

**Federal Adolescent Literacy Policy:
Implications for Administration, Policy, and
the Adolescent Literacy Research Community**

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This is a particularly interesting, unusual, and potentially exciting time in adolescent literacy. More initiatives are being launched around questions of adolescent and secondary school reading and writing than at any time in history. For example, two secondary education bills are currently on the floors of the U.S. Senate (S. 1554) and the House of Representatives (H.R. 3085), both of which could have enormous implications for state, district, and school-level reform initiatives in adolescent literacy. In addition, the “Striving Readers Initiative” has been launched by President George W. Bush and promises to “reform” adolescent literacy in accordance with many of the principles behind the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act. Federal funding agencies such as the National Institute for Children’s Health and Human Development, the Institute for Education Sciences, and the National Science Foundation have launched competitive research panels on adolescent literacy, comprehension, and scientific and mathematical literacy, respectively. In addition, the Department of Education recently funded an evaluation study of supplemental literacy intervention programs embedded in ninth-grade small learning communities established in high schools across the country. Fueled by (or fueling) this interest in adolescent literacy, a number of private foundations have expressed specific interest in how adolescent readers and writers learn, most notably in

the Carnegie Corporation's "Reading to Learn" program and the Gates Foundation's school-wide reform initiatives.

In this paper, which must remain relatively brief in scope, I will focus my attention only on the two federal policy proposals, the President's *Striving Readers* initiatives, and the federal evaluation study. Nevertheless, I want to highlight the fact that adolescent literacy, with a particular focus on the so-called "struggling reader" is receiving unprecedented attention from a host of different groups. It will behoove secondary school researchers, teachers, and administrators to attend to this attention and to continue conversations such as the one we are having here today. If we are to have a role in these initiatives, then we need to do a better job of defining a number of constructs central to our work (not the least of which is *literacy* itself), and we need to work coherently and rigorously to address the language and literacy demands of secondary school (middle and high school) learning and teaching. To that end, I offer a brief synopsis of the four initiatives I have chosen to highlight. For each, I will address the potentials, problems, and inconsistencies in the policies or programs, with a special focus on what the policies or programs might mean for administration and supervision at the state, district, and school levels. I begin by laying out the key aims and mechanisms of the two proposed legislative acts.

Legislative Initiatives

Pathways for Success (PASS, S. 1554, Senate Sponsor: Patty Murray (D-WA))

Pathways for Success, or more commonly, the PASS act, is a \$3.5 billion appropriation comprised of three titles: I: *Reading for Success*; II, *Pathways to Success*; and III: *Fostering Successful Secondary Schools*. Each title is based on the assumption

that too few adolescents graduate high school in a timely fashion (or at all) and that the dropout or late graduate numbers are much higher among poor and/or minority youth.

Title I, *Reading for Success*, focuses most explicitly on literacy, although, as NCTE policy analysts note, the real focus is on *reading* achievement. Title I assumes that although the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) “provided a strong framework for children in the early grades,” many of the nation’s youth (middle and high school ages) have missed out on the benefits of NCLB and thus, suffer from “severe reading deficits.” The bill’s authors’ cite 1998 data from the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) that report 32 % of boys and 19% of girls in the U.S. as failing to read at *basic* levels, and the percentage of 12th graders able to write at *basic* levels decreasing over time. The bill further argues that “America cannot maintain its position as the world’s strong economy if we continue to ignore the literacy needs of adolescents in middle school and secondary school.”¹

The \$1 billion requested appropriation is designed to be distributed through grant competitions to fund state agencies in the following activities (<http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/>, p. 8, October 7, 2004, emphasis mine):

1. Hiring literacy coaches, at a ratio of *not less than 1 literacy coach for every 20 teachers*, and providing professional development for literacy coaches to:
 - a. work with classroom teachers to incorporate reading and writing instruction within *all subject areas*, during regular classroom periods, after school, and during summer school programs, *for all students*;
 - b. work with classroom teachers to identify students with reading and writing problems and, where appropriate, refer students to available programs for remediation and additional services;

¹ The Federal government defines “secondary” as high school level, whereas I designate any schooling beyond that deemed “elementary” school by a given district to be secondary school. My definitions are based on the nature of the schooling, with secondary schools being contexts in which youth engage in learning in discrete, discipline-based segments, usually taught by different teachers. This arrangement is typical of most schooling beyond the elementary level, regardless of whether it is dubbed “middle,” junior high,” or “high” school.

- c. work with classroom teachers to *diagnose and remediate* reading and writing difficulties of the lowest performing students, *by providing intensive, research-based instruction*, including during after school and summer sessions, geared toward ensuring that these students can access and be successful in rigorous academic course work; and
 - d. assess and organize student data on literacy and communicate that data to school administrators to inform school reform efforts.
2. Reviewing, analyzing, developing, and where possible, adapting curriculum to make sure literacy skills are taught within the content area subjects
3. Providing reading and writing professional development for *all teachers in middle school and secondary school* that addresses *both remedial and higher level literacy* skills for students in the applicable curriculum
4. Providing professional development for teachers, administrators, and paraprofessionals who serve middle and secondary schools to help the teachers, administrators, and paraprofessionals meet literacy needs
5. Procuring and implementing programs and instructional materials based on reading and writing research, including software and other educational technology
6. Building on and promoting coordination among reading and writing programs in the local educational agency to increase overall effectiveness in improving reading and writing instruction, including for students with disabilities and students with limited English proficiency
7. Evaluating the effectiveness of the instructional strategies, teacher professional development programs, and other interventions.

To reiterate, this lengthy list of activities is related only to Title I of the overall act and is intended to be funded with a \$1 billion appropriation to be divided among the 50 states and all other U.S. holdings or territories (e.g., the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, the District of Columbia, the U.S. Virgin Islands, etc.).

The appropriation requested for Title II, *Pathways to Success*, of the act is more generous, requesting \$2 billion to be divided among the 56 U.S. states, districts, territories, and commonwealths. This extensive generosity is for good reason: The heart of Title II is for the hiring of academic counselors who will develop “personal plans” for *all students* in their first year of secondary school and to provide “supplemental and other support services that the implementation of students’ personal plans require.” The

appropriation is intended to provide local educational agencies who receive funding with the funds necessary to:

1. Hiring academic counselors (at a ratio of not less than 1 counselor per 150 students) to develop the 6-year personal plans for all students in such students' first year of secondary school and coordinate the services required to implement such personal plans. (The legislation includes a lengthy list of specific activities each counselor shall complete.)
2. Determining the academic needs of all entering ninth grade students and identifying barriers to success.
3. Ensuring availability of the services necessary for the implementation of students' personal plans, including access to a college preparatory curriculum and advanced placement or international baccalaureate courses.
4. Where appropriate, modifying the curriculum at a secondary school receiving funds under this title to address the instructional requirements of students' personal plans.
5. Providing for the ongoing assessment of students for whom personal plans have been developed and modifying such personal plans as necessary.
6. Coordinating the services offered with subgrant funds received under this title with other Federal, State, and local funds.

Although not specifically connected to literacy development, one can see potential links to adolescent and secondary school literacy concerns and programs, especially in points 1, 2, and 4, above. The connections will be especially clear if students' literacy skill levels are determined to be inadequate to meeting the goals of their personal plans. A deep analysis of the possible issues and challenges presented by Title II of PASS is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is worth wondering whether students' existing literacy skills will drive the development of their personal plans, or whether the reverse will be true. The answer to this question will probably be left to administrators of local districts or schools to determine, and administrators will need to assess carefully the implications of establishing personal plans for students that foster literacy growth. First, the resources required for such a plan would be much greater and ever-shifting because of the presumably constant shifting of needs that students would demonstrate. Second,

achieving desired outcomes of the personal plan would be much less certain if an aspect of each plan focused on improving students' skill, rather than on simply meeting goals based on existing skills. At the same time, a model of personal planning based on existing skill (i.e., directing students with "low literacy" levels into education or career plans that required less literacy skill) suggests a model of differential expectations for students, and seems to defeat the purpose of the legislation. Thus, Title II represents a potentially significant moral and material resource challenge for school administrators.

Finally, Title III, *Fostering Successful Secondary Schools*, requests a \$500,000 appropriation to support the development of research-based interventions around the learning environment of secondary schools, focusing particularly on the establishment of small learning communities. The specific tasks associated with Title III include enabling eligible local educational agencies to receive subgrants to:

1. develop and implement research-based programs or models that have been shown to raise achievement among secondary school students, including smaller learning communities, adolescent literacy programs, block scheduling, whole school reforms, individualized learning plans, personalized learning environments, and strategies to target students making the transition from middle school to secondary school;
2. promote community investment in school quality by engaging parents, businesses, and community-based organizations in the development of reform plans for eligible secondary schools;
3. research, develop, and implement a school district strategy to create smaller learning communities for secondary school students, both by creating smaller learning communities within existing secondary schools, and by developing new, smaller, and more personalized secondary schools;
4. provide professional development for school staff in research-based practices, such as interactive instructional strategies and opportunities to connect learning with experience; and
5. provide professional development and leadership training for principals and other school leaders in the best practices of instructional leadership and implementing school reforms to raise student achievement.

Coincidentally (or perhaps not to those who are more seasoned policy analysts), Title III overlaps in important ways with the recent Department of Education research initiative, to be described in a later section of the paper. The most significant aspect of Title III for an adolescent literacy policy analysis is the simple fact that adolescent literacy programs (yet to be determined) are explicitly named as key ingredients of “fostering secondary school success.” Note that mathematics, science, or civics development, for example, do not receive similar attention, despite the attention that these subjects receive in other legislation.

Graduation for All (GFA), H.R. 3085 (Multiple Sponsors)

Graduation for All appears to be a “reduced fat” version of S. 1554. That is, H.R. 3085 makes almost identical literacy and pathways proposals to S. 1554, but reduces the request for appropriations to \$1 billion total. H.R. 3085 is comprised of two titles, with Title I, *Improving Adolescent Literacy*, rolling together the support for literacy coaches with the development of personal plans for students *at risk of not graduating on time because of insufficient accumulation of credits, failure to pass examinations, or low or failing grades*. The caveat of focusing on students at risk offers a significant reduction in focus from S. 1554 because it narrows the task of developing personal plans for all grade nine students to only those students (presumably at the later grades) at risk of not graduating on time. Concomitantly, H.R. 3085 rolls both of those activities (with no significant reduction in the demands on literacy coaches) into a \$1 billion appropriation. The second portions of the 1965 ESEA relative to adequate yearly progress (specifically around measurement of graduation rates by groups as defined in the ESEA), graduation

rate information on state report cards (requiring disaggregation of rates by ESEA-defined group), and the submission of reports on adult education and the family literacy act.

Analysis of the Aims, Mechanisms, and Demands of Each Bill

Of the two proposed bills, it seems clear that the PASS act (S. 1554) is the more far-reaching and specific of the bills. Given the appropriations requested in each and the sponsors of each, however, it also seems likely that H.R. 3085 is more likely to pass than is S. 1554. At this time, however, both are stalled in the two houses of Congress, waiting for small issues such as the presidential race to be resolved.

Although neither bill has yet been acted on, it is worth analyzing what these legislative acts would mean for state, district, and school administrators across the country. Both the possibilities and problems of these sprawling proposals seem obvious, even at first glance. With a second glance, the questions around policy enactment become more complex.

Let's begin with the obvious possibilities. First, Senator Murray and her co-sponsors (Senators Bingaman, Clinton, Daschle [who recently lost his Senate seat], Durbin, and Kennedy) of S. 1554, as well as all of the sponsors of H.R. 3085, should be commended for shining a spotlight on the education of young people, ages 11-18, in our country. Adolescent and secondary school literacy learning has certainly been a neglected feature of our K-12 education system, although a small corps of adolescent/secondary school literacy researchers has contributed to a small, but stable, body of research over the last 50 years (see Alvermann & Moore, 1991, for more details on secondary school reading research). It is possible that this attention will lead to greater funding opportunities for adolescent literacy researchers, opportunities that will in

turn lead to a greater capacity for building and assessing strong programs of secondary school and youth literacy research and practice.

A second possibility posed by these two acts is the lack of clear definition of what it means to talk about the “literacy needs of adolescents.” Both acts refer variously to literacy, reading, writing, struggling readers, and reading and writing instruction for all learners across all content areas. The possibility that I see in the vagueness that inheres in both proposed policies is that states, districts, and schools can define—with the help of adolescent/secondary school literacy researchers—the ways in which they would like to address adolescent literacy in their local settings.

The problems, of course, lie in operationalizing the goals of these proposals. First, if we are not sure whose needs we are really addressing and to what those needs refer (reading of print?, writing of print? reading of all symbol systems? reading of complex texts, decoding, fluency?), then it will be difficult to develop thoughtful, rigorous, and measurable support programs for youth. Second, the sheer volume of what the two bills ask literacy coaches and central administrators to do is staggering. Third, the goals appear to be distributed over so many different foci that it seems unlikely any local education agency could address these highly diffused goals with the kind of attention needed in adolescent literacy. That said, there are several implications for administrators who must work toward meeting the demands of these legislative acts.

What Administrators Will Have to Do

First, because neither of these acts make the funding an entitlement (i.e., the funding is competitive with grants to the states and sub-grants to local education agencies), state-level administrators must, according to the bills, establish

a reading and writing partnership which may be the same as the partnership established under section 1203(d) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, that will provide guidance to local educational agencies in selecting or developing and implementing appropriate, research-based reading and writing programs for middle school and secondary school students.

In this regard, the act builds on NCLB and rests authority for what counts as valid secondary/adolescent literacy instruction in the hands of the state educational agencies. What will count as “appropriate, research-based reading and writing programs” remains to be seen, but could be heavily influenced by the programs being advocated in the President’s Striving Readers Initiative or in the Department of Education’s adolescent literacy evaluation study (see below for descriptions of each). Depending on the nature of the approved approaches, the work of building these partnerships could be tightly constrained or broadly construed.

State and local administrators will have additional tasks within the confines of any approach they choose, with the primary tasks revolving around the hiring and professional development of *literacy coaches* and the professional development of content teachers to work with these coaches. Without more careful definition in the legislation and/or in the sub-grant awards, administrators could face an almost insurmountable task. According to PASS (S. 1554), these literacy coaches are to be certified teachers with a demonstrated effectiveness in both “teaching reading and writing to students with specialized reading and writing needs” and “the ability to work with classroom teachers to improve their instructional techniques to support reading and

writing improvement.” Leaving aside the fact that few such individuals exist at the secondary level, it should be noted that the legislation remains silent on how these teachers will garner the expertise and credibility to work with both students and teachers across the different content areas of the secondary schools. Such a demand requires the coaches to, at the very least, work across the four main *academic* areas (science, social studies, English language arts, and mathematics), each of which has some unique “ways with words” (Heath, 1983; Hicks, 1995/1996; Lemke, 1990; Moje et al., 2004). The task that thus faces state and local administrators is vast: They must first find these literacy coaches, train them to focus on a specific program of secondary literacy development, and then train them to work with students and teachers of at least four different content areas.

Administrators attempting to grapple with this challenge face a double-edged sword: If the administrators attempt to hire wholly new individuals to the school district, they face the daunting task of locating such individuals and integrating them into existing schools. The task of integrating reading or literacy coaches into schools is not an easy one (see Wade, 1992). If, as an alternative, administrators seek to lessen the integration task by choosing current teachers of the different content areas in their schools and districts to serve as coaches, they then face equally challenging dilemmas. They must provide professional development to individuals deeply invested in one content area to recognize the linguistic and discursive demands of that area, and then must provide support for understanding the linguistic, discursive, epistemological, and knowledge demands of at least three other areas. Even if successful in that monumental task, administrators will, in some ways, diminish their effectiveness because by luring the

teachers most focused on literacy demands of the content areas out of content area teaching, they will have removed their most effective practitioners from the classroom. Those left will either be novices or the least committed to recognizing the content areas as linguistically and discursively mediated learning spaces.

What is more, each of these points overlooks the challenge these literacy coaches will face in whether they should be focusing their attention on the students who “struggle” to decode and read fluently, who “struggle” to comprehend at “basic” levels, or who “struggle” with the unique linguistic and discursive demands posed by the increasingly complex texts of increasingly advanced content areas. Because the legislation is quite vague in this regard (simply stating that literacy coaches should support struggling students and reading and writing demands of all students across the curriculum), the task that administrators, teachers, and coaches will face in defining these challenges is vast.

Moreover, because few, if any, secondary schools have conducted reading diagnostic assessments of all students, the actual reading challenges that most secondary school youth face are unclear. Even for youth who fall “below basic” on the National Assessment of Education Progress or on state proficiency tests, the specific difficulties they encounter remain unclear. Are adolescent readers’ struggles problems of decoding, fluency, or comprehension? Do comprehension problems stem from lack of fluency or lack of strategy use? Do students struggle to make inferences or are they unmotivated by the texts they read on such assessments? Do the contexts of the school domains fail to engage them? Do the contexts of their everyday lives offer more interesting texts than those of their school lives? Without more specific diagnostic information on the nature

of adolescents' reading struggles, literacy coaches will be challenged to provide students individualized support and to coach classroom teachers on how to support students in group settings. Administrators, in turn, will struggle to provide adequate professional development to cover the range of possible—or probable—aspects of adolescent readers' and writers' struggles to read complex texts or complex content areas.

Presidential Initiatives

Striving Readers Initiative

As explained previously, the Striving Readers Initiative is a follow-up to the NCLB focus on elementary education, for which President Bush has promised \$200 million. The following quote from President Bush illustrates his stance on the act of reading:

If you don't hold people to account early in the system, it is likely people are going to get shuffled through the schools without being able to read.

And we're beginning to find out that's the truth and we're finding people in junior high and high school who can't read. We need intensive intervention programs. At the very minimum, when a kid gets out of high school they ought to be able to read.

Bush's words in this quote suggest a fairly dichotomous view of reading skill and practice, one in which individuals do or do not, can or can not, read. What it means *to read* is less clear, however. Is reading, from President Bush's (and his advisors') perspective, about decoding, fluency, or comprehension? And do President Bush and his advisors acknowledge that new demands are placed on comprehension processes as texts become increasingly complex and as contexts become increasingly diverse (i.e., as youth

move into more and more discrete representations of the disciplines and of domains in everyday life, such as the workplace)?

Although short on specific details at this point, the Striving Readers initiative was said to be targeted at funding interventions for those students who were “not reading on grade level,” which implies that the demands of content-area reading for generally proficient readers would not be taken into account in the initiative. Estimates of how many students might be included in the label, “not on grade level” were not offered in any of the material on Striving Readers. The approach that was being promoted, however, was the University of Kansas’ Strategic Instruction Model (SIM) (Fisher, Schumaker, & Deshler, 2002). Created by Don Deshler and Michael Hock at the University of Kansas, SIM focuses primarily on at-risk and learning disabled students, thus highlighting a special education orientation of the president’s initiative. SIM has, however, been increasingly adopted by general education teachers for use in content area classes as well as classes designed to emphasize the development of reading, writing, and other literacy areas, although the typical intervention revolves around 6-12 students. Students learn four key cognitive strategies for reading, studying, and remembering information, writing, and improving test performance. The four reading strategies include: word identification, visual imagery (mental movies of narrative); self-questioning, and paraphrasing.

Deshler and Hock’s SIM model thus promises to be more than a model aimed at remediating the decoding or fluency problems of below-grade level readers. Deshler & Hock have demonstrated that the kind of reform they advocate around struggling readers actually requires whole-school reform that may enhance the reading capacity of all

students. Deshler has, in fact, identified three factors that he deems crucial to successful intervention (<<http://www.ku-crl.org/archives/misc/ready.shtml>>, July 2004): (a) Use multiple research-based interventions over a sustained period of time; (b) teach interventions with fidelity and intensity, and (c) ensure that instruction is coordinated across teachers and settings. What Deshler and Hock's model attends less to the motivations of young people and the social and cultural contexts of their reading and writing instruction. In addition, because Deshler and Hock's model is focused heavily on special learning needs, particularly for students with identified learning disabilities, the model tends not to address the nuances of reading and writing within disciplinary practices, discourses, and conventions.

Because the Striving Readers Initiative appears to be in its infancy, the demands placed on state and local administrators are not clear. If the SIM model is promoted as the model for all SR schools, then administrators can expect some confluence between the PASS or GFA legislation and the Striving Readers models because SIM puts some form of literacy coaching at its heart. Whether administrators will need to focus on professional development in teaching all students to navigate the reading and writing demands of disciplinary or content-area literacy, or on the more strategies-based remediation of struggling readers evident in the SIM model, remains to be seen.

Department of Education Research Initiatives

The final policy initiative that I will discuss here is the Department of Education's recent awarding of an adolescent literacy intervention evaluation study to MDRC.² Although a separate initiative, it is unlikely that the evaluation study is coincidental to the Striving Readers Initiative or to the legislative proposals currently under review. Each of

² formerly known as the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation

these initiatives demands the application of “scientifically based” adolescent literacy programs. The Department of Education’s study is designed to examine a host of different supplemental intervention programs that can be implemented in small learning communities (see Title III of the PASS Act, S. 1554). This evaluation study, slated to begin in 2005, will focus attention on supplemental intervention programs, thus focusing adolescent literacy attention on “below-grade-level” readers. Because the evaluation study will also determine the programs that are most likely to be advocated in the PASS or GFA acts and in Striving Readers, it will be important for state and local administrators to carefully assess the demands of these programs. Some of the programs require extensive materials (including technology) purchases, whereas others (e.g., SIM) require extensive professional development. Administrators will need to become familiar with the demands of each program and to assess the likelihood that any given program will meet the particular needs of their students. In addition, if required to implement a literacy coaching model, state and local administrators will need to assess the connections between the programs deemed appropriate and the knowledge and resource base of the literacy coaches hired to implement the coaching model.

In sum, the demands on administrators as a result of just these four forms of federal policy around adolescent and secondary literacy could be vast, despite the fact that there appears to be a fair amount of overlap among the different policies and initiatives. The primary challenges will be in (a) locating the human resources to fill the positions described in these policies and initiatives, (b) developing the professional knowledge—indeed, expertise—necessary to fulfill the broad-ranging demands of these policies, and (c) managing the development, assessment, and reporting details required by

these programs. Prior to addressing these challenges, state and local administrators will need to engage in some definitional and conceptual work on the many different aspects of adolescent and secondary literacy development. This work could be productively supported by adolescent/secondary literacy scholars if we would come together to lay out some terms, research literatures, and labels for the work that we do. The youth of our nation are finally getting some attention: Are we ready to support secondary school administrators, teachers, and coaches in supporting the many different literacy needs and interests of adolescent learners? More to the point, do we have the capacity as a research and practice community to do so? If we do not, then rest assured that someone will do it for us.

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