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March 8, 2010

Time to Act: An Agenda for Advancing Adolescent Literacy for College and Career Success, from the Carnegie Corporation of New York's Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy, outlines background, research, and agenda for making adolescent literacy a national priority. Beginning in 2007, the Carnegie Corporation formed a board of specialists from universities, research centers, policy centers, and K-12 education to discuss the issue of adolescent literacy by reviewing research and best practices to ultimately make recommendations for schools, district, state, and federal policy makers. This report asserts that "without high-quality education at every level, America will

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lose its greatest asset: a knowledgeable and engaged citizenry” (Carnegie 2010). Central to a knowledgeable and engaged citizenry is the ability to comprehend complex passages, synthesize information, and form conclusions based on evidence: the critical literacy skills that must be taught to adolescent learners.

The report calls for a “re-engineering” of America’s secondary schools to support adolescent literacy. The first section “The Vision: Literacy for All” describes the current research in adolescent literacy and the current knowledge we possess to focus on schools to support quality adolescent learning. Drawing on The American Diploma Project, Center of Education Policy and others, the report describes the need to schools to teach adolescents the tools and skills for active engagement with different kinds of texts, critical thinking, and lifelong explorations and development. More practically, middle and high school learners must learn from texts which compared to elementary grades: are significantly longer and more complex in word, sentence and structural levels; present great conceptual challenges and obstacles to reading fluency; contain more detailed graphic representations; and demand a much greater ability to synthesize information. Such changes are described through the hypothetical example of Riverside High.

Authors present a hypothetical example of Riverside High showing how a school could make literacy for all, not just an added on goal, but a foundational goal affecting every decision made in the school. The principal could use the reading needs of his students to drive scheduling, professional development, and teacher planning. The lowest readers could be taught by the strongest teachers in credit-bearing reading classes centered on texts from core subjects. The school could employ a literacy coach who would model lessons for teachers, provides professional development, attend content area meetings, and discuss student data. This hypothetical school, offered as an example of how to achieve literacy for all students, has a strong academic and literacy focus fueled by content-area based literacy instruction plus targeted literacy instruction based on student need and progress. An exemplary “literacy for all” school would address literacy through the culture of

the school, the information used to drive decisions, resource management to support literacy goals, leadership with a literacy focus, hiring of professional staff, and incorporating differentiated literacy instruction and content-area literacy instruction.

Sections two and three describe the challenge of and the keys to achieving literacy for all students. The biggest challenge to literacy at grades 4-12 is that the texts become longer; word, sentence, and structural complexity increases; graphic representations become more important; conceptual challenge increases; and texts begin to vary widely across content areas. All of these areas require explicit instruction not only from reading teachers, but also from content-area teachers. The keys to meeting the goal of “literacy for all” include improving classroom instruction through pre service programs and professional development of current teachers and the wise and consistent use of data to inform systemic changes in schools.

Section four outlines the agenda for change and re-engineering of schools at the site, district, and state level. Schools can organize their culture for learning; use information to drive decisions; allocate resources; develop strong instructional leadership; commit to student success; target interventions for struggling readers and writers; and foster a strong literacy focus in all content area classes. Districts are encouraged to change the focus from remediation to accelerated learning and retune the alignment between middle and high school. At the state level, policy makers can require districts to make K-12 literacy plans; revise standards to include literacy goals in all content areas; develop and revise assessments to reflect new standards of literacy; improve statewide data collection and use; and support aligning instruction with standards and assessments. Each of these agenda items are examined through descriptions of exemplary schools, districts, and states who have actively pursued literacy for all students.

The strength of this text lies in outlining the bulk of the research on adolescent literacy, thoroughly describing what needs to be achieved, and giving composite examples of ways schools have addressed these issues with some success. Beginning with a discussion of the success points of Reading First and other early literacy initiatives, the report

asserts that a national focus on the priority of early literacy has made a difference and lays the groundwork for this same kind of support for adolescent literacy in grades 4-12. In addition, there are several side reports outlining how to choose a textbook with a literacy focus, how to set goals, and how to achieve clear standards. Citing reports such as *Reading to Achieve: A Governors Guide to Adolescent Literacy* (Berman 2005) and *Reading at Risk: the State Response to the Crisis in Adolescent Literacy* (Williams 2007), this report not only informs, but gives many references for further information and support.

The weakness of the text is that the goals are lofty and exemplary schools are hypothetical. None of the real schools described have made adolescent literacy a primary focus of their school, so it is difficult to see the various recommendations in action. Further, the descriptions of how to achieve the goals, such as “hire professional staff” are general at best and give no specific suggestions for achieving the goals.

Time to Act offers an exhaustive look at the evidence supporting adolescent literacy as a national priority. The text is useful as a general overview and focus for talking points for schools, districts, and states to consider. As middle and high schools continue to strive to not only meet the demands of No Child Left Behind, but also prepare students for college, the world of work, and a global job market, adolescent literacy will become a key factor in their success. As the report states- we know what to do; now is the time to act.

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About the Reviewer

Brook Meiller has been in education for 25 years. She began her career as a high school English teacher spending 18 years in the classroom. As the Language Arts Coordinator for Norman Public Schools in Norman, OK, she was responsible for providing professional development and curricular support for literacy grades K-12. For the past two years she has served as the Literacy Coordinator for the GEAR UP for SUCCESS program housed at the University of Oklahoma's K20 Center for Community and Educational Renewal. She is pursuing her PhD in Instructional Leadership and Academic Curriculum with an emphasis in English Education. Her research interests include teacher efficacy and professional development.



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