

# *Learning from a Comprehensive Approach to Adolescent Literacy*

A significant difference still remains between the academic knowledge and skills required to graduate, and those necessary for postsecondary success.

In a nation rife with anxiety about the growing income and opportunity gap, and renewed fear of our declining global competitiveness, it is easy to lose sight of the fact there is some good news on the education front - progress is being made. Over the past three decades, high school dropout rates have steadily declined among all races and economic groups, with the lowest quartile of students - in terms of income - making the most progress. In fact, over the past few decades, the high school dropout rate has been cut in half to a record low of 6.6% in 2013. In urban areas such as New York City, the percentage of students graduating high school in four years increased from 51% in 2003 to 69% in 2011 (Kemple, 2013).

This success is the result of a tremendous national and local effort to improve the systems and structures necessary to ensure that more students graduate high school on time. When 90% of the current available jobs in the US economy require a high school diploma (Carnevale, Hanson & Gulish, 2013), the economic implications of this positive trend is clear.

Although improved high school graduation rates is certainly great

news, we still have a steep hill to climb to ensure that the vast majority of students, regardless of race or income level, are graduating from high school prepared to succeed in college and their careers. An analysis of the country's 50 largest cities indicates that in 2013, the average high school graduation rate was 59%, over 25% lower than the national average of 85.3%.

Even more sobering is New York City's experience. Although high school graduation rates are at an all-time high, only 20% of these graduates met college and career readiness benchmarks. This means that a significant percentage of high school graduates who attend college will likely be required to participate in remedial classes.

These statistics serve as a clear reminder that a significant difference still remains between the academic knowledge and skills required to graduate and those necessary for postsecondary success. The research indicates that students who need remedial reading are less likely to earn a postsecondary certificate or degree. This leaves them out of the competition for the increasing percentage of US jobs that require

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**...Advancing literacy — particularly at the secondary level — remains a fundamental challenge for local and national education leaders, and the need to raise student achievement in reading has never been more pressing.**

National Council of the Great City Schools, 2011

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## New York City Department of Education Middle School Quality Initiative

The MSQI goal is to ensure that all eighth graders in participating schools exited middle school reading on or above grade level. MSQI utilized five components that emphasized the importance of formative and summative assessments, as well as ongoing professional development. The five core components were:

1. The use of a universal reading screen to flag students showing signs of being at severe risk for reading
2. A set of specific strategies to increase the quantity and effectiveness of literacy instruction across the content areas
3. The establishment of a strategic reading period in Year 2 of the Initiative
4. The creation of grade-level professional learning communities
5. A continuous cycle of school-embedded professional development

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post-secondary education, which has been estimated to be required by 40% of all US jobs by 2020 (Carnevale, Hanson & Gulish 2013).

Although there are no easy solutions to the challenge of significantly increasing the number of youth (particularly those from low income backgrounds) graduating high school prepared for post-secondary success without the need of remediation, one obvious place to start is middle school literacy. The current crisis in adolescent literacy is well documented and longstanding. Today, two thirds of children living in low income communities enter and exit the middle-grades with literacy skills below proficiency. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), only 20% of 8th graders eligible for free and reduced lunch are proficient in reading (2014). Literacy is a leading indicator of high school success. Our failure to ensure that all students exit eighth grade reading on or above grade level directly contributes to the percentage of youth that either drop out of high school or graduate with literacy skills insufficient

for college and career success.

### Adolescent Literacy in the Age of the Common Core

In 2001, the National Panel on Reading identified that the number of students entering middle school having difficulty with reading comprehension was one of the greatest challenges facing US education. Almost 15 years later, we have yet to address the issue at scale. The development and adoption of the Common Core State Standards are a direct response to the challenges we face as a nation in preparing our youth for high school graduation and college and career success. The new Standards have significantly raised the bar on what young adolescents need to know and should be able to do to achieve grade-level proficiency. The literacy standards specifically map out a set of increasingly rigorous expectations for what types of texts students should be able to read, understand, and use to make written and oral arguments.

The ability to read independently at grade level is implicit to meeting or

exceeding grade level standards. Yet, in far too many of our nation's schools, we lack the knowledge, skills and persistence to support children in meeting this milestone.

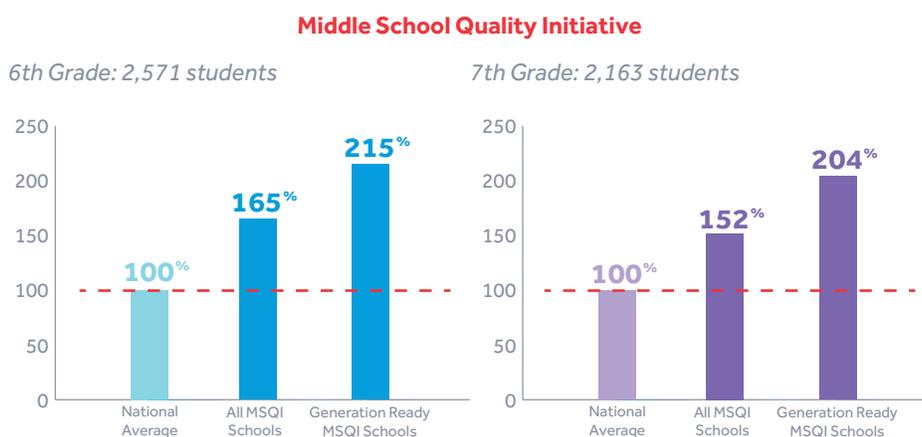
### New York City's Experience

From 2011 until 2014, I had the privilege of working with a team of educators at the New York City Department of Education. Our task was to plan and implement a large scale initiative to support schools with high need populations in meeting the challenge to build the reading skills of their students to ensure high school, college and career success. Our solution, the Middle School Quality Initiative (MSQI), was built on a set of assumptions about why efforts to improve middle school outcomes have not been hugely successful in the past.

#### **Assumption 1: Establish a manageable set of strategies proven to work**

Moving all students to reading on or above grade level by the beginning of high school necessitates a comprehensive strategy. No single

## Results from the Middle School Quality Initiative



These results are for students from October 2012 - June 2013.

100% indicates the nationally normed average DRP growth for one year.

strategy, such as focusing solely on the needs of the most severely at-risk readers (those entering 6th grade two or more years behind), will yield the type of reading gains needed by many young adolescents. Rather, as the seminal research compendium on adolescent reading, *Reading Next*, (2004) suggests, schools should design and implement a manageable set of foundational literacy strategies based on what is known to be effective in addressing the needs of adolescent readers.

### **Assumption 2: Persistence**

Unless we are able to sustain school-wide efforts that demonstrate signs of progress for more than a few years, steady progress towards improving the number of youth entering high school equipped with literacy skills they need for success will not occur. Conventional wisdom on school improvement suggests that it takes a minimum of three to six years for a school-wide strategy to take hold and demonstrate results. Improvement often takes longer in middle and high schools. We also know that sustainable

instructional change takes time and requires professional development that is ongoing, and embedded in the daily practice of teachers (Hammond et al., 2009).

Years of initiatives have shown that external accountability has little or no impact unless schools have the internal capacity to change (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009). Building the internal capacity of schools is therefore a priority. Leadership turnover rates at the district and school level are high and are the greatest in low income areas which can have a direct impact of the longevity of district initiatives. The Council of Great City Schools identified the average urban superintendent's tenure at 3.64 years (2010), and studies of principal turnover indicates an annual turnover rate of an estimated 28% in schools serving the highest poverty children (Clark, Martorell & Rockoff 2009). The ability to persist with school-wide, comprehensive strategies geared towards improvement is further weakened by pressure from high-stakes assessments and accountability systems.

### **Assumption 3: Adolescent readers have unique needs**

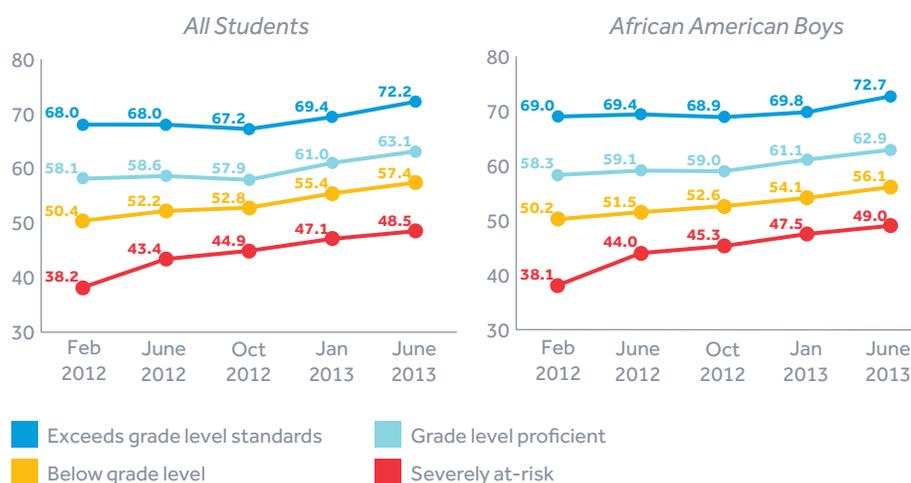
Research shows that interest in reading is shockingly low in middle school (Guthrie, 2014). Regardless of the specific cluster of strategies selected, an emphasis must be placed on a critical area that is slow to be adopted in many middle-grades schools. There must be a synergy between what is known about reading development and the varied needs of adolescent learners. Specifically, there should be a focused emphasis on reading development as a social process, as well as motivating and engaging adolescent readers, particularly those that are showing clear signs that they are disengaging from formal learning.

### **Assumption 4: Context is key**

Finally, the strategies designed to improve adolescent literacy *must* take into consideration the context within which they are intended to work. In the majority of our urban school districts, our academically low-performing middle schools exemplify an imbalance

## Results from the Middle School Quality Initiative

**Average DRP Score for Each Quartile Over Time for Students Present During All Test Administrations**



between the needs of children and the capacity of adults. In one large urban district, the context for improving middle school literacy included:

- Over 77% of students receiving reduced and free lunch
- A wide range of home language diversity and ability
- 18% students with disabilities
- Over 30 students per class
- An average annual teacher turnover rate of 25% or higher
- Teachers and leaders that have not been provided extensive professional development in reading

In order to succeed, literacy improvement models must address these factors in both design and implementation or they will have minimal impact on student achievement.

### **Middle School Quality Initiative**

The Middle School Quality Initiative (MSQI) began in January 2012 as a partnership between the New York City Department of Education and the New York City Council Middle School

Task Force. Its somewhat audacious goal was to ensure all eighth graders in participating schools exited reading on or above grade level. As the founding director of MSQI, the assumptions above contributed to the evolving theory of action behind the design and implementation of this Initiative in New York City Public Schools.

MSQI's comprehensive approach to improving middle school reading levels used the assumptions above, five core components from Reading Next, collaboration from the first cohort of twenty four school leaders involved in MSQI and Sheena Hervey from Generation Ready – a senior advisor of the Initiative – to guide the work. The components emphasized the importance of formative and summative assessments, as well as ongoing professional development identified by Reading Next. Some important strategies, such as independent reading were not included because the design team was conscious of the need to focus on a smaller set of proven strategies to begin the work. Additionally, schools were given the option of adopting their own literacy strategies to the

MSQI framework so that schools with strategic independent reading models in place, were able to maintain them.

The five core components were:

1. **The use of a universal reading screen to flag students showing signs of being at severe risk for reading.** This included monitoring all students' progress towards reading on grade level over time and the use of a set of reading diagnostics to better understand where individual readers were facing challenges.
2. **A set of specific strategies to increase the quantity and effectiveness of literacy instruction across the content areas.** This included explicit reading comprehension instruction through reciprocal reading, the implementation of an interdisciplinary academic vocabulary model – *Word Generation* – that emphasized speaking and listening, and a teacher team inquiry process to increase the volume and diversity of students weekly print text experience.

3. **The establishment of a strategic reading period in Year 2 of the Initiative.** Students were regrouped based on their needs and provided with research-aligned reading tutoring.
4. **The creation of grade-level professional learning communities (PLCs).** The PLCs met at least two times per month to plan curriculum and instruction, review student reading growth data and student work products related to vocabulary acquisition, using text inquiry data to make decisions about individual student support.
5. **A continuous cycle of school-embedded professional development.** School-embedded teacher and leader professional development was designed to increase teacher instructional knowledge of effective literacy practices, and leaders were supported in increasing their capacity to succeed in supervising and supporting their team to improve literacy outcomes.

There was also a strong desire to respond to the District's capacity and the context within which the work would take place.

Explicit attention was placed on addressing the developmental needs of the adolescent learner. First, the team adopted reciprocal reading as a strategy to support the development of small group work around comprehending complex texts. The provision of regular opportunities for adolescents to work together to understand text leverages both their need to socialize with peers as well as the social aspects of learning (Guthrie 2014). Second, the Word Generation curriculum developed by Harvard University's Strategic Education Research Project (SERP) was selected to support vocabulary acquisition because of its use of short nonfiction articles on high-interest topics that

were designed to be interesting and engaging to adolescents. The incorporation of debate into the curriculum further enhanced the developmental appropriateness of the instructional design and the addition of formal competitive debate across New York City schools further added to the relevance and authenticity of the work.

### Learning from the MSQI Experiences

The ability for the MSQI model to persist in individual schools over time was certainly challenged by principal turnover. Of the original cohort of 24 schools, nearly 40% of the leaders turned over in three years. District and school support networks sustained the MSQI focus in the majority of these schools but in some instances, momentum for the work was lost.

Creating a reasonable time-frame (3-5 years) for a comprehensive literacy approach to be implemented, refined, and assessed, is a challenge in the majority of districts due to leadership turnover. The fact that MSQI was sustained through a change in administrations is no small feat. This is a direct result of The New York City Middle School Task Force, an external stakeholder organization made up of community-based organizations, family advocacy groups and universities, making it a central effort to ensure that New York City Department of Education's new administration incorporated MSQI into its district-wide improvement plan. Without the thoughtful and timely advocacy of these member groups, MSQI might easily have ended after two and a half years of initial design implementation. This type of support from a broad set of stakeholders is one example of how meaningful work can be sustained in districts through the changes associated with leadership turnover.

Although there are no simple solutions to achieving the goal of all students

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**Without Generation Ready's support in the process, I don't think we'd have the success that we have with our ELA department, with our ELA scores, with our understanding of literacy and how it affects all content across the board**

Derrick Spaulding, Principal  
M.S. X383 - Emolior Academy  
New York City

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**Our consultant's work in reading led to a dramatic increase in scores over a very short time... I can't put into words how truly valuable she has been to my school community.**

MSQI Middle School Principal  
New York City

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**... Adolescents entering the adult world today will do more reading and writing tasks than at any other time in history, they will need reading and writing to cope with a flood of information they will find everywhere they turn. They will also need to use literacy to feed their imaginations so that they can create the world of the future. In a complex, diverse, and sometimes even dangerous world, their ability to read is crucial – essential not only to help them survive, but also to help them survive and thrive.**

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International Reading Association Resolution  
on Adolescent Literacy, 2012

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entering high school reading on grade level, the work currently underway in New York City is worthy of close examination. The MSQI experience offers a great deal of information about the process of implementing an optimal mix of foundational reading strategies. MSQI tested the optimal mix of foundational reading strategies required to effect large-scale improvement in some of the nation's most high needs, middle grade schools.

The positive news is that there are early signs of progress in both student outcomes and teacher and leadership practice. An analysis of student reading data for the original cohort of schools engaged in the work show very positive growth on average for all students as well as significant for those students that entered 6th grade reading below a fourth grade level. Equally important is evidence from a third party Year Two evaluation showing that MSQI had positive impacts on teacher literacy practice. Students who were interviewed said they liked the small group work and found that reciprocal reading was helping with their understanding of more complex texts; and for some students, MSQI enabled them, for the first time, to say they did not understand what they were reading. Teachers commented that they were often surprised by what their students could do once they worked in small groups and had the opportunity to talk about texts with each other.

One of the single most important outcomes of MSQI is the fact that achieving grade-level reading by the end of 8th grade is now a central strategy of how the nation's largest school district both frames and organizes around the goal of improving high school, college and career success.

## Conclusion

For too long, our expectations for students of poverty have not been high enough to match the goal of college and career readiness. Ensuring that the vast majority adolescents enter high school with the literacy skills required for success is a challenging, but achievable, goal. When teachers, administrators, and ultimately, students, are provided with a comprehensive and long-term support from their district and community stakeholders, success can be achieved. The Middle School Quality Initiative is demonstrating that when such an approach is taken, change can be made and all students, regardless of income or demographics, can join the pathway to postsecondary success.

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