



Literature Summary: Senior Reading Advisors

Prepared by the Department of Research & Performance Management

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Strategy

Continue employing Senior Reading Advisors to improve the literacy skills of struggling readers in middle and high schools.

Description

Memphis-Shelby County Schools (MSCS) instituted the position of Senior Reading Advisor (SRA) in 2018–19. It is designed to be a highly skilled, 12-month instructional position focused on addressing foundational literacy deficits in middle- and high-school students. Select middle and high schools have one SRA position each. These schools offer intensive reading classes, taught by their SRA, for students whose reading skills are significantly below their grade level. The SRA-led classes employ the online program Reading Horizons for part of the instructional content and for benchmarking students' reading progress.

Most, if not all, of the SRAs have extensive classroom instructional experience as well as administrative and/or instructional coaching experience. Beyond teaching struggling readers, SRAs also design and facilitate school-based and District-level content-literacy professional-development sessions for teachers of other subjects in grades 3–12.

Synthesis of Literature

The SRA position/program is unique to MSCS, and thus there is not a body of literature evaluating its specific effectiveness. However, the SRA role is similar to other programs that implement highly specialized, literacy-focused teaching positions, and Hanover Research has produced several reports on topics relevant to the SRA approach to improving secondary literacy. This report synthesizes information from the Hanover materials to provide SRA-relevant recommendations.

General Practices for Improving Adolescent Literacy²

The What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) reviewed National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores, along with a host of studies (correlational, longitudinal, quasi-experimental, and experimental) to determine several key recommendations for improving middle and high school literacy. Derived from “strong” or “moderate” evidence subjected to rigorous external peer review, WWC recommended the following (quoted from pp. 5–6):

- **Provide explicit vocabulary instruction:** Both English language arts and content-area classes should include explicit vocabulary instruction, as this helps students learn new words and improves their ability to independently construct meaning from text.
- **Provide direct and explicit comprehension strategy instruction:** Comprehension strategies consist of “routines and procedures that readers use to help them make sense of texts.” Examples of comprehension strategies include asking and answering questions, summarizing, paraphrasing, locating the main idea, and using graphic organizers. In addition to modelling and explaining the strategy, the teacher should offer feedback on guided practice and emphasize the importance of independent application.



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- **Provide opportunities for extended discussion of text meaning and interpretation:** Aimed at improving reading comprehension and encouraging critical analysis, such discussions may involve small groups of students or an entire classroom. Such discussions should incorporate varied points of view, based on textual evidence, personal experience, and reasoned arguments, expressed during prolonged exchanges with the teacher or other students.
- **Increase student motivation and engagement in literacy learning:** To create confident, lifelong readers, teachers should construct a supportive learning environment that provides useful feedback, treats mistakes as growth opportunities, encourages self-determination, and makes literacy experiences relevant to students' interests and everyday lives.
- **Make available intensive individualized interventions for struggling readers that can be provided by qualified specialists:** When students need more support than a typical classroom teacher can offer, schools should provide intensive interventions through reading specialists or highly-trained teachers. Since no single cause for reading difficulties exists, students may struggle with skills as varied as phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, word analysis, and/or comprehension. Thus, schools should tailor interventions to the needs of each student.

Critical Components for Successful Implementation of Middle and High School Reading Intervention¹

The Consortium on Reading Excellence, Inc. (CORE), a research-focused implementation advisory board, reviewed evidence on the factors associated with the failure of reading interventions. Using that information, they created a framework of critical components for the successful implementation of reading interventions for the average middle and high school. These critical components are:

- **Effective professional development** that features the following characteristics:
 - Provides teachers time and guidance to “design their program, identify helpful tools, and ultimately bring their personal style to established theories” (p. 7).
 - Gives teachers a basic understanding of related theory, “which could take 20 to 40 hours due to reading instruction complexity” (p. 7).
 - Contextualizes theoretical models using “modeling and demonstrations, classroom visits and video media, and... workshops that simulate relevant conditions” (p. 7), allowing teachers to learn in a low-risk setting.
 - Is multidimensional, with “an appreciation for teachers’ and students’ background while also taking into account the larger context of the school environment” (p. 7).
 - Integrates structured feedback and provides ongoing coaching once teachers are in the classroom.
- **Effective and aligned instructional tools** that “enable teachers to transform their professional development into action” (p. 7). According to research from the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, successful reading intervention programs for secondary students feature the following instructional components (quoted from p. 8):
 - **Motivation to read**, specifically, intrinsic motivation to persist in a reading task.
 - **Decoding skills and fluency**, which includes basic decoding skills and fluency.



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- **Language comprehension**, which includes linguistic knowledge, background knowledge, making inferences, and self-regulation.
- **Transacting with text**, engaging in a dialog with the text, especially in making personal connections.
- **Significant systemic reorganization and support** that addresses systemic process issues in a holistic manner. The revamped system should include mechanisms for collective discussion and troubleshooting, monitoring of implementation, ongoing professional development, and coaching for continuous improvement.

Select Recommendations for Implementing Support Classes in Secondary School³

The Education Trust compared instructional practices in four high-impact high schools to instructional practices in demographically similar average-impact schools and found very different approaches between the two groups. “Through additional instructional time, the high-impact schools implemented supplemental academic support while allowing students to stay on track for on-time graduation. Average-impact schools, however, slowed course-taking for struggling students” (p. 6). The Education Trust therefore “cautions against slowing down the coursework progression of students who may struggle in a particular subject area, [as] it may inhibit students from completing college preparatory coursework and catching up to grade-level peers” (p. 6).

Another important finding from the above study was the following:

High-impact schools strategically organize struggling and average-performing students into smaller classes to enable teachers to spend more time with students who are considered to be more at-risk. At high-impact schools, administrators commit to smaller class sizes for struggling students even if it results in larger class sizes for Honors- and AP-level courses in an effort to help the lower-performing students “get to that next level.” Meanwhile, average-impact schools maintain uniform class sizes regardless of students’ proficiency levels. (p. 10)

References

1. Hanover Research. (2014, June). *Best practices in reading intervention implementation*.
2. Hanover Research. (2015, April). *Effective school-wide literacy strategies for secondary students*.
3. Hanover Research. (2015, August). *Best practices in high school support classes*.