

Highlights of the State Superintendent’s Adolescent Literacy Plan

“Demand for high school graduates who can understand increasingly complex and technical material never has been greater....Becoming literate is a critical element in adolescents’ ability to be successful in learning, in the workforce, and as global citizens....

Achievement gaps identified by the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examinations are confirmed by the National Assessment of Educational Progress data for Wisconsin....We are working to close the achievement gap that exists between economically disadvantaged children, children of color, and their peers. This achievement gap is not acceptable.

Our approach to adolescent literacy is consistent with our Partnership for 21st Century Skills that focuses not only on reading but also on the importance of literacy for the 21st century....

Literacy is at the heart of learning. Our students must focus on literacy skills in order to prepare them for post-secondary and workplace opportunities. As we move forward, we will work together to create the most literate, well-educated citizenry and work force in the nation.”
—State Superintendent Elizabeth Burmaster

Toward a Definition of Adolescent Literacy

At its core, literacy is the ability to read and write. While this ability remains the nexus of literacy for adolescents, additional abilities are needed to maximize learning in all content areas. In Wisconsin, we must infuse this core with the ability to invent, design, create, compute, and communicate so that adolescents can make critical judgments, solve real-world problems, and become productive citizens who lead rewarding lives.

In simpler times the ability to decipher works, and read and write constituted literacy. Today students live in a vastly different world. Instant information bombards them on all fronts. The sheer speed at which information is created and shared necessitates a shifting and expanding vision of literacy in the 21st century. Now literacy includes the ability to manage, synthesize, and analyze these multiple streams of information.

Reading and writing continue to be essential skills. The Alliance for Excellent Education’s 2007 report on adolescent literacy indicated that writing skills, along with reading comprehension, is the best predictor of academic success and a basic requirement for participation in civic life and a global economy.

Today’s literacy requirements increasingly demand that students think critically and visually, build mental models, and interact with others to grapple with their dynamic and intricate modern world. Literate students must think globally and creatively to solve problems. They must recognize the interconnectedness of the world and interrelatedness of all content areas.

Wisconsin Student Assessment Data

Although Wisconsin students as a whole have a solid reading foundation, an increased focus on adolescent literacy is imperative to ensure all students are proficient and advanced readers and writers.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) required that all students be tested in reading and math in grades 3 through 8 and in 10th grade. The tests are referred to as the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examinations (WKCE). Performance on the tests are rated as minimal, basic, proficient, and advanced. Wisconsin also uses the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) assessment. This is given to 5% of fourth-graders and 4% of eighth-graders to assess math and reading every two years. NAEP serves as a common metric for all states.

The ACT college entrance examination is also used to measure student achievement in Wisconsin. In 2007 46,430 Wisconsin high school graduates took the ACT college examination. That figure represents about 70% of all public and high school graduates.

WKCE test results confirm a gap in reading achievement exists between:

- students who are economically disadvantaged and those whose families have a higher socio-economic status
- students of color and students who are white
- students who are English Language Learners and their English-speaking peers
- students who have disabilities and their peers

Math and Reading Scores Decline in High School

Wisconsin students have historically scored above the rest of the nation in reading. Fourth grade scores continue that trend, but 8th grade scores have declined, although not significantly. WKCE data indicates that reading achievement declines from middle school to high school. In 2007, the proficient reading scores were lowest for 10th grade students. Math, science and social studies scores show the same pattern with the lowest scores occurring in 10th grade.

Math: 3rd-8th grades—about 70% are proficient; 10th grade—69% are proficient.

Science: 4th-8th grades—75% are proficient; 10th grade—72% are proficient

Social Studies: 4th grade—91% are proficient; 8th grade—81% are proficient;
10th grade—76% are proficient.

NAEP scores indicate that 8th graders improved their overall average score in writing since 1998. Scores overall were above the national average, but there were gaps for the groups mentioned above who did not do as well.

ACT Test Results

In 2007 Wisconsin students tied with Iowa for second place among all states that administer the ACT college entrance exam. The composite score of 22.3 in Wisconsin was up 0.1 point over the past seven years. Wisconsin students also exceed the national average for ACT College Readiness Benchmarks, which predict success in college level coursework.

The problem begins to show when the scores of the 70% of high school graduates who took the American College Testing Program (ACT) are broken down. Eleven percent of the students in the state who took the ACT were students of color, which was an increase of 2.9% from 2001 to 2007. In 2007, higher percentages of students of color were not considered ready for college level biology classes than were white students.

- 61% of white students were not prepared for college coursework.
- 74% of American Indians/Alaskan Natives were not prepared.
- 78% of Asian American/Pacific Islanders were not prepared.
- 81% of Hispanics were not prepared.
- 94% of African-American students were not prepared.

These figures do not include the large number of students who do not graduate from high school, most because they failed to master foundational skills in reading and writing.

The 2007 ACT writing scores reflect the same racial disparity:

- 23.1 was the average combined English and writing scores for white students.
- 20.7 was the average score for Asian American/Pacific Islanders.
- 20.6 for Hispanics

- 20.3 for American Indians/Alaskan Natives
- 17.2 for African-American students

Challenges to Academic Success

Increasing poverty levels in Wisconsin are a challenge to academic success. In Milwaukee the percent of students eligible for free or reduced lunch was 80% in 2007. The state level for students receiving free or reduced lunch was 31% in 2007, compared to 24.1% in 2001.

39,000 students in Wisconsin are English Language Learners. Students in Wisconsin speak 85 different languages in their homes—58% of those students speak Spanish and 29% speak Hmong. In 2007 the Alliance for Excellent Education released a report that identified six institutional challenges involved with students who are English Language Learners. Two of those challenges are to assure that literacy instruction for all subject areas is part of teacher training and that writing skills should be integrated into all instruction.

Awareness for an Emphasis on Literacy Skills at the Middle and High School Levels

Nationally there is a call to upgrade efforts in adolescent literacy. Organizations recognizing this needed include:

- National Governors Association
- National School Boards Association
- National Association of State Boards of Education
- National Association of Secondary Principals
- American College Testing Program (ATC)
- National Middle School Association
- National Councils of Teachers of English
- International Reading Association.
- Alliance for Excellent Education

The International Reading Association, National Council of Teachers of English, National Council of Teacher of Mathematics, and the National Science Teachers Association organization agree there is a compelling need for literacy coaches at the middle and high school levels. These coaches would help all teachers teach reading and writing in their content areas. Susan Frost, an education advisor to President Clinton, said, “We thought teaching every child to read well by the end of third grade would take care of the problem, but we were wrong.”

Ensuring adequate ongoing literacy development of all students in the middle and high school years is more challenging than ensuring excellent reading in the primary grades for two reasons. The first is that secondary school literacy skills are more complex, more embedded in subject matter, and more multiply determined. The second reason is that adolescents are not as universally motivated to read better or as interested in school-based reading as are younger children.

Core Components of the Wisconsin Adolescent Literacy Plan

Leadership and Collaboration

Educators at all levels must be involved in the discussion, planning and implementation of district plans for adolescent literacy. Teams of educators, in partnerships with their community, can build collective expertise from a broad range of perspectives. The first step in the plan is to

develop a message about the importance of adolescent literacy. The second step is to identify other state and local organizations and initiatives that can help get the message out across the state. There is a role for public libraries to play in this step of the process.

Academic Standards

The Wisconsin Model Academic Standards need to serve as the roadmap to meet the individual literacy needs of all adolescents. The Standards need to be strengthened to include literacy components for all content areas.

Instruction and Intervention

Intervention must include students who are English language learners and students with disabilities. The first step in the Instruction and Intervention component involves creating partnerships to facilitate collaborative planning. Another step is to identify community resources for intervention services that may support adolescent literacy. Public libraries can be one of those community resources that helps with intervention services in support of literacy.

Professional Learning and Resources

Teachers need a compendium of professional learning opportunities, resources, and tools to help them deliver high quality, differentiated literacy instruction in their content areas. Principals, teachers, instructional coaches, and professional support staff all need access to the materials and opportunities to improve their skills as literacy leaders. There is a need to identify professional learning opportunities in which adolescent literacy issues are addressed. Connections with public libraries is specifically mentioned. The adolescent literacy regional workshops sponsored by public library systems are one way that public libraries can help support school efforts, by ensuring teachers and school librarians are aware of the training opportunities. One of the recommended tools is a web resource on adolescent literacy, which DLTCL has started.

Literacy Leaders and Personnel

Literacy instruction needs to be embedded in all content area classes. Support of literacy in the content areas is critical. This is where literacy coaches can be especially helpful. Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. *State Superintendent's Adolescent Literacy Plan*. September 2008.

Source: *State Superintendent's Adolescent Literacy Plan*, Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. September 2008.