

Building Reading Strength and Stamina in Middle and High School

Evidence-based techniques and strategies in *Achieve3000 Literacy™*

By Douglas Fisher

Introduction

Research highlights several factors that influence reading growth for middle and high school students. This white paper outlines the key skills they must develop to become proficient readers and provides evidence-based instructional strategies for building those skills.

Self-efficacy, or students' belief in their ability to reach goals, significantly impacts their engagement in learning tasks and overall achievement. Thus, to improve reading outcomes, it is important that an effective curriculum helps students set and accomplish appropriately challenging goals (Rege et al., 2021).

Achieve3000 Literacy utilizes a LevelSet assessment to help students identify their current reading ability so that they can, in collaboration with their teachers, set short- and long-term goals for development according to the Lexile® level required for success in college or the workplace. As students complete activities, they can track their progress from one Lexile level to the next, helping them draw concrete connections between effort and outcome.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dr. Douglas Fisher is Professor and Chair of Educational Leadership at San Diego State University and a leader at Health Sciences High and Middle College. He was previously an early intervention teacher and elementary school educator. The recipient of the International Reading Association William S. Gray Citation of Merit, an Exemplary Leader Award from the National Council of Teachers of English, and a Christa McAuliffe Prize for Courage and Excellence in Education, Dr. Fisher has published numerous articles and books on reading and literacy, differentiated instruction, and curriculum design.

Students must additionally be able to build and activate background knowledge in order to read and understand increasingly complex texts about our physical and social world (Elbro & Buch-Iversen, 2013). For example, before students can read about stalagmites and stalactites, they must establish a basic understanding of caves and minerals. Before they can read about gerrymandering, they must be able to differentiate between the electoral and popular vote.

Achieve3000 Literacy™ has thousands of informational articles that help students develop the vocabulary and background knowledge necessary to discuss and read more deeply about topics in science and social studies. Features including image previews, lesson vocabulary and challenge terms, depth of knowledge discussion questions, and teacher material for background building introduce students to key concepts and phrases. As they read these articles and respond to comprehension questions, they build background knowledge that equips them to take on increasingly complex texts.

In addition to self-efficacy and background knowledge, students must develop four major reading skills:

- **Word recognition** is the ability to connect sounds and letters with accuracy and automaticity. Students who possess word recognition skills are able to identify words and rapidly access their meanings. As students orthographically map the letter combinations (graphemes) to the associated sounds (phonemes), they can read with increasing ease (Ehri, 2014). Learning to recognize and decode words starts in the primary grades but can continue into middle and high school with intervention programs such as *Corrective Reading®*, a program that addresses unfinished learning in word recognition for students in Grades 3–12.
- **Word knowledge** allows readers to assign meaning to the words that they read, including unknown words (Wright & Cervetti, 2017). Word knowledge includes the pronunciation and any associated definitions.

Achieve3000 Literacy includes intentional and targeted vocabulary practice, using words from the texts students are reading. In addition, the program is designed to adjust the vocabulary demands of each text to ensure students are being appropriately challenged.

- **Sentence fluency** covers grammar and syntax knowledge and the ability to use that knowledge to analyze complex sentences including clauses, conjunctions, unclear pronoun referents, or ambiguous phrasing (Balthazar & Scott, C. M., 2024).

Achieve3000 Literacy provides opportunities for students to practice reading individual sentences in the context of longer passages and to respond to comprehension questions that focus on the meaning of those individual sentences.

- **Verbal reasoning** is the skill people use to make sense of oral and written language by making inferences, interpreting tone and mood, understanding discourse, and monitoring comprehension (Burton et al., 2009).

Achieve3000 Literacy™ engages and extends students' verbal reasoning skills by challenging them to read longer passages and compose written responses to inferential questions about the text.

Evidence-Based Strategies

Efforts to build critical reading skills should focus on both strength and stamina. To build strength, students should be supported as they engage in reading more challenging, complex texts. To build stamina, they should read a higher volume of less challenging texts on their own.

Much like lifting heavy weights, readers engaging with complex or difficult texts need supervision and support. For reading strength training to be effective, teachers should model their thinking and engage students in guided learning experiences. During teacher modeling, teachers share their thinking while reading aloud, modeling their cognitive and metacognitive processes while explaining their approach to understanding the text. In addition to comprehension modeling, teachers should model word solving, the use of text structures and text features, and basic skills like fluency and multisyllabic word decoding, syllable use, and morphology.

The Stretch texts provided by *Achieve3000 Literacy* offer teachers excellent resources for modeling and teaching students how to think while reading. These texts provide opportunities to engage students in strategy instruction, including both cognitive and metacognitive learning that students can use on their own as they read independently.

Students can also engage with complex and difficult texts during close reading, which calls for them to read and re-read the text, digging deeper as they discuss text-dependent questions with scaffolding and support where appropriate (Fisher et al., 2016). In doing so, students learn new skills and strategies that they can use when they read on their own.

Achieve3000 Literacy provides teachers with access to thousands of Stretch texts and comprehension questions, on a wide range of topics that support the content middle and high school students need to learn, that can be used to engage students in close reading and assess their understanding.

Although strength training is important—in fact, critical—it's insufficient to ensure that students develop into fully capable readers. Much like aspiring athletes, they also need to work on stamina because practice is what allows quality instruction to stick. Students need to apply what they are learning on their own using texts that will support them in engaging in high-volume practice.

To be clear, practice does not make perfect, but it does make permanent. Students need to practice with increasingly complex texts that push them toward what Kapur (2008) calls productive failure, or a struggle that results in growth. As with Goldilocks, it can't be too hard, too easy, or too boring. Instead, texts need to be much more like the games on your phone that start off easy and become progressively more challenging. Starting at level 36 would be frustrating, but staying at level 3 would be boring.

As we consider the reading needs of adolescents, we must consider how to help them build critical foundational skills such as self-efficacy, background knowledge, word recognition, word knowledge, sentence fluency, and language comprehension. And we need to design meaningful learning experiences that build students' reading strength and stamina in each of these areas. Thus, we need strong instructional materials that provide both the necessary components of literacy and the instructional strategies to ensure all students learn, develop, and grow. *Achieve3000 Literacy™* provides exactly that—the instructional materials necessary for students to practice and apply what they are learning—using informational texts that build background knowledge and foster self-efficacy.

References

- Balthazar, C. H., & Scott, C. M. (2024). Sentences are key: Helping school-age children and adolescents build sentence skills needed for real language. *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 33(2), 564–579.
- Burton, N. W., Welsh, C., Kostin, I., & van Essen, T. (2009). Toward a definition of verbal reasoning in higher education. Educational Testing Service.
- Ehri, L. C. (2014). Orthographic mapping in the acquisition of sight word reading, spelling memory, and vocabulary learning. *Scientific Studies of Reading*, 18(1), 5–21.
- Elbro, C., & Buch-Iversen, I. (2013). Activation of background knowledge for inference making: Effects on reading comprehension. *Scientific Studies of Reading*, 17(6), 435–452.
- Fisher, D., Frey, N., & Lapp, D. (2016). *Text complexity: Stretching readers with texts and tasks*. Corwin.
- Kapur, M. (2008). Productive failure. *Cognition and Instruction*, 26(3), 379-424.
- Rege, M., Hanselman, P., Solli, I. F., Dweck, C. S., Ludvigsen, S., Bettinger, E., Crosnoe, R., Muller, C., Walton, G., Duckworth, A., & Yeager, D. S. (2021). How can we inspire nations of learners? An investigation of growth mindset and challenge-seeking in two countries. *American Psychologist*, 76(5), 755–767.
- Wright, T. S., & Cervetti, G. N. (2017). A systematic review of the research on vocabulary instruction that impacts text comprehension. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 52(2), 203–226.

Learn more at:

mheducation.com/SORA3K

