

# Literacy: A key for learning

Literacy—the ability to read, write, speak, listen, and think effectively—is fundamental to teaching and learning. To support literacy development from the early years to the high school level, we conduct studies and evaluations, offer a variety of programs and products, and bring our expertise directly into schools. This story describes how our adolescent literacy project promotes effective strategies for improving adolescent literacy development in the region and generates valuable resources for educators across the country.

*“Defining literacy as a broader way of thinking and set of skills is key to using it in social studies.”*

High School Teacher, Maine

*“By addressing issues that appear in grades 9-12, faculty saw that reading was not just the English teacher’s job, but that literacy was something everyone needed to become aware of to promote comprehension in their content area. Faculty had to stop and think about how the texts they choose for kids—the difficulty of terminology and readability—can effect how students learn.”*

Content Literacy Specialist, Maine

## Adolescent Literacy: Expanding the Focus

Today’s teens need stronger literacy skills than ever before, not only to meet tough new content-area learning standards but also to acquire the basic skills necessary to make a living. “Students need more literacy skills because of today’s technology, because they will be changing jobs, because the world is getting smaller,” says Betty Jordan,

director of the Washington County Consortium for School Improvement in Maine.

Jordan’s organization is one of many in Maine concerned about the low level of literacy among high school students. One issue is how access to high-quality professional development in literacy has been limited, especially in rural areas.

Recognizing the centrality of literacy to successful educational reform, such as that outlined in Maine’s landmark Promising Futures document, the former commissioner of education in Maine asked The Education Alliance’s Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University (LAB) and one of its partner organizations, The Center for

Resource Management (CRM), for support. Together, they would supplement the K–8 literacy efforts already underway by starting an adolescent literacy project in Washington County high schools.

To do so, the Alliance partnered with the Maine Department of Education, the Center for Inquiry of Secondary Education, the University of Maine at Orono and at Machias, the Mitchell Institute, and the Washington County Consortium. Their goal was to strengthen content-area literacy development in several, small, rural high schools. The three-year project with Washington County high schools includes a research component, professional development in content-area literacy for teachers, and technical assistance to school-based teams to plan and implement literacy action plans.

The centerpiece of the project is the Adolescent Literacy Support Framework, developed by CRM and the LAB to bridge the divide between literacy research and practice. “This research-based framework helps school leaders identify what they need to address to effectively support adolescent literacy development,” says Julie Meltzer, senior research associate at CRM and director of the Washington County adolescent literacy project.

Four key components of the framework, each with its own associated research-based best practices, work together to improve literacy skills: (1) address student motivation, (2) implement research-based literacy strategies, (3) support reading and writing across the curriculum, and (4) ensure organizational support. To improve literacy school-wide, all four key components of the framework must be put into place.

Jeanne Bishop, principal of Shead High School in Eastport, Maine, has been working with the framework for two years. “I had students in the high school who weren’t reading at grade level, and I wasn’t seeing a lot of reading for enjoyment or a lot of use of the library,” she says.

She and five content-area teachers decided to take the intensive professional development course. They also participated in monthly on-site technical assistance sessions facilitated by the school coach and content-area reading specialist, Roz Weizer. These sessions included four mini-workshops that Meltzer and Weizer developed to help educators meet goals in two areas of their literacy action plan: improving reading comprehension across the content areas and implementing an effective sustained silent reading program.

“Right now, I can see an impact through a change in teaching styles,” says Bishop. “I’m seeing more group work, tighter expectations and rubrics guiding class assignments, interdisciplinary collaboration, and teachers excited about using the strategies.”

The literacy development strategies motivate teachers and students alike. For example, instead of just giving an assignment and having a discussion afterward, teachers can choose to use various graphic organizers to clarify concepts, or an anticipation guide to help students access prior knowledge, or group reports to motivate the students to learn.

“The strategies can be generalized to different settings. For example, a student in English class who just finished using the Cornell note-taking method could go to science class and use the same note-taking strategy there,” says Jim Roberts, curriculum developer for the Washington County Consortium in Machias. “The biggest impact I see is that teachers across content areas are using consistent literacy strategies in the classroom.”

Teachers trust the framework’s strategies because they are current with cognitive research and grounded in scientific theory about what motivates students to



learn. Ongoing professional development after the literacy training offers teachers practical support. “The follow-up professional development is so powerful,” says Roberts, “and the bag of tricks is so deep, you can look for a multitude of ways to motivate students.”

According to Roberts, professional development is critical. “The standards-based tests have a strong emphasis on literacy. So, if you don’t have a solid background in strategies that teach literacy, you won’t be able to help students develop the skills they need.” To meet Maine’s challenging content-area standards, secondary schools need to keep their students’ comprehension and communication techniques up to par in all the content areas.

The focus on the literacy framework also helps teachers connect their practice to larger school reform goals. Project

staff have observed that teachers in the participating schools are talking a lot more about teaching practice. “Instead of teachers seeing things as unchanging, now they ask, ‘What else could I do?’” says Meltzer. “I’ve heard teachers say, ‘I don’t even think about planning a lesson now without thinking about the literacy impact.’”

The success of the adolescent literacy project in Washington County is growing. The University of Maine’s advanced adolescent literacy institute enrolled 21 teachers last year in a pilot version, co-developed by Julie Meltzer, Jeff Wilhelm, and Tanya Baker. During the summer of 2003, more than 60 teachers from throughout the state participated, and 12 content-area literacy teachers became mentors. High schools in other counties are now creating their own literacy teams. “This is broader

than Washington County, Maine,” says Betty Jordan. “This is a national issue and concern.”

To benefit both a regional and a national audience, the Alliance and CRM have been developing literacy improvement materials and professional development opportunities. Practitioners from across the country have responded enthusiastically to the print publication, *Adolescent Literacy Resources: Linking Research and Practice* and the online resource, the Adolescent Literacy in the Content Areas spotlight on The Knowledge Loom Web site. To support teachers using these materials, national presentations and workshops have been facilitated by Meltzer, Weizer, and Alliance staff Mary Anne Mather and Sidney Okashige. Twenty four educators from the northeast region are participating in a new online professional development experience, the Collaboratory, which combines online seminars and on-site coaching. As a result, an increasing number of educators and policymakers have been using the framework to guide their thinking about adolescent literacy development.

“If the bottom line is that the kids leave our high school with what they need for life,” says Colleen Haskell, principal of Maine’s Jonesport-Beals High School, “that’s what I’m looking for.”