



MEETING OVERVIEW

**SEPTEMBER 28-29, 2006
POINTE SOUTH MOUNTAIN RESORT
PHOENIX, ARIZONA**

*Sponsored by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices
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In September 2006, the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA) hosted the Middle Grades Literacy Forum in Phoenix, Arizona. The Forum presented an unprecedented occasion for state policy leaders from 29 states to discuss the opportunities and challenges they face in promoting improved literacy achievement among middle school students. Over the past year, many states—with the support of NGA—have focused on the need to improve America’s high schools to prepare students for work and postsecondary education. In doing so, states have come to realize that the challenge of raising expectations often begins earlier than ninth grade. Many students arrive at high school reading below grade level. Low income and minority students in particular often enter ninth grade ill-equipped to participate in a rigorous, college-preparatory program in high school. To prepare students for success in high school and beyond, states need to ramp up their policies for adolescent literacy.

State Teams

Twenty-nine teams of high level state policy decision makers participated in this two-day event to share best practices and discuss issues in-depth with national experts. Team members included governors’ education policy advisors, state legislators, state board of education members, senior state department of education staff, secondary school principals, higher education faculty, foundation and business leaders, and other influential decision makers.

The NGA Center Middle Grades Literacy Forum, supported by the U.S. Department of Education, offered the state teams:

- examples of state strategies to disseminate research-based practices and model policies to support literacy improvement in grades four through eight;
- sessions on topics including English language learners, teacher preparation, professional development, and links between literacy and mathematics achievement; and
- access to national and state experts who helped individual teams develop state action plans during team planning time.

Proceedings and Key Themes

Details on the meeting are available on the [NGA Web site](#), including the agenda, more detailed meeting summary, annotated resource list, speaker biographies, state team policy planning template, and presentation slides from over 15 presenters.

The opening session made the case for state attention to middle grades literacy. The speaker made the following points as evidence of the need to improve adolescent literacy policies and practice:

- ❖ Improving students' chances for high school graduation and success in postsecondary education and the workforce requires focusing on students' literacy needs at an early age, continuing literacy supports in the middle grades, and redesigning the form and functions of high schools.
- ❖ The ability to read proficiently is linked not only to academic and workplace success but to overall quality of life and public health.
- ❖ Reading difficulties are not self-correcting, but they can be reversed.

Following the call to action, leaders of the Alabama and Florida adolescent literacy initiatives offered lessons learned and guidance to other states:

- ❖ Build sustainable support among key state leaders for literacy.
- ❖ Identify and assist students with the greatest literacy needs, and provide strategies and support to their teachers and administrators. Both state efforts depend on extensive capacity building of school staff in effective literacy instruction.
- ❖ Reprioritize current funds to support literacy goals. Though Alabama and Florida have dedicated new resources to their literacy initiatives, these state leaders emphasized the importance of realigning current funding to support the adolescent literacy priority.

Researchers identified characteristics of middle grades learners reading below grade level, skills that struggling students appear to be missing, effective literacy instructional strategies, and forthcoming research studies. Some of the key messages from the research panel included:

- ❖ Students need strong vocabulary and comprehension instruction to understand the complex texts they will need to master in their upper level content area courses.
- ❖ Many of the studies of comprehension reviewed by the National Reading Panel (NRP) were conducted in the middle grades levels; the NRP recommendations for comprehension instruction apply to this grade span as well.
- ❖ Literacy coaching should be successful if based upon what research shows is effective professional development and literacy instruction.
- ❖ To ensure the success of their lowest performing readers, states can screen and diagnose all sixth graders who score at the lowest levels on the state assessments, provide reading classes for the neediest students, establish policies that allow teachers with reading background to teach struggling adolescents, and provide training for teachers in adjusting assignments for low-level readers.

Nearly every forum speaker emphasized the importance of educator capacity building. A panel of technical assistance providers and researchers offered the following insights on the topic:

- ❖ Focusing attention to literacy in upper elementary and middle school is essential because students who are successful in their ninth grade year are 3.5 times more likely to graduate from high school.
- ❖ The most effective instruction includes regular monitoring of progress for students who were identified with reading problems at the beginning of middle school.
- ❖ It is important to differentiate roles among teachers. Not everyone is a reading instructor, but all school staff can contribute to literacy improvement.
- ❖ States need to pay attention to their English Language Learner (ELL) populations. Ninety-six percent of eighth grade ELLs scored below the basic level on the nation's report card in 2005, and ELLs graduate from high school at considerably lower rates than their English proficient peers. To address these challenges, states can develop a common statewide definition and tracking system for ELLs, update teacher certification requirements to include ELL training, provide instructional models for ELLs appropriate to local contexts, and offer more flexibility in school schedules.

Three educator-leaders from across the country described their schools' approaches to raising student achievement with a focus on literacy skills. To render more successful schools like theirs, they echoed many of the requests state policymakers made earlier in the day, such as the need for secondary teachers to receive training in supporting struggling readers and the benefit of extra time. These principals also called upon state policymakers to provide them "political coverage for bold school leadership." The charter school operator on the panel suggested that policymakers' support for public choice could provide external pressure to improve nearby district schools.

The closing panel highlighted data linking literacy performance to college preparedness, suggestions for aligning secondary and postsecondary education expectations, and reasons business leaders are concerned about literacy achievement among today's young people. Three of the key steps they suggested for states are:

- ❖ Align and benchmark standards to college and workplace expectations. Additionally, the reading standards for secondary students should be explicit grade-by-grade.
- ❖ Identify students who are not on target for college readiness and provide them supports early. Students who are not on target in reading, they emphasized, will not be ready for high school or college success in math or science.
- ❖ Engage a wide variety of stakeholders to support the focus on adolescent literacy. Private sector partners can provide more than just financial resources, and parents and students can be compelling advocates.

In addition to the presentations and panel discussions, meeting participants attended breakout sessions on meeting the literacy needs of English Language Learners, tailoring literacy instruction to special education populations, making the connections between literacy and mathematics achievement, and infusing writing across the curriculum. Presentation materials from these sessions are available on the [NGA Web site](#).

State Planning and Next Steps

State teams also engaged in state policy planning with expert consultants. Many of the teams planned to return home and seek the input of additional stakeholders in their efforts to communicate about the need for a state focus on adolescent literacy and identify and employ evidenced-based curricula, assessment models, and professional development. Governors and their advisors interested in discussing how the Center can be of assistance should contact Ilene Berman, Program Director in the Center for Best Practices at 202-624-5378 or iberman@nga.org.