Module II: Improving Adolescent Literacy in Secondary Schools: Frameworks for Instructional and Organizational

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Contents

Goal

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To have school leaders understand the magnitude of the adolescent literacy problem and various instructional and organizational change strategies that can be used to address this challenge.

Objectives

1. Demonstrate an understanding of the scope and nature of the adolescent literacy problem confronting secondary teachers and administrators.
2. Describe the major instructional and infrastructural factors required to improve outcomes for struggling adolescent learners.
3. Provide a sound rationale for having a continuum of literacy instruction for struggling adolescent learners in secondary schools, and describe the roles that various teachers play, and the different kinds of interventions that are embodied within this continuum.
4. Demonstrate an understanding of the critical factors to consider in implementing change in secondary schools to improve literacy outcomes for struggling readers.

Overview of Module

First and foremost, school principals are to be the instructional leader in their building. The primary mission of schools is student learning. When student performance falls short of expectations, it is the principal's responsibility to take steps to rectify the situation. Nothing should receive greater attention than the quality of instruction taking place within school. In a study of high schools undertaking reform efforts, Noguera (2004) found that out of the 10 schools studied, only two were successful. The successful ones were those with a "laser-like focus" on teaching and learning. Thus, all major decisions should be made in light of creating the kinds of instructional conditions that will optimize student learning and improved outcomes.

To this end, the purpose of this module is to explore one of the greatest instructional challenges confronting principals in middle and high schools in our nation in the 21st century – namely, how to transform the large numbers of struggling adolescent readers into students who will be capable of taking rigorous courses and being prepared to successfully enter and succeed in post secondary education and the world of work. The magnitude and nature of this challenge is both large and complex. However, important advances have been made in recent years to provide principals with guidance and direction on how to implement school-wide literacy programs that can improve academic outcomes for all adolescents, especially for those who are struggling readers.

This module is designed to be taught in two 60-minute class sessions. Lesson One will address the challenges of adolescent literacy and how a continuum of literacy instruction can be used as a framework for meeting the broad array of instructional needs of struggling learners. Lesson Two will describe how effective adolescent literacy programs are dependent on a solid instructional core being in place along with the necessary support structures. It will also outline factors that drive successful change initiatives in secondary schools designed to improve student outcomes

Background Information on Adolescent Literacy

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In America, there is a fundamental belief that all children should learn the basics of reading in the primary grades and continue to build on those skills throughout their elementary and secondary school years (Snow, 2002). In reality, however, each year, millions of high-school students do not read well enough to understand their textbooks or other material written for their grade level. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2002), 26% percent of these students cannot read material essential for daily living, such as road signs, newspapers, or bus schedules. Students unable to handle the demands they face in high school will certainly struggle in postsecondary education. If reading problems are allowed to persist into adulthood, the consequences for these individuals can be formidable. The National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS, 1992) has indicated that about 50% of adults perform in the two (of five) lowest levels of functional literacy (Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, & Kolstand, 1993).

The magnitude of the problems facing adolescents, especially those who attend poor, urban high schools, are striking. For example, in some of the largest urban school districts, nearly 65% of adolescents read below the "satisfactory" level on state reading assessments (i.e., they are unable to understand and respond to the complex literacy demands of secondary school subject-matter courses) (Council of Great City Schools, 2001). While only about 70% of *all* adolescents successfully complete high school, the data are even more sobering for minority students: only about 50% of these students successfully complete high school!

There are a variety of factors that have contributed to the literacy crisis confronting large portions of our high-school populations. First, the national effort during the last decade to raise achievement levels of children in American schools has largely focused on the youngest students. Because of limited resources, local districts (and, indeed, most federal agencies) have chosen to direct their limited resources to younger generations. For example, in its 36 years of existence, Title I has directed only 15% of its funds to middle schools and high schools, even though secondary schools enroll 33% of all low-income students. High schools are not only less likely than elementary schools to receive Title I funds, they also receive less money as well. On average, elementary schools average $495 per low-income student compared to approximately $325 per high school student. This lack of support is leading to sobering results: 23% of 12th -graders score "below basic" on NAEP reading performance measures (USDE, 2002).

Second, the movement to increased accountability for student outcomes as set forth in *No Child Left Behind* underscores even further the plight facing struggling adolescent readers (Hock & Deshler, 2003). Currently, many high-school students are being caught in the transition from receiving watered-down instruction during their elementary years in school to the expectation to meet the new standards reflected in state assessments. Additionally, changing demographics that resulted in crowded elementary schools during the 1990s are being manifested in the large numbers of students now entering middle schools and high schools (Hodgkinson, 2001). As a result, during the next 10 years, the number of high-school students will grow by nearly 15%. Thus, both research and instructional initiatives are needed to address the myriad of problems confronting

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struggling adolescent readers in high-school settings.

While there are some adolescents who leave elementary grades as virtual non-readers or who are word-recognition deficient, the largest group of adolescent struggling readers are those who have acquired some, but not sufficient, reading skills to enable them to escape the "fourth-grade slump" (Curtis, 2002). Specifically, nearly 60% of struggling adolescent readers in poor urban settings fall between the 5th and the 30th percentile in reading performance (Curtis, 2002). That is, they generally have some decoding skills, but not at a level that enables them to deal fluently with subject-matter reading demands, and they lack the required skills and strategies to meet comprehension expectations. In sum, the magnitude and complexity of the challenges surrounding adolescent literacy is going to require strong, creative, focused leadership by secondary principals.

Alignment with the Four Tenants of Social Justice

• *Developing school cultures that include all students* -- The underlying assumption of the instructional framework described in this module, the Content Literacy Continuum, is that instruction in secondary schools should be conceptualized in a way that ensures that *all* students have access to and can successfully learn critical content knowledge.

• *Ensuring literacy for all learners* -- The Content Literacy Continuum describes the unique, but very important, role that *all* teachers on a secondary school faculty play to ensure that all students acquire sufficient literacy skills to help them meet the demands of the curriculum.

• *Creating cultures of empowerment* -- The overriding goal and philosophy of the instructional model described in this module is developing students who are independent learners and performers. In short, the instructional emphasis is on teaching students how to learn so they can be successful life-long learners. This is a vital outcome goal of all instruction in the 21st century because of the information explosion and the shrinking half-life of existing information.

• *Ensuring that family and community perspectives are at the heart of the culture of the school* -- Students become motivated learners when they see the direct connections of what they are expected to learn in school is related to the lives they live and the experiences they have within their families and communities. An instructional principal that is embedded within all levels of the Content Literacy Continuum is the importance of teachers deliberately linking school learning to other aspects of students' lives.

Lesson 1 – "The Challenge of Adolescent Literacy and Responding to

that Challenge with the Content Literacy Continuum"

Time -- 60 minutes

Readings – Each is to be completed *prior to* the Lesson 1 class

- Kamil, M. (2003). *Adolescents and literacy: Reading for the 21st century.* Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education.
- Hock, M. F., & Deshler, D. D. (2003). Adolescent literacy: Ensuring that no child is left behind. *Principal Leadership, 13*(4), 50-56.
- Lenz, B. K., Ehren, B. J., Deshler, D. D. (2005). The content literacy continuum: A school reform framework for improving adolescent literacy for all students. *Teaching Exceptional Children. 37*(6), 60-63.

Assignment *prior to* class

At least two-three weeks prior to this class, hand out the three readings for students to read outside of class in preparation for Lesson One. These readings (especially the one by Lenz, Ehren, and Deshler) will prepare them to conduct the interview of a secondary school principal about his/her approach to dealing with adolescent literacy problems. This interview is to be completed prior to the Lesson One. The Content Literacy Continuum Interview Framework included in Appendix A should be used to record information gathered during the interview.

Instructional Process During Class

1. Reflection Question: Begin class by posing the following reflection question: "In light of what you have read in preparation for today's class, what do you think will be the greatest challenge facing you as a secondary school principal in addressing the problem of adolescent literacy?"
2. Slide 2: Introduce the module and describe learning outcomes for Lesson One.
3. Slides 3 – 10: Describe the challenge of adolescent literacy facing secondary school leaders today.
   - Reflection Question: "Given the magnitude of the problems of struggling adolescent readers, has this country's investment in educational programs for younger children been a failure?"
4. Slides 11-12: Since adolescents who struggle with literacy problems evidence a variety of problems, it is important to recognize that there isn't a single solution. Rather, it is important to think in terms of a comprehensive framework that can be implemented across a school. (For talking points in class, a synopsis of this continuum is found in the note section of each power point slide)
5. Student Discussion and Student Action Plan: Divide students into groups of four and using the information that was gathered during each student's interview with a secondary principal, have them do the following: (a) Have each student provide a brief synopsis of what they found during their interviews regarding the presence of instructional programs, services, and activities at each of the five levels of the Content Literacy Continuum; (b) Based on the reports of each group member, have the group

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construct a summary report that is representative of what was found across the four schools that were the subject of their interviews; (c) Ask a spokesperson from each group to report the summary findings of their interviews; (d) Lead a class discussion about the reports made that enables all to form a picture of the status of adolescent literacy programs in the schools interviewed; (e) Based on the picture that emerges, generate three major statements that best summarizes what was found during the interviews; and (f) Ask each class member to reflect on the discussion and write a personal action goal in their notes.

Lesson 2 – "Closing the Performance Gap for Struggling Adolescent Learners"

Time -- 60 minutes

Readings – Each is to be completed *prior to* the Lesson 2 class

   • Deshler, D. D. (2005). A closer look: Closing the performance gap. *Stratenotes, 13*(1), 1-6.
   • Biancarosa, G., & Snow, C. E. (2004). *Reading next – A vision for action and research in middle and high school literacy: A report from Carnegie Corporation of New York.* Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education.
   • Deshler, R. T. (2005). A framework for change. Louisville, KY: Aligna Solutions.

Instructional Process During Class

   1. Reflection Question: Begin class by posing the following question: "If you had to chose, what do you think would be most significant in improving academic outcomes for struggling adolescent readers: (1) changes in school structure or infrastructure (e.g., course alignment, scheduling, etc.) or (2) changes in instructional practice (e.g., how content is chosen and taught, etc.)? Why?
   2. Slide 13: Introduce the lesson and describe learning outcomes for Lesson Two.
   3. Slides 14—18: Present information on the two core factors (i.e., instructional core and infrastructure core) required to close the performance gap in struggling adolescent readers using an interactive power point presentation (For talking points in class, a synopsis of these two cores is found in the note section of slide 14).
   4. Discussion Questions: Based on the information covered in slides 14 to 18 and the article by Deshler (2005), use the following as possible discussion questions:
      • "Are there other outcomes that should be considered in addition to the ones described in the Deshler (2005) article and power point slides on Closing the Gap?"
      • "Why is the Instructional Core listed first in the model? Why is it imperative that infrastructure decisions be determined by instructional factors?" Historically, have school reform efforts in secondary schools typically been led by changes in infrastructure or instructional factors?
      • How can a model like the one described in the Deshler (2005) article

and power points on Closing the Gap be a helpful framework for a secondary school principal?

     5. <u>Slides 19-22</u>: Present information on the factors related to effectively implementing change initiatives in secondary schools using an interactive power point presentation (slides 19 to 22). Some of the key points are summarized below.

- The change skills and tools needed to lead a school in closing the Performance Gap increase in complexity and sophistication as the Instructional and Infrastructure Cores are developed.
- "Change Mastery" is clearly one of the key competencies that principals need to bring about school-wide change. Participants should examine their own personal "toolkits" to assess how well prepared they are to lead the changes needed to close the performance gap and improve literacy.
- Two key change processes must be managed—*organization change* and *individual transitions*. Leaders must be able to organize and guide school-wide change efforts while also helping individual people bridge the gap between today's expectations and tomorrow's needs.

     6. <u>Discussion Questions and Reflection</u>: Based on the information covered in slides 19 to 22, use the following as possible discussion questions:

- "Why do you think that the sophistication of change increases as the Instructional and Infrastructure Cores are developed in schools?"
- "What personal experiences do you have in organizing and leading change programs? What worked well? What didn't work well? What are some of the key things that you learned?"
- "What 'change tools' are you familiar with or have you used to lead change in schools?"
- "What current school initiatives do you think are suffering from ineffectively managed change issues?" Have class participants reflect on what they can do to intervene and assist going forward

     7. <u>Culminating Activity</u>: As a culminating activity for this module, have students read the following Case Study on *John Adams High School: A School in Transition* and respond to the questions listed at the end of the case study. It is suggested that students work with a partner for this assignment (it would be best to have students who are/will be working in similar kinds of schools [e.g., middle schools or high schools] work together). This assignment can be turned in at the following class meeting.

     • "What approach would you use to in addressing the attitudes of several of the teachers relative to their role in addressing literacy problems of the schools students? This is a question of managing the change—how do you help these teachers buy-in to the needed change(s)?"

     • "Assuming that you have a three year time frame within which to implement what you consider to be the necessary kinds of changes that should be made to have in place a comprehensive literacy program to meet the needs of struggling adolescent learners?"

        > Rank order the top five actions that you would take to improve the overall literacy program at John Adams High. Provide a rationale for each.

> Identify the top three to five change issues that you think will determine the overall success/failure of the literacy program at John Adams.
> What kinds of outcome measures would you use to determine the effectiveness of your plan?

CASE STUDY – John Adams High School: A School in Transition

At age 54, you have been principal of John Adams High School for nearly 12 years. John Adams H.S. was built in 1945 in what was then the outskirts of a metropolitan area. The area is now an older suburban area whose demographics are changing. Up until about six or seven years ago, the neighborhood boasted unusual stability, but since then you have seen many families move further out. Families from the nearby urban area have moved in, but they have been fewer in number. Four years ago, boundary changes clearly changed the complexion of the school. The number of minority students, many of whom struggle with English as a second language, has increased, as has the number of families in lower socioeconomic groups.

For years, John Adams H.S. had produced consistently high student test scores in reading and math and rarely failed to be among the top 30% of schools in the state. You now understand that the low reading and math scores that you have seen over the past three or four years are not aberrations, but have become a pattern. The drop in scores has been alarming. Two years ago, only 55% of your students attained the level of proficient reader; a year later, the percentage was lower, and there is no reason for you to believe that the downhill pattern will change unless significant changes are made. While poor reading comprehension is the primary problem that the vast majority of students who are performing below the proficiency level face, about 5% of the student body has significant word recognition problems in addition to difficulties with comprehension.

By in large, your staff has remained fairly stable! Many are experienced teachers and maintain a high degree of dedication to the school. However, as the literacy performance of an increasing number of students has grown, a growing number of teachers have become vocal in expressing their concern about the "poor job being done by the elementary and middle school teachers in the district" in sending such poorly prepared students to the high school. Additionally, many emphatically express their feelings that they chose to teach high school science (or history, etc.) because of their love of the subject matter – they didn't get into teaching high school students to be a "reading teacher!"

You have created and sought opportunities to meet with concerned parents – parents of students who are successful readers as well as those whose sons and daughters who could be described as having significant reading problems. The parents of these unsuccessful readers often worry the most – they know what it is like to be unable to complete an application for employment or read the directions for a prescription. Full realization of what it must be like to be functionally illiterate came to you one afternoon as you visited with an emotional mother of a failing student. As a nearly illiterate mother of five, she

began talking to you about what life was like without the ability to read. You asked her, "What is it that you would most like to be able to read?" She paused for a few minutes and then answered thoughtfully. "The mail," she quietly replied.

Not long after this conversation, you received in the mail an invitation to attend a meeting for high school principals in your region. The accompanying letter emphasized the close link between the leadership a principal exhibits and staff interest, enthusiasm, motivation, and effective implementation of a plan or program. Agreement to attend the meeting represented an earnest commitment to literacy. Each participant was to submit a written Adolescent Literacy Plan for his or her school. Each plan was to address issues and topics as outlined below. It didn't take you long to decide that this was something you wanted to do.

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Appendix A

The Content Literacy Continuum Interview Framework

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Level 1: Content Mastery (mastery of critical content for *all* regardless of literacy levels)

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What are students doing?

What are teachers doing to ensure all learn critical content?

What does it looks like in action?

What professional development is provided to ensure that teachers have the necessary competencies?

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Level 2: Embedded Strategy Instruction (routinely weave learning strategies within *and* across classes using large group instructional methods)

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What are students doing?

What are teachers doing to embed learning strategies?

What does it looks like in action?

What professional development is provided to ensure that teachers have the necessary competencies?

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Level 3: Explicit Strategy Instruction Options (mastery of specific strategies using explicit, direct and intense instruction)

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What are students doing?

What are teachers doing to provide explicit, direct, intense instruction on targeted learning strategies?

What does it look like in action?

What professional development is provided to ensure that teachers have the necessary competencies?

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Level 4: Intensive Basic Skills Development Courses (mastery of entry level literacy skills at the 4th grade level)

What are students doing?

What are teachers doing as they provide intensive basic skills instruction?

What it looks like in action?

What professional development is provided to ensure that teachers have the necessary competencies?

Level 5: Intensive Clinical Options (mastery of language underpinnings of curriculum content and learning strategies)

What are students doing?

What are teachers/speech language therapists doing as they provide intensive clinical instruction?

What it looks like in action?

What professional development is provided to ensure that teachers have the necessary competencies?

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Additional References on Adolescent Literacy

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