

Preventing Reading Failure in Secondary School: The Reading Edge

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There is a literacy crisis in America's secondary schools. Far too many students enter high school reading far below grade level (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2002, 2003). The problem is worst among disadvantaged students. On the 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 43% of disadvantaged eighth graders scored below the basic level, in comparison to 19% of non-poor students.

The middle school years offer the last chance for many struggling students to build the reading skills they need to succeed in demanding high school courses. The best way to prevent dropout and other problems of high school is to ensure reading success before high school.

Due in part to accountability systems that focus on reading and math in middle schools, many middle schools are now offering reading instruction to all or most students, to give these students a boost in this critical skill. However, it matters a great deal how reading is taught. Middle school reading is different from elementary reading. The students are far more sophisticated in their interests and social skills, and those who are struggling in reading have little patience for methods or materials designed for younger children. Students are likely to have uneven reading skills and gaps, so teaching everyone the same content is both inefficient and demotivating. In order to prevent failure in high school, middle schools students need reading approaches that build on their strengths and respond to their developmental needs.

The Reading Edge

At West Virginia's Eastern Greenbrier Middle School (Greenbrier) and Florida's C.H. Price Middle School (Price), reading is job one for every student. Greenbrier is

located in Ronceverte, West Virginia, a town rich in natural beauty and recreation opportunities, but with more than 50% of the middle school's students eligible for free or reduced lunches. Price is also located in a rural setting, Interlachen, Florida, and 69% of its students qualify for free or reduced lunches. In 2006-2007, Greenbrier and Price participated in a study in which each school allowed researchers to randomly assign half of the sixth graders to receive traditional reading instruction, while the other half received The Reading Edge, the Success for All Foundation's new approach to adolescent literacy.

The Reading Edge is designed to build enthusiasm and skill in reading in the crucial middle grades, and to break the cycle of failure experienced by so many young adolescents. Young adolescents work best when they can see that they are achieving success and earning recognition. The Reading Edge facilitates this by grouping students according to their reading levels and then moving them forward as rapidly as possible, changing groupings every nine weeks or sooner if their progress warrants it. Even students who are initially placed at a reading level far below their grade level are motivated by this, as they can succeed in reading and then move up rapidly as their skills improve.

Cooperative Learning. The Reading Edge is based on cooperative learning methods in which students work in small teams to help each other master reading skills. Cooperative learning has been found to be effective at all grade levels (see Slavin, 1995; Slavin, Hurley, & Chamberlain, 2003; Rohrbeck et al., 2003), but for middle schools it is particularly appropriate to students' developmental needs. Students are assigned to four-member teams, and told that they are responsible for the success of their teammates as well as themselves. Students study together and coach each other, but on regular

assessments they have to show what they can do on their own, without help from their teammates. Teams are recognized as successful when members improve on their past performance. Building on young adolescents' strong interests in each other, in sports, and in taking responsibility, cooperative learning offers them a chance to be noisy, active, and social in the pursuit of academic excellence. Students know that for their team to succeed, every team member has to succeed, so they need to encourage and help one another to learn.

At one study school, the literacy coach observed that students in the Reading Edge classes began to take on responsibility for each other's learning. It was easy to see that students had developed a comfortable rapport with each other as they digested an expository book called "Feeding the World". Although these students were reading on a fourth grade level, they were able to use "team talk" routines based on reciprocal teaching methods to answer questions related to supply and demand, production and pricing, and other sophisticated economic concepts. When one team member did not understand what a particular question was asking (a common problem at this level), his partner was able to restate the question, and prompt the other team members for their opinions before they took turns sharing answers. In the past, this comprehension problem might have led to off-task behavior. In this case, the students could use their team as a safe place to dissect a troublesome question, and build confidence in their abilities to use strategies to understand text.

Classroom Management. Young adolescents can be rambunctious, and are full of energy that can be a powerful positive force if properly directed and a disaster if not channeled into productive activity. The Reading Edge builds on this developmental

strength by organizing classroom activities to be rapidly paced, highly varied, and active, so that students are constantly engaged in activities that are motivating and worthy of their attention and energies. Teachers use classroom management methods such as think-pair-share, numbered heads, and discuss and defend, which emphasize engaging all students, maintaining a rapid pace with high levels of success, and giving constant individual and team feedback, all of which are proven components of effective classroom management strategies (Emmer, Evertson, & Worsham, 2006).

Metacognitive Skills. “Man, I love this – this is not work – it’s learning.” This student’s simple reflection meant a great deal to the literacy coach at Price because it marked a turning point in his development. This particular young man had spent the first few months in reading class with his head on his desk, refusing to participate in efforts to help him read and comprehend text. He had little hope that anyone could help him with the skills he had failed at so many times before. School became a very different place for him once this task was personalized - framed in terms of finding out which strategies worked best for him. Learning to read became useful to him when he was allowed to test out different strategies and chose to use what worked for him, not for everyone else in the class.

An important developmental strength of young adolescents is their rapidly growing ability to think about their own thinking, and to be strategic in managing their own learning (Pressley, 2003). The Reading Edge builds on this strength, teaching students proactive strategies for comprehending difficult text - summarization, prediction, questioning, clarification, use of graphic organizers, and more. Working in teams, students learn how and when to apply each strategy so that they can become strategic and

thoughtful readers, gaining skills that will help them study and learn throughout their time in school and beyond.

Goal-Setting. Unlike most elementary students, middle school students are capable of imagining alternative futures and planning toward goals. The Reading Edge builds on this developmental strength by having students discuss their own personal aspirations and set learning goals in collaboration with their teachers and teammates. This provides motivation for students to work hard and to persevere in the face of inevitable frustrations.

Every class begins the year with a social and academic problem-solving curriculum in which students learn how to communicate effectively, work collaboratively, and begin to set both short and long-term learning goals based on their personal ambitions. At the same time, students take a baseline reading assessment and are placed in a reading class by instructional level. Teachers share with students how they performed on the assessment, and engage students in straight talk about reading difficulties they may have had in the past, especially related to work in their content area classes. They then jointly set goals for the progress students expect to make, and students commit themselves to meeting those expectations.

Students track their own progress with the use of a Learning Guide. On it, students record reading goals and new vocabulary words for each lesson, and points they earn for classwork, homework, and tests that make up their grade. The Learning Guide is a self-assessment tool that students use to set personal goals, identify strengths and areas that need improvement, and record personal reflections on strategy use. It also helps

students stay organized. Students keep track of their work as they complete it, and identify the work they still need to master.

Frequent Assessment and Feedback. Young adolescents have a strong drive to succeed and to be recognized for their success as long as they see the tasks at hand as genuine and demanding by objective standards. The Reading Edge provides many opportunities for students to succeed and to receive honest feedback about their progress towards their goals. Students can earn recognition by reading books at home and reporting on them, by sharing how they used vocabulary words in new contexts, and by succeeding as a team in helping all team members master new content and improve upon past performance.

Having just finished a quarterly reading assessment, a group of students at one school were asked by their coach why they had worked so diligently at the computerized assessment, despite little adult supervision. The overwhelming answer was that they wanted to know how they were doing. Asked to explain what motivated them to work hard in reading, students joked about rewards they would like (mostly pizza and ice cream), but then came up with the idea of a business card on which they could record their scores. They agreed that what was most important to them was knowing how well they were doing in reaching their goals. They wanted to carry a tangible reminder of their progress with them, to be able to show their families and friends that they were making strides in a skill that represented success in high school and in life.

Mutual Reinforcement. The strength of The Reading Edge is the synergy that results when cooperative learning, classroom management, metacognitive skills, goal setting, and frequent assessment and feedback merge and overlap. Instruction in The

Reading Edge is designed to facilitate this. One Reading Edge teacher, ‘Ms. Harrison’, exemplified the mutual reinforcement and seamlessness of program elements. Ms. Harrison presented a fast-paced lesson that was filled with student dialogue. Students were constantly engaged with her and with one another. Their abilities to use the metacognitive strategies of summarization, prediction, and background knowledge were highlighted. The following excerpt from observation notes made in one of Ms. Harrison’s classes illustrates the interplay of program elements.

Students have just begun reading Gary Soto’s Baseball in April. They are tackling the day’s Big Question, and Ms. Harrison asks them to use Team Talk to *...decide what ‘first impressions’ really means*. A buzz emerges from the teams of four...

After one minute, the teacher uses the ‘Shave and a Haircut’ melody to get kids’ attention, *Da-na-na-na-na...* to which kids respond, *NA-NA!* The room immediately falls silent. *I want you to think about the first thing others think when they see you. Is there anything you would want to change about the first impression you make?* She calls on students, expanding on and reinforcing their answers. *Are first impressions always accurate?* To student mumbling she replies, *Oh...I hear the potential for some Team Talk. Discuss accurate first impressions and inaccurate first impressions.* Teams unravel this idea while she walks among them, clarifying, questioning, and prompting. Thirty seconds later, *Da-na-na-na-na. (NA-NA!). Let me hear from Macy.* Macy shrugs her shoulders. *Okay. Talk about it with your team again.* Teams resume their discussions for another thirty seconds, after which Ms. Harrison uses the same strategy to re-center their attention. *Okay. Get out your new books. You first saw this book*

yesterday. *Talk to your team about what you first thought when you saw this book. What were your first impressions? Thirty seconds pass...shave and a haircut... Who would like to share from their team?* One boy comments that his team thinks there will be Spanish-speaking people in this book, based on the author's name. *Good prediction based on the author's last name!* Another boy jokes that the book will include someone getting beat up, because on the cover, boys in the back of a pick-up truck carry bats. Ms. Harrison doesn't skip a beat. *Ah! So, at first you saw the picture, then you saw the title. Did your first impression change? We're going to see if you guys are right in your first impressions.*

She asks students what a theme is. One student suggests 'a play.' She asks them to think about Universal Studios, and several shout out, *A theme park!* She tells them that's using their background knowledge. *Team Talk Question: What is a theme?* After twenty seconds she asks one team to share what they think. They suggest *The main idea?* Ms. Harrison responds *Or the thing the author wants us to think about when we're finished the book. If we have to identify it, we need to know where to look. Where do we look for clues to identify the theme? Talk with your team.* After thirty seconds she elicits responses including 'on the back', 'chapter titles,' and 'in the character's actions.'

With prompting, the students also tell Ms. Harrison that characters' reactions and attitudes also tell us about theme. Teams discuss other ways of predicting the theme. *What are some of the themes that we're going to see when we read Baseball in April?* After calling on a student, she reads from chapter one. *I see some evidence of themes here....* The class decided that maybe whatever is important to each of us is what we judge in a first impression. Ms. Harrison directs them to 'partner read', and students pair

off within teams and begin to assume roles of reader and listener, which they will exchange momentarily.

After partner reading, the following dialogue rounds out the lesson:

- Ms. Harrison: *What else do we see the character doing?*
Student: *Pushing on his teeth!*
Student: *Doing his hair!*
Ms. Harrison: *What is the author trying to tell us about Alphonso? What is the theme we're getting at?*
Student: *He's weird!*
Student: *He's normal!*
Ms. Harrison: *Interesting...*
Student: *Weird for girls, normal for boys.*
Ms. Harrison: *Who do you think Gary Soto is telling us this is normal behavior for?*
Student: *Boys.*
Student: *Teenagers.*
Ms. Harrison: *It kind of goes back to our Big Question today about first impressions, because normal teenagers are worried about...*
Student: *What people think.*
Ms. Harrison: *The theme could be worrying about first impressions; what people think.*

Ms. Harrison relates the theme to the students as one of insecurity. She asks them to predict how protagonist Alphonso will work this out, and with whom. They discuss Alphonso's brother, and the teacher asks the students how the author told us that Alphonso and his brother are similar. A student replies, *With the same description of the bike.* Ms. Harrison asks why the author included the brother in this story, and gave him similar characteristics to Alphonso. *What's the author trying to say to this audience of teenagers who are reading this book? I think he's trying to say that teenagers have the same issues.*

Evaluation of the Reading Edge

Two major evaluations of The Reading Edge have shown the potential of the program to accelerate student achievement on the reading skills that lead to success in high school. In the first (Slavin, Daniels, and Madden, 2005), seven middle schools around the U.S. that used The Reading Edge were matched with local schools that used traditional textbooks. The differences were striking. The Reading Edge averaged a gain of 24.6% on state reading assessments over a three-year period. Control schools gained only 2.2%, and other schools in the same states averaged a gain of 4.2%.

In the second study, Greenbrier and Price Middle Schools both randomly assigned sixth graders to use The Reading Edge or to continue with their traditional textbooks (Chamberlain, Daniels, Madden, & Slavin, 2007). Once again, students who experienced The Reading Edge scored significantly higher than did control students.

Conclusion

Middle school is not too late to accelerate the reading achievement of young adolescents. Our experiences with the Reading Edge, now used in 140 middle schools nationwide, tell us that the reading performance of middle school students can be significantly improved, and students at this level can still become strategic, self-aware, and successful readers, developing the skills and motivation they will need to handle difficult secondary content. What this requires is reading methods that respect and build upon the developmental strengths of these students, their interests, social enthusiasm, desire for independence, and craving for honest, positive feedback. The Reading Edge provides just one example of how high levels of reading can become a reality for students at a critical moment in their progression to high school graduation and beyond.

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