ADOLESCENT LITERACY POLICY

Fundamental Principles
ExcelinEd Policy Toolkit- 2026

OVERVIEW

For decades, literacy policy has centered on ensuring that students learn to read by the end of third grade. However, developing strong readers requires more than foundational skills alone. From the earliest years through adolescence, students require reading skills such as phonics and decoding in conjunction with exposure to rich academic content that builds students' vocabulary and knowledge. Content and skills develop simultaneously and are essential to long-term reading success.

Third grade remains a critical milestone, but it is not the finish line. The development of core reading skills continues well beyond grade 3. Too often, literacy instruction separates skills from content. Decoding is often emphasized in early grades while access to rigorous texts is reserved for later grades. As a result, some students fall behind, lacking either the background knowledge to comprehend difficult texts or the decoding skills necessary to access them.

Once students move from the early grades into upper elementary and middle school, the books and materials they encounter become more challenging. As students progress along that K–8 continuum, educators must continue building foundational skills while also deepening students' knowledge and vocabulary through content-rich instruction. Without direct teaching and regular checks to identify where students are struggling, many older students' reading needs go unnoticed. The data bear out the need for this continued approach.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) indicates a downward trend in eighth grade reading achievement, even as some states have improved in fourth grade. Forty-seven of 50 states have declined on the eighth grade NAEP reading assessment since 2011. For 18 of these states, the decline was 10 points or more, equivalent to one grade level. One-third of the nation's eighth grade students are reading below the NAEP Basic level.

A comprehensive literacy policy must extend beyond the early grades to ensure sustained, evidence-based instruction and progress monitoring throughout the K–12 continuum. This does not mean applying the exact same early elementary approaches to adolescents, but it does require embracing the link between skills and content. Students need both in tandem to become proficient readers.

Building on our fundamental principles of early literacy policy, Excel*in*Ed has identified 16 fundamental principles for grades 4–8 grounded in research and designed to guide states, districts and educators in strengthening instruction, systems and supports.

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These principles are organized into a coherent, comprehensive approach across four key systems of support: supports for educators; assessment and parent/guardian notification; evidence-based reading instruction and intervention; and accountability and reporting. Together, these systems strengthen the implementation of adolescent literacy policy and improve reading outcomes for all students.

ADOLESCENT LITERACY FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES

System of Support for Educators

These principles establish a coherent, statewide system of support to ensure educators at every level are prepared and sustained in delivering effective, evidence-based instruction. By strengthening preparation pathways, providing differentiated professional learning, embedding ongoing coaching, and ensuring access to a reading specialist or interventionist in grades 4-8, this system builds the instructional capacity necessary to improve literacy outcomes for all students.

Fundamental Principles

1. **Differentiated statewide science of reading training** for school and district leaders, teachers, literacy coaches, reading specialists or interventionists, tutors and other designated staff - Professional training is differentiated by role and ensures that all secondary educators understand how literacy demands evolve across grades, how students vary in literacy strengths and needs, and how discipline-specific texts present unique literacy challenges.
2. **Ongoing and job embedded coaching support** for administrators and teachers
3. **A reading specialist or interventionist** for each school serving students in grades four through eight
4. **Preparation for teacher candidates** in elementary education, secondary education and special education have the knowledge and skills to teach all students to read by aligning educator preparation coursework to the science of reading
5. **Sufficient funding** towards adolescent literacy policy implementation

Assessment and Parent/Guardian Notification

These principles establish a transparent and coherent system of assessments to ensure timely identification of reading difficulties and clear communication with families. By requiring universal screening for reading, aligned diagnostic and summative assessments, comprehensive training on the assessment system for educators, and prompt parent/guardian notification, this approach supports early identification, informed instructional decision-making, and shared accountability for improving literacy outcomes in grades 4-8.

Fundamental Principles

6. **Universal reading screening of all students in grades 4-8 as well as diagnostic and summative assessments** to support identification of discrete skill deficiencies in reading - Screening should target the areas of advanced word reading, fluency, vocabulary, sentence processing and reading comprehension.
7. **Comprehensive training for teachers** on the approved system of assessment
8. **Parent notification for all students in grades 4-8 who exhibit deficiencies in reading** based on the vetted and approved assessment system no later than *15 days* after the identification of the reading deficiency

Reading Instruction and Intervention

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These principles ensure that literacy instruction in grades 4-8 is grounded in scientifically based reading research and supported by high-quality, content-rich materials and instructional practices. By aligning standards to the science of reading, protecting instructional time, and requiring timely, targeted interventions and individualized reading success plans, this approach guarantees that all students receive the instruction, support, and acceleration necessary to access grade-level content and achieve reading proficiency.

Fundamental Principles

9. **State standards for literacy are aligned with scientifically based reading research** and address word recognition and language comprehension skills and build background knowledge across content areas
10. **Daily class schedules** that allocate sufficient instructional time for core instruction, intervention and enrichment
11. **A list of content rich (materials that systematically build academic knowledge and vocabulary through coherent, grade-level texts and topics), science of reading HQIM core literacy curricula, interventions and supplemental materials** approved by the State Board of Education
12. **Students identified with deficiencies in reading receive**:
    - Access to instruction from a reading teacher or reading specialist
    - Reading intervention services and supports using HQIM
    - Time in the student schedule, in addition to core instruction, for intervention supports
    - Targeted small group reading intervention
    - Summer school programming or other forms of remediation as appropriate
13. **Individual reading success plans (IRSPs)** are developed for students in grades 4-8 who exhibit reading deficiencies at any time and are based on the vetted and approved assessment system and are provided no later than *30 days* after the identification of the reading deficiency

Accountability and Reporting

These principles establish clear expectations for sustained investment, oversight, and transparency in adolescent literacy efforts. By requiring dedicated funding, state-level guidance with technical assistance, and regular district-level review and public reporting of student outcomes and Individual Reading Success Plans, these principles ensure responsible implementation and continuous improvement in literacy achievement for students in grades 4-8.

Fundamental Principles

14. **The Department provides guidance and technical assistance** to aid school districts in implementation
15. **The District conducts an annual review** of the effectiveness of Individual Reading Success Plans
16. **Each District provides an annual report** providing an update on the literacy performance of students in grades 4-8

For additional information, review the Advancing Adolescent Literacy Model Policy and visit EarlyLiteracyMatters.org.