



NEW KNOWLEDGE

Building Capacity for Literacy Instruction

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THE BIG PICTURE

In 1992, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) revealed the majority of students nationwide did not meet proficiency levels in reading and more than 20 years later, progress in improving student outcomes in reading has been minimal. According to the most recently published NAEP results, 80 percent of low-income fourth graders and 66 percent of all fourth graders [are not proficient in reading](#).

Fostering early reading proficiency is critical. The earlier children fall behind in developing literacy skills, the more difficult it becomes for them to catch up to grade-level peers—a trend we see reflected in the nation’s adult population. According to the National Assessment of Adult Literacy, nearly 1 in 7 American adults lack basic literacy skills, many of whom have obtained a high school diploma.

So how do we ensure more of our students are on track to reading proficiency? This question looms large. Part of the challenge is that there is not a one-size-fits all approach to improving literacy outcomes. However, we do know there are critical literacy milestones, such as reading accuracy and stamina (the ability to read and comprehend independently for a period of time) that all students need to reach.

The challenge is not only in identifying which students are struggling to reach which milestones, but also in determining how to help them with their unique needs. State required annual assessments are limited in providing frequent, detailed data because they are administered only once during the academic year and results are usually received after students have moved on to the next grade. This makes intervening to help struggling students get on track challenging for teachers.

While the status quo for measuring students’ literacy skills is annual state assessments, we are seeing an upward trend in schools adopting formative assessments. These assessments- administered multiple times within an academic year- help evaluate progress and determine instructional needs to help students reach key literacy milestones. Formative assessments provide educators with the data and time needed to ensure more students are on track to reading proficiency.

NEW UEI KNOWLEDGE

UChicago Impact, a nonprofit organization within the University of Chicago Urban Education Institute (UEI), works with school districts and charter networks nationwide on getting more students on track to reading proficiency.

UChicago Impact partners with schools to implement the Strategic Teaching and Evaluation of Progress (STEP) system. STEP is a research-based formative assessment system designed to build teacher capacity for literacy instruction and provide educators with the data and professional learning necessary to improve student achievement in literacy across grade levels.

In 2012, UChicago Impact’s STEP team began working with Community of Peace Academy (CPA), an elementary school in the Minneapolis-St. Paul school district, on interpreting STEP formative literacy assessment data and improving literacy instruction.

Through a grant provided by The McKnight Foundation, CPA staff administers STEP assessments for both early and middle grades students, while UChicago Impact’s STEP team provides professional learning designed to help teachers interpret assessment data and develop strategies for improving individual students’ literacy skills. The school also employs a full-time literacy coach whose sole responsibility is to support teachers in literacy instruction. The literacy coach works with STEP’s Managers of Professional Learning on supporting teachers in assessing students’ literacy skills multiple times in an academic year, monitoring student progress, implementing interventions where needed, coaching teachers, and providing differentiated professional development.

School leadership continues to provide the support teachers need for improving literacy instruction through regular feedback on lessons and instruction, fostering a growth mindset, celebrating successes, and frequently discussing areas of opportunity.

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While their work to foster reading proficiency in all students is not over, CPA has made impressive gains since making serious investments—through grants, consistent efforts, and mindset—in students’ achievement in literacy.

In the course of just two academic years, between the end of the 2013/14 academic year and the end of the 2016/17 academic year, CPA saw the percentage of its students on-track to literacy proficiency increase by 24 percent.

DEVELOPMENTS TO WATCH

Teaching students to read is one of the hardest jobs in education and, traditionally, it has been seen as the responsibility of primary school teachers. However, a 2016 study commissioned by the American Institutes for Research (“Reconstructing the Evolution of the American Supply of Cognitive Skills: A Synthetic Cohort Analysis”), found that mastering complex literacy skills requires lifelong learning and that many students lose literacy skills before they can ever use them in their careers—with automation in the workforce perpetuating the problem.

The study’s authors note that, “policymakers have mistakenly assumed that cognitive skills, including literacy skills, are a static commodity. i.e. once acquired they cannot be lost.”

This study and others underscore the need to expand literacy instruction to students in higher grade levels and, this year, UChicago Impact is working with schools across the country to deepen foundational literacy skills for older students. About 30 schools have now implemented UChicago Impact’s STEP Gray and Burgundy series, which supports middle grades teachers in fostering comprehension of the more complex reading material found in nonfiction texts and structures, and strengthening the literacy skills students need for lifelong learning.

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