

KEYSTONE STATE READING ASSOCIATION

PRTE: Pennsylvania Reading Teacher Educators, Special Interest Group

Position Paper: *Reconfiguring to Meet the Literacy Needs of Today's Adolescents*

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Just more than a decade ago, the International Reading Association (IRA) released “Adolescent Literacy: A Position Statement” (Moore, D.W., Bean, T.W., Birdyshaw, D., Rycik, J.A., 1999). That document emphasized two key points; that adolescents *deserve and need* appropriate, quality instruction and support for their continuing literacy development, and to meet the needs of a continuously shifting society, educational professionals need to *work collaboratively* to provide that instruction. The Keystone State Reading Association (KSRA) and the Pennsylvania Reading Teacher Educators (PRTE) fully support the IRA statement and note that, ten years later, there is an even stronger need for instruction that is based on data and skill applicability. The tenets of the original position statement resonate all the more strongly today, in particular those that emphasize the use of formal and informal assessment results as the basis for instruction that will motivate and empower students to achieve and be active, productive citizens in our ever-changing culture.

The IRA has since been joined in this call by numerous researchers, educators, and organizations, including the National Commission on Writing, the College Board, the Alliance for Education, and the Carnegie Foundation. In effect, over the past ten years, numerous organizations have worked side by side to make a clear case for instructional reform. While high school dropout rates have improved overall during this time period (ChildTrends, 2011), the disparity between states (ranging from fourteen to fifty percent, as noted by NCHEMS, 2009) and between economic and ethnic groups (Alliance for Education, 2009) reinforces the need to “do things differently” (Moore, et al, 1999, p.1)

A substantial move toward answering this call has come with the recent adoption of Common Core Standards by more than forty states. The result of a joint effort from the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), the Common Core Standards State Standards Initiative is focused on establishing common learning expectations and goals across grade levels, so that regardless of the state or district in which they live, students will leave high school with the skills and knowledge they need to be successful in a college and/or the world of work.

While the widespread acceptance of the Common Core movement means that it has the momentum and support to make it the vehicle for real change in American schools, it is important to recognize what it is and what it is not, and the implications for adolescent literacy. According to the literature on the Common Core website (www.commoncore.org):

- The Common Core State Standards are a clear set of shared goals and expectations for what knowledge and skills will help our students succeed.
- Common standards will provide a greater opportunity to share experiences and best practices within and across states.
- Standards do not tell teachers how to teach.

KSRA and PRTE acknowledge the potential of the Common Core mission and vision, and welcome the efforts of such additional organizations in recognizing the validity of literacy support for adolescents and the need for improvement in the middle and secondary schools. We continue to support the positions and findings of the IRA in regards to making decisions about how to teach and reach students at all facets of the literacy continuum.

Towards that end, we posit the following foundational principles that should guide the efforts middle and secondary educators as they teach.

We support the belief that literacy is not a merely a static, quantifiable attainment of sub-skills. Literacy is lifelong developmental process that intertwines reading, writing, listening, speaking and viewing with thinking as an individual makes meaning of the texts and contexts they encounter in the world.

Support during and beyond the early and intermediate years is essential. For the adolescent demographic, this support is strengthened when provided by content area teachers who have had substantial training in language and literacy and are skilled in matching a variety of instructional methods with the strengths and needs of their students. When intervention is needed, it is not implemented from the perspective of remediating deficiencies of the student. Instead, the focus is on modifying and re-arranging the elements of instruction, including the learning environment, to best fit each learner's strengths and needs (Blanton & Wood, 2009). Certified, experienced reading specialists serving in the role of literacy coaches in the middle and secondary setting and modeling best practices in collaboration with classroom teachers will increase the quality and effectiveness of content area teaching.

An effective content area classroom for adolescent learners will include, at a minimum:

- Robust exploration of functional, academic and content area vocabulary from authentic sources and contexts. Instruction should feature thought-provoking interaction that provides frequent, varied opportunities for readers to increase their language comprehension and production. (Beck, I. McKeown, M.G., Kucan, L., 2002, p.2)
- Promotion of all aspects of literacy: reading, writing, speaking, listening, visualizing and thinking, in acquiring the real world knowledge necessary for the contexts of citizenship, career and college. These skills should be interwoven, for example, learning to read should be embedded in the process of reading to learn and learning to write must be embedded in the processes of writing to learn (Calfee, R.C., & Miller, R.G., 2007).
- Tasks that provide support for the inquiry process of online reading comprehension. Embedded in this process are the skills and strategies required to identify an important question which then directs the reader to locate, critically evaluate, synthesize, and communicate information with the Internet (Leu, Reinking, Carter, Castek, Coiro, Henry, Malloy, Robbins, Rogers, & Zawilinski, 2007)
- Clear purposes that are set with students for learning and interaction with content that is structured to be meta-cognitive and reflective, with learners that are involved in assessment processes (Ogle & Lang, 2008)
- Explicit and implicit instruction that builds upon prior and background knowledge, develops an awareness of the conventions of literary and expository texts, including text structures and features, and incorporates appropriate digital technologies to promote active learning (Fisher, D. & Frey, N., 2008)
- Activities where students are engaged by design; where self-selection and choice are supported with instruction throughout the learning process, transitioning through self-regulation into independent literacy practices (Biancarosa, G. & Snow, C.E., 2004, p.16)
- High-quality modeling of multiple comprehension strategies used in conjunction with texts that interest students, followed by opportunities for students to attempt and refine use of the strategies on their own. (Fisher, D., Frey, N. & Ross, D., 2009)
- The promotion of higher-order thinking and comprehension that is built through inquiry and exploration and focused on addressing global issues and essential questions, incorporating a wide range of related sources and texts, making personal connections, and promoting the ability to transfer this understanding to other situations (Wiggins, G. & McTighe, J. (2005, Keene, E.O., & Zimmermann, S.,1997)

PRTE and KSRA believe that adolescents deserve instruction that incorporates the best practices of literacy development in response to their ever-changing needs and needs of our society. Working collaboratively, we can effectively prepare today's adolescents to achieve academically, participate actively in society, make informed choices, and to make meaningful and positive contributions.

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