



## VPI Information Brief 4 Adolescent Literacy

### **CLASSROOM SCENARIO**

Mr. Beignet, a high school English teacher, and Mrs. Chicory, a special education teacher, work together as a co-teaching team. Together they teach three hours of freshmen English. At the beginning of the school year collaboratively they reviewed the standardized test scores as well as conducted curriculum based assessments on all of their new freshmen with and without disabilities. Although they did have proficient readers, numerous students showed weaknesses in decoding and comprehension. These readers lacked background knowledge and were often disengaged/inactive readers. Aware that struggling readers are at high risk of dropping out during the transition from middle school to high school, Mr. Beignet and Mrs. Chicory agree to collectively do all they can to teach English content while simultaneously improve student reading skills. What can Mr. Beignet and Mrs. Chicory do to improve the academic outcomes and literacy skills of their students?

Literacy is defined as the ability to read, write, speak, listen and think effectively (Meltzer, Smith, & Clark, 2001). The Alliance for Excellent Education, a Washington, D.C., based advocacy group, released a report titled *Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy* (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004). In this report it was stated that eight million students between fourth and twelfth grades struggle to read grade level material and more than three thousand students drop out of high school each school day. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2004) test samples of students to measure national achievement trends over time. Reading scores for 17- and 13-year-old students show minor improvements over 30 years. Louisiana Department of Education has set an overarching goal to enhance literacy of preschool children through adults through significantly improved literacy instruction and by creating positive teaching and learning environments (SEESE, February, 2006).

Who are the struggling adolescent readers? By the time a student enters the fourth grade they can struggle with reading for different reasons for example: poor vocabulary; insufficient background knowledge; poor reading strategies; and a

lack of motivation. The largest group of struggling adolescent readers experience problems in fluency and comprehension (Berman & Biancarosa, 2005).

Meltzer, et al. (2001) state there are several points in the development of effective adolescent literacy that are consistently reinforced in the research. These points are: the need to integrate both generic and discipline-specific literacy strategies throughout the content areas in order to maximize learning; the role of engagement and motivation in literacy development; the interconnectedness of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and thinking; and the requirement that students be actively involved in making meaning from text.

Biancarosa & Snow (2004) say it is possible to raise middle and high school students' overall literacy, but to do so students need instruction in reading comprehension, learning while reading and reading in the content areas. *Reading Next* recommends the following classroom-based instructional strategies to improve adolescent literacy: direct, explicit comprehension instruction; motivation and self-directed learning; effective instructional principles embedded in content; strategic tutoring; diverse texts; text-based collaborative learning; intensive writing; a

technology component; and on-going formative assessment of students (Biancarose & Snow, 2004).

What can Mr. Beignet and Mrs. Chicory do in their classroom? One of the fifteen instructional elements is direct, explicit comprehension instruction. An instructional approach such as Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR) could be implemented. Based on the foundations of reciprocal teaching and features previously identified with effective instruction before, during, and after reading CSR helps students learn specific strategies associated with effective reading comprehension (Klinger & Vaughn, 2004). CSR can be taught to the class as a whole and then they can be divided into cooperative groups to practice the strategies with expository text found in content areas. In addition, a meta-analysis on instructing adolescents with learning disabilities conducted by Swanson and Deshler (2003) found advance organizers and explicit practice to be critical steps in the instruction of adolescents. The University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning (CRL) has validated the Strategic Instruction Model (SIM) which includes a learning strategies curriculum and a content enhancement series to utilize both student-focused and teacher-focused interventions.

What can be done beyond the classroom to improve adolescent literacy? Instructional improvements influencing student outcomes are unlikely to be maintained or extended beyond the initial classroom interventions if certain infrastructural factors are not in place. Biancarose & Snow (2004) list the following as critical infrastructural elements of effective adolescent literacy programs: A comprehensive and coordinated literacy program; extended time for literacy; professional development, teacher teams; on-going summative assessment of students and programs; and leadership. To tackle the literacy issues principals are challenged to become literacy leaders to change the passion and commitment of

teachers, parents, and other to improve adolescent literacy in all students (NASSP, 2005).

Good teaching!

#### References:

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#### Questions for Reflection

1. What types of reading characteristic do adolescent readers display in your school?
2. What effective instructional elements do you use to improve adolescent literacy?
3. What literacy infrastructure elements are present in your school?
4. What are some of your greatest challenges in improving adolescent literacy?

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