes or often.</p> <p>Write a major research paper at least once a year.</p> <p>Write a few sentences about how to solve a mathematics problem at least once a semester.</p>	<p>Complete short writing assignments that are graded in English classes at least monthly.</p> <p>Complete short writing assignments that are graded in science classes at least monthly.</p> <p>Complete short writing assignments that are graded in social studies classes at least monthly.</p> <p>Revise writing often to improve quality.</p> <p>Use a word processor often to complete an assignment or project.</p> <p>Write in-depth explanations about a project or activity occasionally or often.</p>
<b>Speaking</b>	<p>Make an oral presentation in English class at least once a semester.</p>	<p>Discuss what was read with other students in English class occasionally or often.</p>

Looking at the experiences with the greatest impact, six are similar for both middle grades and high school. The more time students spend reading outside class and the more books they read, the higher the achievement. Completing short writing assignments at least monthly and revising writing to improve quality are also significant. Using word-processing software to complete assignments and being expected to complete challenging writing assignments were associated with higher reading achievement for both groups.

**Table 6: Reading Achievement According to Degree of Emphasis on Literacy**

Emphasis on Literacy	Middle Grades 2002 Reading Goal: 160		High School Reading Goal: 279	
	Percentage	Mean Reading Score	Percentage	Mean Reading Score
Intensive	23%	169*	18%	288*
Moderate	45	158	40	281
Low	32	147	42	270

\* Score is at the Proficient level of achievement.

**Note:** All scores are significant at <.05.

The mean score for high school students who reported intensive literacy experiences was at the Proficient level. Students who finish high school reading at the Proficient level are less likely to have to take remedial courses when they go to college. Of middle grades students having intensive literacy experiences, 60 percent met the reading goal, compared to only 33 percent with “low” experiences. Students who have not met the reading goal by the end of the middle grades are unlikely to have the reading skills they need to take college-preparatory courses in the ninth grade without concentrated extra time and help.

### *Why every school must meet the five literacy goals*

Schools will not see significant improvements in the reading, writing and oral communications skills of students until they commit to an **across-the-curriculum emphasis on literacy**. Assessment data from middle grades and high school students framed five goals that will result in significantly higher reading achievement outcomes. (See page 17 for a complete description of the goals.) The goals involve every class and all teachers in the campaign. Let’s discuss each goal briefly.

#### **HSTW and MMGW Five Literacy Goals**

1. Read the equivalent of 25 books per year across the curriculum.
2. Write weekly in all classes.
3. Use reading and writing strategies to enhance learning in all classes.
4. Write research papers in all classes.
5. Complete a rigorous language arts curriculum taught like college-preparatory/honors English.

**Goal 1 — Read the equivalent of 25 books per year across the curriculum.** Getting students to read more results in higher reading achievement. This goal not only contributes positively to overall student achievement, it bonds all teachers in a common effort. The evidence from the 2002 *HSTW* Assessment shows the more students read, the higher their reading achievement scores. The 18 percent of seniors reading five or more books in English classes had a mean achievement score of 12 points higher than those reading no books. (See Table 7.)

**Table 7: Reading Scores of High School Students  
According to Books Read in English Class**

Books Read	Students Reporting	Mean Score
None	21%	272
1–4	61	277
5 or more	18	284

The *HSTW* recommendation is 8-10.

**Source:** 2002 *HSTW* Assessment

*The 2002 HSTW Assessment results showed that:*

- 18 percent of students said they read five or more books outside class; and
- 22 percent of students said they spent two hours or more weekly reading outside of class.

Students in the middle grades who did a great deal of reading had the highest reading achievement scores on the 2002 Middle Grades Assessment. Reading 11 or more books a year resulted in performance scores at least 30 points higher than students who said they read no books; and at least 20 points higher than students who read two or fewer books. (See Table 8.) The downside is that 43 percent of middle grades students said they read five or fewer books each year; 25 percent said they did no reading outside school and 39 percent reported reading only half an hour or less per day.

**Table 8: Impact of Reading More Books In and Out of School  
on Reading Scores of Eighth-grade Students**

Books Read	Students Reporting	Mean Score
None	3%	131
2 or fewer	10	142
3–5	30	153
6–10	25	161
11 or more	32	163

**Note:** The recommendation is 25 books annually.

**Source:** 2002 Middle Grades Assessment



*The 2002 Middle Grades Assessment showed that:*

- 32 percent of students said they read 11 or more books each year across all classes; and
- 25 percent of students said they spend two hours or more weekly reading outside of class.

**Goal 2 — Write weekly in all classes.** Students who write regularly transfer new learning into their own language, discover their voices and learn how to effectively address others. Seniors participating in the 2002 *HSTW* Assessment who completed short writing assignments graded at least once a week improved their reading scores by 13 points compared to students who had such an experience only once a semester. Editing and revising writing assignments prior to grading at least once or twice a month resulted in scores eight points higher compared to students who had such experiences only once a semester.

Again, *HSTW* Assessment results show such practices are rare. Only 27 percent of high school seniors reported completing short writing assignments graded daily or weekly. Revising written work before receiving a grade was a more common practice, with 53 percent reporting they had to do so at least once a month. (See *Table 9*.)

**Table 9: Impact of Frequent Writing Experiences on Reading Achievement of High School Seniors**

Frequency	Short Writing Assignments That Were Graded		Revising Written Work Before Receiving a Grade	
	Percentage	Mean Score	Percentage	Mean Score
Never	2%	252	7%	263
Once a Year	10	261	14	268
Once a Semester	21	270	27	275
Once or Twice a Month	39	282	35	283
Weekly/Several Times a Week	27	283	18	280

**Source:** 2002 *HSTW* Assessment

Frequent writing experiences make a difference in achievement for middle grades students as well. Completing short writing assignments of one to three pages, graded once a month or more was associated with an increase of 15 points in reading achievement scores in the middle grades, when compared to those stating this was never required. Fifty-nine percent of students said they had to complete short writing assignments for a grade once a month or more. When students regularly revised written work to improve quality, the results were even more dramatic. Students reporting they often had to do so had mean reading achievement scores of 27 points higher than students who never were expected to revise their work. Yet, only 28 percent of students said they frequently had to revise written work. (See *Table 10*.)

**Table 10: Impact of Frequent Writing Experiences on Reading Scores of Middle Grades Students**

Frequency	Short Writing Assignments That Were Graded		Frequency	Revising Written Work To Improve Quality	
	Percentage	Mean Score		Percentage	Mean Score
Never	8%	144	Never	6%	137
Once a Year	10	148	Rarely	19	149
Once a Semester	23	158	Sometimes	47	157
Once or More a Month	59	159	Often	28	164

Source: 2002 Middle Grades Assessment

**Goal 3 — Use reading and writing strategies to enhance learning in all classes.** Reading and writing are critical for learning all content. Proficient readers can use strategies to get the most from what they read and communicate their thoughts effectively. Struggling students face problems learning how to construct meaning from assignments in mathematics, science, social studies or career/technical classes. They cannot make sense of what they read and report few teachers help them learn reading and writing strategies. On the 2002 *HSTW* Assessment, students who reported that teachers often gave them opportunities to discuss or debate texts had reading performance scores significantly higher than those who said their teachers did not provide such opportunities. (See Table 11.)

**Table 11: How Certain Learning Experiences Across the Curriculum Affect High School Students' Reading Achievement**

In classes other than English, we discuss or debate topics we have read		
Frequency	Percentage	Mean Score
Never	5%	264
Seldom	19	275
Sometimes	48	278
Often	28	279

Source: 2002 *HSTW* Assessment at all sites

In the middle grades, students receiving the opportunity to practice reading and use what they read to discuss, write and complete projects scored 13 points higher on the 2002 Middle Grades Assessment than their peers who did not. (See Table 12.)

**Table 12: How Certain Learning Experiences Across the Curriculum Affect Middle Grades Students' Reading Achievement**

In classes other than English/language arts, we practice reading and use what we read to discuss, write and complete projects.		
	Percentage	Mean Score
Yes	84%	159
No	16	146

Source: 2002 Middle Grades Assessment

The greatest barrier in getting more students to the Proficient level is most teachers lack expertise in engaging students in reading, comprehending, talking and writing about the language of the field being studied.

**Goal 4 — Write research papers in all classes.** By participating in the research process, students learn to identify problems, seek appropriate materials to address problems, draw conclusions and put into their own words what they have learned — all skills critical in postsecondary studies and real-world professions. Seniors participating in the 2002 *HSTW* Assessment stating they had to write major research papers once a year had reading achievement scores of 13 points higher than students reporting they were never required to do so. Making an oral presentation on a project or assignment once or twice a month was associated with scores of 13 points higher than those for students never making such presentations.

**Goal 5 — Complete a rigorous language arts curriculum taught like a college-preparatory/honors English course.** Enrolling all students in college-preparatory English classes breaks down the barriers of lower standards for some students; it is a way to set the same intellectual standards and the same level of effort for all students. The tendency to put lower-achieving students in watered-down English courses with titles like Basic, General or Technical English is a sure formula for further poor reading achievement.

*HSTW defines college-preparatory English as having three characteristics for each student:*

- reads at least eight books per year and demonstrates understanding;
- writes a short paper for a grade each week; and
- completes a major research paper each year.

*HSTW* Assessment data on students placed in college-preparatory-level English courses are associated with reading achievement of 15 points higher than for those in less demanding courses. Seniors enrolled in academic English had a mean score of 286 on the 2002 assessment — only two points below Proficient. (See Table 13.)

**Table 13: Reading Performance of High School Seniors  
Based on English Course Enrollment**

Course	Percentage	Mean Score
College-preparatory	34%	286
Non-college-preparatory	66	271

Source: 2002 *HSTW* Assessment

One in five students participating in the Middle Grades Assessment were enrolled in advanced English/language arts classes. Their mean reading score was 172, which ranks at the Proficient level, while all eighth-graders had a mean score of 156.

**Enrolling all students in higher-level language arts classes is the one action schools can take that is likely to have the greatest impact on improving literacy skills.** Changing the content of language arts courses needs to begin in the middle grades. As high school graduation requirements rise, many students enter high school unable to do rigorous college-preparatory-level work. The failure rate in grade nine is three to five times higher than that in any previous grade.

Leaders in schools making the most progress in raising student achievement address the transition from the middle grades to high school by focusing on students traditionally enrolled in “watered-down” academic courses taught by the least experienced teachers.

*Middle grades schools identify seventh-graders not ready for high school and take one or more of the following actions:*

- provide them with more intensive studies in language arts and reading in grades seven and eight;
- offer summer catch-up programs to entering high school students who are still behind;
- provide a support class in seventh through ninth grades for students who need extra help; and
- assign the **most** experienced teachers to instruct these students.

**Watered-down courses and low expectations do not work.** In a study of 3,000 students during their eighth- and ninth-grade years, *HSTW* found that schools placing higher percentages of ninth-grade students in college-preparatory-level language arts classes have a success rate comparable to schools that enroll fewer students in these courses. (This was also true for mathematics and science.) *HSTW* found that students in the lower half of reading achievement in grade eight were twice as likely to fail ninth-grade English if in a low-level course than if enrolled in a high-level course.

## ***Conclusion***

There is ample evidence supporting the need for an intensive literacy campaign in America’s middle grades and high schools. Further, there are promising findings that show when literacy is made a priority, student reading achievement will improve. The goal of this guide is to show educators how they can mount a successful campaign resulting in more literate graduates with a greater chance of completing postsecondary education and qualifying for well-paying jobs with promising futures.

## Reading Proficiency Levels<sup>3</sup> — Eighth Grade

### Basic

**Scores:** 135 – 171

Eighth-grade students performing at the Basic level demonstrate understanding of explicitly stated information by retrieving it from text. At the Basic level, students use text details to make simple inferences and predictions using explicitly stated information and supporting details to identify a character's emotions and recognize their cause. They use context clues to define and interpret a phrase. In addition, these students can use surface details to draw a logical conclusion or interpret meaning from texts. They can explain why information is included and recognize the purpose of a title and illustration. They can form an opinion in response to a text, but may not be able to cite supporting passages.

### Proficient

**Scores:** 172 – 221

Eighth-grade students performing at the Proficient level demonstrate understanding by using explicitly and implicitly stated information to identify and summarize the main idea of a text. At the Proficient level, students are able to extend text ideas to formulate an appropriate question or make a relevant connection to real-life experience. They can use surface details to make a comparison. In addition, these students demonstrate some knowledge of literary elements and devices by recognizing poetic imagery and using details to explain the meaning of a symbolic phrase. When discussing a title's appropriateness or expressing a text-based opinion, they can provide general support from the text.

### Advanced

**Scores:** 222+

Eighth-grade students performing at the Advanced level demonstrate a thorough understanding of theme, point of view and characterization by using specific ideas from across a text and by connecting ideas between two texts. At the Advanced level, students can explain the relevance of a question by extending text ideas and using a connection between the text and real-life experience. In addition, advanced students can derive meaning from whole texts to make overarching evaluations. When analyzing content or expressing text-based opinions, advanced students can provide specific support.

### Performing at Goal

**Score:** 160

Eighth-grade students performing at goal demonstrate understanding by using explicitly stated information to identify the main idea of a text. They use surface details and context clues to make predictions, draw conclusions and draw comparisons within the text and to real life. Students provide a simple explanation for a symbolic phrase and identify literary elements within a passage. They express an opinion based on the text with some general support.

<sup>3</sup> Skills are evaluated in reading materials for information or to perform a task.  
Eighth-grade tests assess literary reading and reading for information.

## Reading Proficiency Levels — 12th Grade

### Basic

**Scores:** 262 – 287

Twelfth-graders performing at the Basic level demonstrate a general understanding of grade-level texts. They locate specific information and identify the main ideas and purpose, make simple connections between ideas within a text and provide general evaluations of the meaning or purpose. In addition, they identify interpretations and provide text-based support for those interpretations.

### Proficient

**Scores:** 288 – 316

Twelfth-graders performing at the Proficient level demonstrate understanding of grade-level texts. They understand explicitly stated ideas, compare and contrast information in different parts of a text, determine the relative importance of different ideas and provide overall interpretations of a text's meaning. Proficient readers recognize connections between ideas in the text, with other texts and with real-life experiences. They recognize general organizational features and can extend ideas in the text through inferences such as predictions and conclusions.

### Advanced

**Scores:** 317+

Twelfth-graders performing at the Advanced level demonstrate a thorough understanding of grade-level texts. They integrate text ideas, explain causal relationships and evaluate complex information and organizational features. Students analyze text ideas to provide specific and extensive support for evaluations and interpretations. They evaluate an author's opinion and explain how it is conveyed. They make connections between complex, deeply embedded ideas within the text with other texts and with real-world experiences. They can interpret and explain specialized terminology.

### Performing at Goal

**Score:** 279

Twelfth-graders performing at goal demonstrate specific and general understanding of grade-level texts. They use explicitly stated ideas to support interpretations, identify and evaluate relevant information and connect ideas from across a text to make simple inferences. Students use examples and specific information to support straightforward interpretations and evaluations. They use knowledge of common structures and types of texts to describe and evaluate how information is presented.

## Five Goals for High-Level Literacy Programs

### *Students will*

- 1. Read the equivalent of 25 books per year across the curriculum.** Students' reading skills and understanding of content will grow if they read more and are exposed to a wider range of materials. Teachers should assign eight to 10 books in English/language arts and another three to four or their equivalents in all other classes. Teachers in every class should assign reading appropriate to course content and expect students to demonstrate understanding of what they read. Expect students to read both fiction and nonfiction, including technical manuals, journal articles and magazine articles. Give students choice in the selection of materials within parameters that will allow them to meet course goals. Ask students to prepare written reports, make oral presentations and perform tasks related to what they have read.
- 2. Write weekly in all classes.** Expect students to complete short writing assignments each week in all classes. These can take many forms, including journals, letters, editorials, essays, process descriptions, open-response questions, reports and written summaries. Some writing assignments can be for audiences and purposes outside the classroom. Provide frequent opportunities for students to revise their writing to improve quality. Expect teachers to use common grade-level rubrics for evaluating student work.
- 3. Use reading and writing strategies to enhance learning in all classes.** Proficient readers summarize what they have learned; ask clarifying questions; use pertinent vocabulary; and analyze the content, purpose and structure of a text. Prepare and expect all teachers to demonstrate a variety of reading and writing strategies enabling students to learn the content and language of their disciplines and to communicate effectively.
- 4. Write research papers in all classes.** Uncovering what has already been written and learned about a topic is a valuable learning process. Research is an integral part of most real-world occupations and is therefore a skill that must be learned in school. Individual research allows students to become experts on a particular topic and contribute to their classmates' learning. Research includes multiple steps — defining the question, locating and evaluating information, summarizing and paraphrasing information, combining information in cogent writing and documenting sources. Expect students to write some research papers in the traditional format; others may be formatted as proposals, laboratory reports or journal articles.
- 5. Complete a rigorous language arts curriculum taught like college-preparatory/honors English.** To reach this goal, students read eight to 10 books each year and demonstrate understanding, write short papers each week that are graded and complete a research paper. Students will complete some summer reading assignments. Assigned materials can include a wide variety of grade-level selections, including young adult and classic novels, biographies, poetry, drama, short stories and essays. Students will formulate and respond to questions and reflect on what they have read. They will identify connections among various reading materials and relate what they read to personal experiences and real life. Students use written work to demonstrate understanding of what they read and demonstrate a growing ability to organize thoughts and communicate clearly.

Developed by *HSTW* and *MMGW* for their network schools.

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