



# Special Report

Unlock Success for Below Proficient Readers

January 2019



## The Challenge

Millions of middle and high school students struggle to read at grade level, and at least 70% of these students require some form of remediation.<sup>1</sup>

**Of all the issues in public education today, none is more complicated or critical to post-secondary success than literacy. A vast number of students in classrooms today require additional instructional support to function successfully in their core content studies. It is an ongoing problem that continues to perplex educators across the country.**

There is a misguided perception that once students “learn to read” in elementary school they will be fully prepared for success in middle and high school classrooms and beyond. However, learning to read is only the initial step. Adolescent students must apply “reading to learn” strategies as they strive to make sense of increasingly complex concepts.

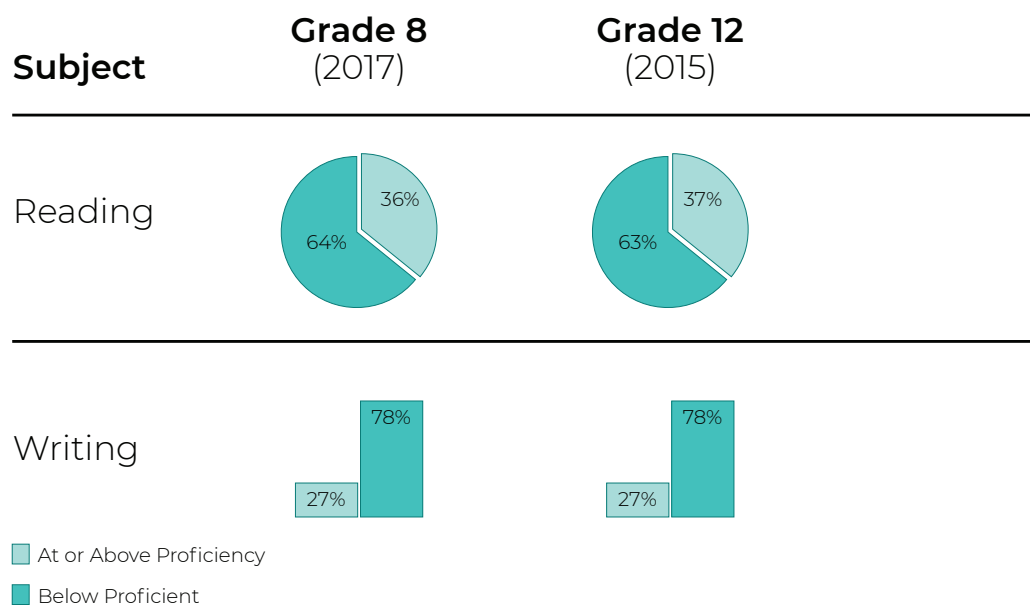
While much attention has been focused on early literacy, far less attention and funding has been directed to “reading to learn” efforts, specifically comprehension and content area reading strategies which are prerequisite skills for secondary and post-secondary success. Very few older struggling readers need help reading the words on a page; their most common problem is that they are not able to effectively comprehend what they have read.<sup>1</sup> “Students working below basic levels of literacy, suggest they are not able to connect ideas, form inferences, and make generalizations when reading grade level texts.”<sup>2</sup> This reading deficiency also impacts mathematical problem solving, with reading comprehension skills more important than mental modeling.<sup>3</sup>

## The Opportunity

“Reading to learn”—the expectation of secondary school students—demands higher levels of support to ensure that students are fully prepared for 21st century pursuits. Providing support that unlocks success for below proficient readers can improve overall student performance.

**The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading assessment measures reading comprehension and presents a broad view of student reading knowledge, skills, and performance over time.**

The most recent NAEP results<sup>2</sup> highlight the low percentage of students scoring at or above the proficient level on literacy tasks and confirms the extent of the proficiency problem across the country. And while these scores indicate a serious problem among all students, the statistics are even more alarming for low income students and students of color.



With the number of middle and high school students reading below grade-level proficiency, the expense of providing remediation can be significant, and the costs nationally for not providing a timely remedy are staggering. Every year in the United States nearly 60% of first-year college students discover that despite graduating from high school and being considered fully eligible to attend college, they are simply not ready for post-secondary studies. Once enrolled in higher education, these students find they must take remedial courses which do not earn college credits, an equity issue as post-secondary financial aid cannot be applied to remedial coursework.<sup>4</sup>

To improve the performance of students working below the proficient level on reading tasks, schools need to apply a set of evidence-based practices that have a dynamic and powerful interrelationship.<sup>1</sup> This report describes four strategies middle and high school curriculum needs to address to unlock success for struggling adolescent readers.

# 1. Identify Individual Needs

**Schools must provide instructional safety nets for students who have fallen behind in meeting proficiency standards. To do so, they must know what each student needs.**

The task of differentiating instruction for older struggling students can be difficult to operationalize and manage at the secondary level. Educators need ongoing diagnostic and prescriptive formative assessment that informs teachers how individual students are progressing in real time<sup>1</sup> because learning actually improves when assessments are used formatively to guide instruction.<sup>5</sup>

For greatest effectiveness, formative assessment needs to be embedded within the context of lesson activities, not the result of a several-times-a-year assessment. Technology applications can simplify this process and provide immediate data on student performance so student needs are identified early and often.

The valuable student performance data that ongoing assessment delivers will provide teachers—and students—with an effective method for monitoring academic progress and pinpointing student needs. In addition, administrators should use this timely information to establish school-wide professional development priorities and provide focus for system wide instructional support.

## The Apex Approach

Apex Learning embeds formative and summative assessment throughout its digital curriculum to help teachers and students identify learning needs. Students have numerous opportunities to check their own understanding through practice activities. This is particularly helpful for below proficient readers who have difficulty comprehending grade-level materials. Given the opportunity to learn from their mistakes in real time, students begin to build context and make sense of the instruction.

Pretests, quizzes, and posttests all provide teachers with data to help monitor students' understanding and identify skill gaps.

## 2. Appropriate Intervention Tools and Scaffolded Support

**The implementation of evidence-based strategies can improve students' ability to read and understand complex, grade-level texts.**

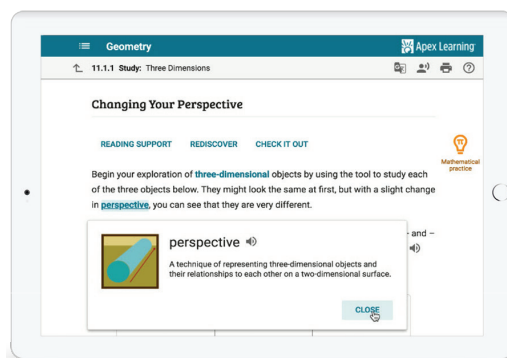
Below proficient readers need help understanding individual words and, most importantly, with broader reading comprehension. What specific things can be done to effectively address the problem of students with below proficient reading skills? Seminal studies Reading Next, the Institute for Education Sciences Practice Guide Improving Adolescent Literacy: Effective Classroom Intervention Practices, and research from the Meadows Center for Preventing Educational Risk at the University of Texas, Austin provide detailed information on effective classroom practices proven to improve reading achievement through evidence-based strategies.

Among the reading practices included in the research are the following strategies that address these needs:

- Provide explicit vocabulary instruction.
- Provide direct and explicit comprehension strategy instruction.
- Make available intensive and individualized interventions for struggling readers.
- Increase student motivation and engagement in literacy learning.
- Have students read a variety of texts and analyze them across a variety of disciplines discuss, receiving feedback on their responses.
- Build background knowledge through exposure to rich content.
- Teach students, through modeling and direct instruction, to monitor their comprehension while reading.<sup>1267</sup>

### The Apex Approach

Effective digital curriculum aids teachers in providing meaningful instruction for below proficient readers. Apex Learning embeds scaffolded literacy support—across all disciplines—that includes accessible text that is organized to maximize understanding, layered assistance for academic vocabulary, and carefully modeled and guided reading, writing, and note taking experiences, in addition to options for read aloud. Reading comprehension skills are explicitly taught, and non-scored practice provides students with opportunities to get instructive feedback. Opt-in supports and adaptive remediation individualize the learning experience to meet each student's needs. With this literacy support built directly into the curriculum, struggling students can overcome the precise barriers they face to access grade-level instruction.



### 3. Student Motivation and Engagement

**Motivation is critical for struggling students to reach grade level. To be motivated to complete any task, they need to believe they can do it.**

Secondary students routinely report that they do not take their studies seriously, feel disengaged in the classroom, and are alienated from school. However, learners' engagement increases when the perceived challenge of the task and their own skills are high and in balance, instruction is relevant, and the learning environment is under their control.<sup>9</sup> As such, student motivation should be considered as a contributing factor in the proficiency problem.

Findings from research synthesized by Hiebert et al.<sup>10</sup> found that adolescents are motivated when they believe they have some control over their learning. For instance, adolescents who believe that their own effort contributes to their ability to read, rather than it being a given ability, are motivated to persevere in a task even when it is difficult. Students are motivated by content that is challenging but achievable, as well as personally relevant and interesting. Students need instructive feedback when they struggle<sup>11</sup> and immediate feedback when they succeed so they never wonder whether they've mastered the concept.<sup>12</sup>

Providing content that is relevant, interesting, and instructionally sound can help keep adolescent students interested and motivated to learn, all necessary steps toward building reading proficiency.

#### The Apex Approach

Apex Learning gives below proficient readers the real-time support, engagement, and feedback they need to be engaged and motivated. Carefully scaffolded instruction with embedded literacy supports ensures students are supported as they are learning prerequisite skills and grade-level concepts. Active learning opportunities are provided every few seconds, and they offer students the immediate, instructive feedback essential in building the clarity, guidance, and momentum they need to build confidence in their knowledge as they take on grade-level material. The use of a variety of media keeps students engaged and provides contextual support as students move through the curriculum.



## 4. Instructional Coherence

**Avoid “curriculum chaos” and leverage technology to create a coherent instructional strategy.**

While a “large bag of tricks” is required to reach all students effectively, schools must strive for instructional coherence to ensure their goals become a reality. Simply put, trying to implement a number of programs on a single campus has little chance of working. Over time these programs and strategies, layered one upon another, have contributed to a number of instructional problems not the least of which is the “curriculum chaos” students experience when working in multiple programs targeting their skill deficiencies. A student may be placed in one program for core instruction, receive intervention support in another, ELL support from yet another curriculum, and so on. The problem is exacerbated when the scope and sequence of skills in these solutions do not align and teachers have not been trained well on all the platforms students are using.

To effectively meet the needs of the range of learners on a campus, it would make better fiscal and instructional sense to purchase a comprehensive program that serves multiple instructional purposes.

Schools must transform their thinking about teaching, learning, and what it takes to reach each student meaningfully at his or her instructional level. Many recommendations for programs for below proficient readers are also consistent with best practice for English language learners, thereby maximizing time and money in a district’s search for solutions that work effectively across student populations.<sup>613</sup>

### The Apex Approach

Apex solutions focus on providing literacy, language, and academic support for below proficiency readers and also ELL students and students with learning gaps who may also struggle with grade-level content. Making grade-level content accessible to these students is intentional and will allow students to access rigorous grade-level instruction they need for success without the need for a plethora of programs.

Fewer solutions not only has an impact on instructional coherence, it also simplifies data analysis for educators and often provides an economic advantage for a district. Apex Learning provides English, math, science, social studies, and elective curriculum for original credit, credit recovery, grade-level proficiency, and exam readiness needs to provide coherence in support for struggling students.

## Conclusion

### More Success for More Students

**These evidence-based practices outline a path to help below proficient readers find success in grade-level instruction.**

Of all the school-related factors impacting student performance, evidence-based instructional materials matter most. Yet educators all too often struggle with finding the time and resources to utilize the formative assessment information and support tools necessary to provide each student with the scaffolding and support needed for students to succeed and thrive instructionally.

Digital curriculum can be transformational. By paying attention to the tangible and intangible roots of evidence-based practice, educators can effectively utilize digital curriculum to place more below proficient readers on a trajectory for academic success.

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An industry leader with deep expertise in digital curriculum, Apex Learning works closely with school districts across the country to implement proven solutions that increase on-time graduation rates and create opportunities for student success in school and beyond. The company is driven by the understanding that supporting the needs of all students – from struggling to accelerated – strengthens schools and creates stronger communities, brighter futures, and a more equitable world. Apex Learning is accredited by AdvancEd and its courses are approved for National Collegiate Athletic Association eligibility. Apex Learning, where opportunity thrives. For more information, visit <http://www.apexlearning.com>.

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