

## Teen Literacy across the curriculum



*“For years we have just assumed that the English teacher would take care of everything, but content-area teachers need to play a role, too, so we need to include adolescent literacy practice in their preparation.”* – Karen Rumery, director of assessment and curriculum for Gorham Public Schools in Maine.

Today’s teens need stronger literacy skills than ever before, yet high school educators speak urgently about students with low levels of reading and writing proficiency, often lamenting that students can only read at the fourth and fifth grade level. Businesses complain that high school graduates don’t have the basic literacy skills needed in the workplace. And new statewide education standards lean heavily on literacy requirements, asking students to analyze, discuss, describe, and explain.

### Teaching teenagers to read and write

Concern over low literacy levels has prompted school districts throughout the region to start literacy initiatives in their high schools. Many schools have asked how they can bring content-based literacy instruction to the classroom in ways that will make a positive difference for their students. Seeking answers to these questions, they have turned to the Education Alliance’s Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory (LAB).

As part of its broader work on student-centered learning at the secondary level, the LAB developed the Adolescent Literacy Support Framework, a diagnostic tool to help school leaders identify how to initiate improvement. The framework is drawn from research on reading comprehension, motivation, school reform, and second language acquisition.

The framework emphasizes four keys to adolescent literacy improvement:

- Motivation — Relevance to social and emotional needs of adolescents
- Research-Based Strategies — Reliance on proven strategies and techniques
- Across the Curriculum — Reading and writing in all content areas
- Organizational Support — Leadership capacity to ensure necessary

support, sustainability, and focus

### **Schools begin the work**

The Maine Department of Education recognized that literacy support is key to success on the state's standards and sought the LAB's help with improving literacy development. The LAB conducted workshops for Maine high schools and is working with the University of Maine to bring professional development opportunities to Maine educators. Over the next four years, the LAB and CRM will be piloting the Adolescent Literacy Support Framework in schools throughout Washington County, Maine.

"We are extremely interested in this project because we're realizing that adolescent literacy is really at the core of learning," says Betty Jordan, director of the Washington County Consortium for School Improvement.

One of the pilot schools, Jonesport-Beals High School in Jonesport, Maine, is a rural school of 104 students. The teachers feel they try to give their students a good foundation, yet they are also aware of a significant group of students they want to support much better; they believe that if it's not a schoolwide effort, it's not going to work.

"Most of my teachers have said that they weren't taught to teach reading when they were getting certified," says Jonesport-Beals principal, Colleen Haskell. "They assumed that by the time kids get to high school they know how to read. This project will help teachers learn strategies that they can use to teach reading and writing across the curriculum. If the bottom line is that the kids leave our high school with what they need for life, that's what I'm looking for."

With help from the LAB, the participating schools will learn what it takes to successfully develop literacy skills through content-area teaching and learning, an understanding that will benefit schools across the country. "This is broader than Washington County, Maine," says Jordan. "This is a national issue and concern."

Even so, there are few systemic secondary literacy initiatives in place anywhere in the country. The literacy work under way in Maine will provide procedural knowledge about implementing successful high school literacy programs, and these findings will be available to other schools across the country.

"Students need more literacy skills because of today's technology, because they will be changing jobs, because the world is getting smaller," says Jordan. "This is an opportunity to provide those skills for the students so they are prepared, and so they can become quality

lifelong learners.”