

Introduction

Research highlights several factors that influence reading growth for middle and high school students. This whitepaper outlines the key skills they must develop to become proficient readers before introducing 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.

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Leadership of NCTE, as well as a Christa McAuliffe award for excellence in teacher education. He has published numerous articles on reading and literacy, differentiated instruction, and curriculum design as well as books such as The Teaching Reading Playbook. 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 first 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 terms. As they read these articles and respond to comprehension questions, their knowledge of the world grows. And, as they build their background knowledge, they are ready for increasingly complex texts.

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

- 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.

Efforts to build these critical reading skills should focus on both strength and stamina. This is to say, 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 including juicy sentence protocols and close reading exercises. During teacher modeling, teachers share their thinking while reading aloud. They model their cognitive and metacognitive processes and explain their approach to understanding the text. To increase the impact of modeling, they should provide a rationale for their thinking. In addition to comprehension modeling, teachers can 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 teach students how to think while reading. These texts provide teachers the opportunity 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 peers as the teachers provide 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, 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 lessons. Comprehension questions help students assess their understanding of each text.

Although strength training is important—in fact, critical—it's insufficient to ensure that reading develops fully. Students, much like aspiring athletes, need to work on stamina. This aspect of teaching and learning—practice—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 the volume of practice required to really learn.

To be clear, practice does not make perfect, but it does make permanent. Students need to practice with increasingly complex texts, not texts that are so hard that they struggle and give up, but with 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, it needs to be much more like the games on your phone. They 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.

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