



MEETING SUMMARY

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

*Sponsored by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices
with support from the U.S. Department of Education*

For a brief summary of the meeting proceedings, see the [Meeting Overview](#) on the NGA Web site.

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.

Meeting Materials

Details on the meeting are available on the [NGA Web site](#), including the agenda, meeting overview (brief version of this summary), annotated resource list, state team policy planning template, and presentation slides from over 15 presenters.

Meeting Sessions and Messages

The meeting was framed around the state strategy recommendations of the NGA Center's [*Reading to Achieve: A Governor's Guide to Adolescent Literacy*](#):

1. Build Support for a State Focus on Adolescent Literacy
2. Raise Literacy Expectations Across Grades and Curricula
3. Encourage and Support School and District Literacy Plans
4. Build Educators' Capacity to Provide Adolescent Literacy Instruction
5. Measure Progress in Adolescent Literacy at the School, District, and State Levels

THE NEED FOR STATE ATTENTION TO MIDDLE GRADES LITERACY

[\(Lyon PowerPoint presentation\)](#)

The opening session featured G. Reid Lyon, Executive Vice President, Higher Ed Holdings and Whitney International University making the case for state attention to middle grades literacy.

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 early literacy and high school issue areas have in recent years received a great deal of attention through national and state level champions, messaging, and policy action. "Reading by third grade" and improving "obsolete" high schools are frequent and well-embraced refrains. Middle grades literacy has been a much less prominent issue. Raising middle grades literacy achievement, though, has the potential to build upon the successes of early literacy investments and ensure students enter high school prepared to meet the increasingly challenging 21st century school and workplace expectations.

Reading proficiency is critical to students' academic learning and success in school. Yet, on average, across the nation, 37 percent of fourth grade students and 29 percent of eighth grade students read below the basic level as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress. The consequences of reading failure are profound and extend well beyond the classroom. Reading failure is not only an academic problem. **The ability to read proficiently is linked to quality of life and public health, argues Reid Lyon, former Chief of the Child Development and Behavior Branch within the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development at the National Institute of Health.**

Poor reading ability in grades four through eight is a strong predictor of high school dropouts. The consequences of high school dropouts are dire for not only individuals but their communities, states, and the nation. High school dropouts are 3.5 times more likely to be arrested than their counterparts who have graduated. Sixty percent of high school dropouts are unemployed. Illiteracy costs the nation approximately \$224 billion per year.

Reading difficulties are not self-correcting, but they can be reversed. Research tells us what type of instruction works and how. This research is essential for designing effective teaching methods. By the time they reach sixth grade, students need to know how to read quickly and must possess enough content, language, and vocabulary knowledge to understand what they read. They also need to be motivated to read and engaged in the activity. Upon mastering the basic skills of reading, young people still require instruction to read to learn in multiple disciplines.

WHAT STATE LEADERS CAN DO TO SUPPORT MIDDLE GRADES LITERACY ACHIEVEMENT

[\(Bragg PowerPoint Presentation\)](#)

[\(Mitchell PowerPoint Presentation\)](#)

State policy leaders can ensure that educators and leaders have the training and supports they need to provide all students with effective, research-based literacy instruction. Two states, Alabama and Florida, have been leaders in galvanizing public and political support for prioritizing and supporting adolescent literacy. Mary Laura Bragg, former Director, Just Read, Florida! and Katherine Mitchell, Assistant State Superintendent of Education for Reading, Alabama described their initiatives in a conversation moderated by Susan Frost, President, Education Priorities

Florida's focus on literacy began with Governor Jeb Bush's executive order in September 2001 that directed the Florida Department of Education to review the reading landscape in the state and offer policy solutions to the identified challenges. Initially, Florida focused solely on early literacy as the state sought to secure Reading First funds. Once those funds were awarded and state leaders recognized the scope of the literacy problem in Florida, they began to ramp up the state's literacy focus to include struggling readers in grades four and above.

Based upon recommendations of the report issued in response to the governor's executive order, the state took a number of actions. The state created the Just Read, Florida! office, housed in the Department of Education, to lead the state's literacy activities. The director of the office reports directly to the governor, the state legislature, and the Commissioner of Education.

Specifically to support middle grades literacy, Florida has created professional development opportunities, including creating a reading endorsement, providing literacy coaches for the lowest performing middle schools, training principals to support teachers and understand the role of the literacy coach, and establishing an online site called LEARN, which includes videos of model literacy instruction in grades K-8. In addition, the state provides diagnostic assessments for the lowest performing 25 percent of students in K-12 as well as screening and progress monitoring for grades 6-10 and posts all of this data in an online network. Much of these materials were created in partnership with the [Florida Center for Reading Research](#). In the past two years, districts have been required to establish K-12 literacy plans, funded through the Florida Education Funding Program, and provide intensive tutoring for students with decoding and comprehension deficits.

The **Alabama** Reading Initiative (ARI) began with 16 pilot schools in 1998 that agreed to adopt the seven initiative commitments, which includes at least 85 percent of the faculty committing to a 100 percent literacy goal for the school, principal leadership, and extensive professional development. Since the start of ARI in 1998 with \$1.5 million in private funding, 900 schools have participated, 105 of which serve middle grades students. Initial reports reveal that ARI schools make greater improvements in student achievement than their non-ARI school counterparts. The middle grades ARI was the focus of an [evaluation](#) by the American Institutes for Research. The evaluators found that the model for secondary schools needed to be distinct from the elementary model, the Alabama initiative drew from national level discussion and research (e.g., [Reading Next](#)), and teachers required intensive support from specialized staff.

Mitchell noted that the state initially focused the ARI model on elementary schools. Alabama Governor Bob Riley promised full-funding of ARI (\$56 million for 2006-2007) if it took on all elementary schools in the state. Still, 30 secondary schools used local funds to participate in ARI, and four regional reading coaches supported middle grades. One of the obstacles for the middle grades participants proved to be the school schedule, which the ARI office helped the schools reconfigure.

In 2006, the state began the ARI Project for Adolescent Literacy (PAL) to extend ARI's reach into the middle grades formally. The state is studying the progress of the recently selected 14 pilot ARI-PAL sites that were awarded faculty training, a common informal assessment, and \$140 per pupil for intervention. The state is now working to forge partnerships with these demonstration sites and other local education agencies and solicit partners and funding to extend the ARI-PAL program across Alabama.

Bragg and Mitchell offered the following lessons from their leadership experiences in Alabama and Florida:

- **Build sustainable support among key state leaders for literacy.** In Florida, Governor Bush made reading an economic issue and promoted the issue in a range of venues across the state. Legislators also took on the mantle of promoting literacy. Governor Bush garnered legislative support and raised funding for reading from \$0 in 2001 to \$18.5 million for Just Read, Florida! and \$118 million for the Florida Education Finance Program in 2006. Alabama's initiative began in the state department of education and gained momentum and support from legislators and the governor once the initiative began to show results.
- **Identify and assist students with the greatest literacy needs, and provide strategies and support to their teachers and administrators.** Florida's middle grades reform activities include professional development, progress monitoring and screening, and supports targeted to the lowest performing students.
- **Build the capacity of teachers and administrators to raise literacy achievement.** The Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI) has always been a voluntary program that requires teachers and principals to choose to commit to a 100 percent literacy goal for the school and engage in intensive professional development. Of the 900 ARI schools, 123 are secondary schools.
- **Reprioritize current funds to support literacy goals.** Florida legislators responded positively to the Just Read, Florida! office recommendation that half of the statewide professional development funding for districts be earmarked for reading.

RESEARCH FINDINGS ABOUT MIDDLE GRADES LITERACY

[\(Kamil PowerPoint Presentation\)](#)

[\(Gersten PowerPoint Presentation\)](#)

[\(McCardle PowerPoint Presentation\)](#)

During this session, 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. Presenting during this panel were Russell Gersten, Professor Emeritus, University of Oregon; Michael Kamil, Professor of Education, Stanford University; and Peggy McCardle, Chief of the Child Development and Behavior Branch of National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. Rafael Heller, Senior Policy Associate, Alliance for Excellent Education moderated.

Michael Kamil opened the discussion by reminding the audience of one of the most important things in school that we tend to ignore: textbooks. A review of high school, college, and technical school textbooks reveals that students will encounter complex, advanced materials in their assigned textbooks. Many students are not prepared for this challenge. Inability to understand these texts prevents students from mastering content knowledge, a point which is underscored by ACT's [Reading Between the Lines](#) study. Of the tested eighth graders who did

not meet the EXPLORE reading benchmark, only 1 percent are on target to meet the ACT college readiness science benchmark and only 15 percent are set to meet the math benchmark.

Students need strong vocabulary and comprehension instruction to understand the complex texts they will need to master in their upper level content area courses. Their teachers need to be equipped to provide this instruction. Many of the studies of vocabulary and 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. Research on professional development concludes that the best professional development is that which teachers implement upon returning to their classrooms. The experimental verdict is still out on literacy coaching, but it is likely to be effective if implemented consistent with professional development and literacy instruction best practices. In addition, a study Kamil is conducting now in San Diego is showing recreational reading improves reading achievement, but only if it is tied to instruction.

Peggy McCardle described some of the reading research the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development is funding through six networks, one of which concentrates on adolescent literacy. She also provided an overview of the research on the “fourth grade slump.” As reading material gets more difficult at the upper elementary level and requires higher level reading comprehension, some students begin showing signs of reading difficulty they did not show in earlier grades. **Ongoing assessment, including at the classroom level, is important to identify students’ difficulties and to then respond with strategic instruction matched to students’ deficits.** Administering and acting upon these assessments take time, skill, and funding. Teachers may administer some assessments, but school psychologists or reading specialists may also need to assess and assist struggling readers.

There is some debate in the research community about the exact number of older students with decoding difficulties, some say 10 percent, others claim the number is higher. There is also debate about how to define the “struggling reader.” Some places only identify the lowest performing 25 percent of students, but in fact there may be more students who are struggling readers. Older students with decoding difficulties need the help of a reading specialist or a specially trained teacher. Content area middle and high school teachers can help to develop comprehension by, for example, helping students learn to question the text and master content area vocabulary. They can also motivate and engage older, reluctant struggling readers with interesting assignments and supports such as teaching vocabulary students will encounter in a new text.

McCardle encouraged continued research on optimal approaches to professional development and identified some recent preliminary research findings on effective instruction: capitalizing on cultural background can engage students and motivate comprehension and content knowledge; better prepared teachers use their time more wisely; block instruction for English language learners seems to keep these students more focused on learning tasks. Finally, she concluded by stating that the **best investments in literacy** are:

- solid early (K-3) literacy instruction;
- teacher preparation and development in literacy for *all* teachers;
- differentiated teacher support roles for struggling readers across the grade span (e.g., elementary classroom teachers responsible for reading instruction, reading specialists in middle schools for students with decoding difficulty); and
- research-based classroom materials, both curriculum and assessments.

Russell Gersten presented on the literacy needs of the lowest performing students, what he refers to as “Tier 3” students, those who need more than an extra 10 minutes with a teacher to grasp a history or science lesson. Some of these students receive special education services and Title I reading help, but others who do not get help desperately need it. Teachers of these students shared in focus groups Gersten conducted that they often agonized about whether to give a D or an F to children who couldn’t read the textbook and to whom they should give simplified assignments. Often teachers would give the student a D for effort and move them along to the next grade where the student would continue to get frustrated and disengaged.

Gersten cited Joe Torgeson’s findings that struggling readers in middle school enter sixth grade with much less than their grade level peers. These struggling readers have read much less, have sight word vocabularies thousands of words less, know the meanings of fewer words, and are less skilled in using comprehension or repair strategies. Unsurprisingly, they typically do not enjoy reading or choose to read for pleasure.

Some of these students will need intensive instruction in basic word reading strategies including phonics. Most will need instruction and guided practice to improve fluency and intensive vocabulary instruction. All will need instruction to help them become better at applying comprehension strategies and thinking about the meaning of what they read. **The good news is that research demonstrates that some of these goals can be met by intensive small group instruction or individual tutoring, and several of these areas can be addressed in whole class settings.** Comprehension instruction strategies, particularly those that are highly engaging and work with average ability students can also benefit the Tier 3 students, assuming the instruction is more intense and initially moves at a more deliberate, systematic pace. What doesn’t work very well is placing students in a pullout program in a middle school resource room where the teacher works with students one at a time, leaving the rest of the struggling students doing seat work alone.

What Gersten **recommends states can do to ensure the success of their lowest performing readers** is to:

- screen and diagnose all sixth graders who score at the lowest levels on the state assessments;
- provide reading classes for sixth through eighth graders who require assistance;
- establish policies to ensure teachers (or ESL, speech, or language therapists) who can teach reading can do so in grades six through eight;
- provide training, professional development, and follow-up for general educators in how to adjust assignment for Tier 3 students, research-based practices that work with this population, and how to use content enhancements (visuals, concept maps); and
- support special education students and teachers by providing special educators professional development in learning strategies sound curricula for explicit comprehension instruction, including vocabulary and comprehension as well as word reading in curricula and special education students’ Individual Education Plans (IEPs).

He also strongly recommended that teachers not be offered a potpourri of approaches but that they be trained well in one approach they can apply and continue to improve upon over the course of a year or two.

Audience members asked the research panel about how states can best evaluate potential programs, if literacy coaching really works, and whether phonics instruction is appropriate after second grade.

The researchers cautioned states to take a careful look at a program before purchasing to determine whether the program has evidence of effectiveness and if so, who conducted the study and how. They suggested that an evaluation be instituted along with any new program adoption. To assist states in evaluating programs, they recommended partnering with a university or research institute. States need to be—or find others who can help them become—good consumers of research and determine what is real and applicable evidence before buying any sort of program.

The audience questioned the efficacy of literacy coaching, a practice being adopted by some states. **Michael Kamil stated that “there is no published data using an experimental study to show that coaching [is] effective.” But, he argued, based on what research tells us about effective literacy instruction and professional development, if done right coaching should work.**

The question arose about whether or not phonics instruction should happen after second grade. Students with decoding troubles, the researchers said, might need to be taught decoding, but struggling older readers should not be remediated by receiving decoding instruction alone. A lot of decoding problems, said Dr. Kamil, are remediated by vocabulary instruction. Phonics instruction cannot be a general intervention at the upper elementary through high school levels. It’s a targeted intervention for the students who might need it.

PANEL: DEVELOPING CAPACITY TO SUPPORT MIDDLE GRADES LITERACY THROUGH ASSESSMENT, PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT, AND EDUCATOR TRAINING

[\(Deshler PowerPoint Presentation\)](#)

[\(Linan-Thompson PowerPoint Presentation\)](#)

[\(August PowerPoint Presentation\)](#)

This session provided state leaders with suggestions for building a state infrastructure to support middle grades literacy improvement. Don Deshler, Professor, University of Kansas; and Sylvia Linan-Thompson, Director, Vaughan Gross Center for Reading and Language Arts, discussed how states might employ educator capacity building models, certification requirements, teacher training approaches, and assessment practices to meet their literacy achievement goals. Diane August, Senior Research Scientist, Center for Applied Linguistics, spoke about the characteristics and needs of English Language Learners. Ilene Berman, Program Director, NGA Center for Best Practices, moderated.

Don Deshler began his talk by making **three points with implications for state policymaking:**

1. Focusing attention to literacy in upper elementary and middle school is essential because students who are successful in their ninth grade year (earning five units of credit and no more than one F) are 3.5 times more likely to graduate from high school.
2. Schools should screen students at the beginning of middle school for reading problems. Schools can create a reading profile of students comprising data from screening of their word analysis skills, fluency, and comprehension. Progress monitoring should also occur a minimum of three times a year.
3. It is important to differentiate roles among teachers. Not everyone is a reading instructor, but all school staff can contribute to literacy improvement.

He then posed five important questions to ask about middle school literacy supports:

- 1) What happens for students reading below the 4th grade level?

- 2) What instructional strategies are in place across a school's staff to ensure that students will get "critical" content in spite of their literacy skills?
- 3) What happens for students who know how to decode but still do not comprehend well?
- 4) What steps must be taken to ensure that powerful learning strategies are embedded across the curriculum?
- 5) What happens for students who have language problems?

To respond to these questions, Deshler and his colleagues at the University of Kansas employ a content literacy instruction framework to develop an action plan or a content literacy continuum tailored to the needs of different levels of students:

- Level 1: Enhance content instruction to ensure that regardless of literacy-levels, students master important information
- Level 2: Embedded strategy instruction (routinely weave strategies within and across classes using large group instructional methods)
- Level 3: Intensive strategy instruction (mastery of specific strategies using intensive-explicit instructional sequences)
- Level 4: Intensive basic skills intervention (mastery of entry level literacy skills at the 4th grade level)
- Level 5: Therapeutic intervention for students with language difficulties (mastery of language underpinnings of curriculum content and learning strategies)

Sylvia Linan-Thompson described the professional development model used in Texas and urged states to ensure that their professional development approach is systemic, coherent, and aligned to school, district, and state goals and standards and initiatives. Teachers are more apt to implement aligned approaches. Echoing speakers from earlier in the day, Linan-Thompson emphasized the importance of using assessments to inform instruction and equipping teachers with the type of instruction required to deliver literacy and content in the middle grades. The Vaughn-Gross Center professional development focuses on strategy instruction, teaching struggling readers strategies for word reading, comprehension, and vocabulary. Content area teachers are eager for practices that will help their students master the content and subject area routines.

Providing teachers with the requisite content literacy skills cannot happen during in-service training alone. Many of these in-service practices also apply to pre-service teacher training, and the most potent trainings include both large group and follow-up mentoring sessions. Engaging all of the critical partners (e.g., districts, pre-service educators) requires collaboration and partnership at every level.

Diane August shared a demographic overview and suggestions for state policymakers in addressing the needs of English Language Learners (ELLs). **Multiple data point to a crisis for adolescent ELLs.** Ninety-six percent of eighth grade ELLs scored below the basic level on the nation's report card in 2005. ELLs graduate from high school at considerably lower rates than students who are English proficient. Though five states (CA, FL, IL, NY, TX) account for over 60 percent of the ELL population in grades six through 12, other states have the fastest growing ELL populations (CO, GA, IN, NC, NE, NV, OR). More than half of the adolescent ELLs were born in the U.S. and are second or third generation immigrants, which suggests that many ELLs are not learning the core content in English despite many years in U.S. schools. Among the students who emigrate to the U.S., some arrive with strong first language literacy skills and content knowledge whereas others had poor or disrupted schooling in their home countries. Although some adolescent ELLs live in middle and upper income families, 59 percent live in families with incomes 185 percent below the poverty line.

Research reveals five major challenges identified for ELLs:

1. Lack of common criteria for identifying ELLs and tracking their progress
2. Lack of appropriate assessments
3. Inadequate educator capacity for improving ELLs' literacy across the content areas
4. Lack of appropriate and flexible program options
5. Lack of a strong and coherent research base on how to build literacy in ELLs

Proposed solutions to these challenges include:

1. Developing a common statewide definition for identification and declassification of ELLs and create a system to track students.
2. Seeking examples from other states or work in a cross-state consortia to improve assessments.
3. Building educator capacity by updating state teacher certification requirements so all credentialed teachers have training in working with ELLs, require districts with large numbers of ELL students to provide specific ELL professional development, and train coaches in how to develop literacy among ELLs.
4. Providing instructional models appropriate to local contexts to ensure ELLs learn academic content (e.g., bilingual programs, sheltered English programs, newcomer programs) and provide flexible pathways (e.g., extended instructional time, more than four years for high school, flexible school day schedules).

The panelists discussed **the importance of using diagnostic assessments early, administered before students arrive in middle school to ensure they don't lose a semester or learn after a conflicting school schedule has been set.** They also raised the issue of making sure that the school staff themselves are ready to meet students' instructional needs. A new reading initiative is only going to be successful if the teachers are willing and equipped to implement it. Another critical point regarding diagnostic assessments is that the work does not end there. **Diagnostic assessments are only useful if schools are prepared to respond to what the assessments reveal.**

All of the presenters acknowledged the hard work required to change school culture and practice. What teachers need is knowledge, supports, and time, but professional development cannot be generic advice. Teachers need assistance in figuring out how to apply good instructional practice in their particular context and situations. Strengths and weaknesses vary considerably across classrooms and teachers. Don Deshler emphasized that the first client for professional development is teachers rather than students. They often begin by "getting the rock of out their shoe," for example helping a school meet an adequate yearly progress target so the providers establish credibility among the teachers. Deshler is also studying the coaching process dynamics to see what is most effective in coach to teacher learning relationships. Sylvia Linan-Thompson and Diane August underscored the importance of getting principal buy-in to literacy improvement and making it part of how the school leaders evaluate teacher practice.

PANEL: REPORTS FROM THE SCHOOLS – WHAT STATE POLICYMAKERS SHOULD KNOW
[\(Barbic PowerPoint Presentation\)](#)
[\(DeVito PowerPoint Presentation\)](#)

In this session, educator-leaders from across the country described their adolescent literacy instructional programs and shared their experiences raising academic achievement across their school populations. In a conversation moderated by Susan Frost, President, Education Priorities, these successful school leaders – Christopher Barbic, Founder and Director, YES

College Preparatory, Houston, TX; Mary Kanikeberg, Principal, Vista Middle School, Ferndale, WA; and Michael DeVito, District English Language Arts Coordinator and Department Chair, Port Chester Middle School, Port Chester, NY – offered advice about how state policies and practices can support effective learning environments.

Michael DeVito described Port Chester Middle School's focus on improving achievement as "systematic change through community education." Almost 64 percent of Port Chester Middle School students are eligible for free and reduced priced lunches. This high concentration of poverty along with the growing number of ELLs impacts the school's operations. To respond to these challenges, the district has set yearly performance targets, aligned curricula across elementary and middle schools, and instituted intensive staff development. They also began to group seventh and eighth grade teachers who stayed with the same group of students over two years so they could spend less time getting to know student profiles.

Changed practices at Port Chester, informed by guidance of a consultant, included teaching novels to middle school students, providing team planning time for teachers to meet three times a week, and instituting interdisciplinary teaching. The curriculum has been aligned to the assessment. Based on student scores on the state assessment, students receive academic intervention services and the school offers extended day instruction.

Christopher Barbic, who started his teaching career with Teach for America, was frustrated by watching Houston students flounder in middle schools. Of the 15,000 Houston sixth graders in 1995-1996, only slightly more than 10 percent graduated from college, and of those only 600-700 are low-income students. In an attempt to remedy this situation, he started a program that became a charter school in 1998. YES Preparatory's four sixth to twelfth grade schools now serve 1,500 students and have the capacity to serve 2,800. Nearly 80 percent of the population qualifies for free lunch, and 95 percent of the students are Hispanic. On average, students arrive in the sixth grade at the fourth grade reading level. According to Barbic, "the best high school reform is to fix middle schools."

YES defines success as college graduation, not high school graduation or college entrance. The premise of YES is that a student's success is not contingent upon a single teacher or school leader but will be the result of building a strong system, and literacy is infused throughout this system. To help all students succeed, YES schools:

- require uniform tracking assessments in addition to the state and district tests to allow for immediate student-by-student data analysis among teachers;
- support student literacy development through a school reading list and providing the lowest achieving 10 percent of students remediation support from YES-graduate, current college students;
- provide extended learning time (i.e., 7:30 am – 5 pm school days; once a month Saturday school, three weeks of summer school);
- keep class and school size small and learning-time focused: students have 90 minutes every day for reading and English and sixth and seventh graders receive an additional hour of instruction at the end of each day for reading; and
- organize the school into vertical teams: sixth through twelfth grade students attend the same campus and their teachers participate in regular team meetings

A secondary principal from Vista Middle School in Washington State, Mary Kanikeberg shared her beliefs about the role of the principal in changing school culture, effective school

improvement planning, and conducting informative classroom visits. When Kanikeberg first arrived at Vista Middle School, the highly diverse student body posted performance on the state assessments at levels slightly higher than the state average. Kanikeberg noted that the school community was complacent about this performance, but she has since urged them to achieve more. The school now performs in the 70th percentile range in math, reading, and writing. Under Kanikeberg's leadership, they are still working to get more students to proficiency levels.

Vista Middle School has taken a number of steps to realize these student achievement improvements. The middle school now has 400 students after a larger middle school was split into two. Through the school improvement process, Kanikeberg's faculty set goals for measuring success. Vista Middle School, with assistance from the district, works with the Content Literacy Continuum of the University of Kansas to learn how to analyze student data and develop literacy instruction based on student needs. As the principal, she gives teachers immediate written feedback on a regular basis. In the first three days of school, she visited 43 classrooms and provided feedback based on the school's goals in literacy, reading, and writing. In addition to these efforts, the school now offers pre-early college courses to seventh and eighth graders to encourage them to enroll in college-level courses in high school.

Susan Frost raised the question of how teacher improvement and retention can be part of school improvement efforts. DeVito noted that teachers often forgo higher wages at nearby districts because they appreciate the culture and tone of the school, and many teachers have been at Port Chester Middle School for more than 30 years. Barbic argued that expecting teachers to stay with a school for 30 years in this generation is unrealistic and perhaps not desirable. In a personality profile of YES's top 20 high-performing teachers, they found seven very specific and common traits among the group. **The best teachers are smart, well-grounded in content knowledge, passionate about their field of study, and able to convey this knowledge and enthusiasm to young people.** Kanikeberg described the constraints of union contracts and her experience ousting ineffective teachers. She noted that though at first the rest of the faculty supported the teachers she placed on probation, once these two teachers resigned, the remaining staff offered Kanikeberg their support and appreciation. She now looks very carefully at new hires, makes sure they know the school's goals and supports their participation in a three-year induction program.

In response to an audience member question about **what the schools need from states and districts**, the panelists answered:

- create a plan for school improvement and provide funding to support it;
- provide teachers, especially secondary teachers, with training in how to teach reading to struggling readers;
- provide political coverage for bold leadership;
- commit to extra time (lengthen the required hours for a school day) and small schools, which may require raising new funds; and
- support public school choice: Barbic argued that the external pressure of his charter schools might help to improve the nearby district schools

REFLECTION ON STATE TEAM PLANNING DISCUSSIONS

Asked to offer insights based on his discussions the previous afternoon with each state policy team, Reid Lyon began by posing a question he heard from almost every state: What are the major components states need to put in place to improve middle grades literacy achievement?

As discussed among many of the teams, the components necessary to improve middle grades literacy achievement include:

Evidence-based curricula - Not only does the curriculum need to work, but it has to be trustworthy. The school staff needs to feel it is usable and accessible. Most importantly, the curriculum needs to be effective and sustainable.

Assessment model – A successful program will only be successful if teachers know whether their practice is having a positive effect. Not only will assessment provide a measure for teachers, but it can also be part of a system-wide accountability system. School, district, and state leaders need to know what is working and what is not.

Professional development – Teachers need the essential capabilities and skills to implement a new curriculum. Teachers need development and support to change their practice and sustain the new approach.

Each of these components must work in concert with the others, which is difficult to accomplish. But, Lyon argued, **some places have and are doing this successfully, which should mean “no excuses” for everyone else.** The challenge is determining what exactly is required and putting it into policy and practice. He charged the states to make a plan, drawing on guidance from the nation’s top researchers and policymakers.

PANEL: IMPACT OF LITERACY ON COLLEGE AND WORK READINESS

[\(Schmeiser PowerPoint Presentation\)](#)

Cyndie Schmeiser, President, ACT, shared data about links between literacy performance and college preparedness. David Spence, President, Southern Regional Education Board, offered suggestions for aligning secondary and postsecondary education expectations. Carolyn Witt Jones, Executive Director, Partnership for Successful Schools, shared reasons business leaders are concerned about literacy achievement among today’s young people and what influential employers can do to help. In a discussion moderated by Ilene Berman, Program Director, NGA Center for Best Practices, the panelists gave state leaders policy recommendations.

Drawing on data from ACT participants, Cyndie Schmeiser provided answers to three questions:

1. What do we know about the literacy skills of middle school students?
2. How do we connect what we know is happening in middle school to what is going to happen to these students as they progress through high school and become ready for college and work?
3. What do the data suggest we could do to improve these students’ readiness?

The data set informing the responses to these questions is based on approximately 640,000 eighth and ninth grade students who took the ACT eighth grade EXPLORE program in 2005 and 2006, of whom nearly half are male and half female, and 35 percent are minority students. ACT defined college readiness and developed “college readiness benchmarks” by analyzing what ACT scores students need in English, reading, math, and science to take a credit-bearing postsecondary course at a nationally representative sample of postsecondary institutions without the need for remediation and have at least a 75 percent chance or greater of receiving a course grade of C or a 50 percent chance of receiving a course grade of B. To project the performance level of 8th graders based on EXPLORE, Schmeiser said, they were able to use student performance on the 10th grade PLAN and the ACT, all of which employ the same score scale.

Only 43 percent of the students assessed are on target to be ready for college-level reading. By subgroup the percentages on target to become college ready are 19 percent for African-American students, 28 percent are Hispanic students, and 30 percent are Native American students.

The bottom line is that middle school students who are on target in reading are significantly more likely to be ready in other academic areas. Of the students who didn't meet the eighth grade benchmark, only 40 percent are college ready in English, 15 percent in math, and 1 percent in science. Students who are college ready in reading are more likely to enroll in college, stay in college, and earn grades of B or better in college English, math, and science courses.

Students are losing momentum, though. More students are on track to be college ready in eighth or tenth grade than when they reach the senior year of high school. Schmeiser asserts that the reason students lose momentum are that in high school they are not asked to meet rigorous standards, are not exposed to enough complex texts, and too few states have grade-specific reading standards for high school level students.

To prepare more students with the literacy skills required for college and workplace success, Schmeiser recommends that states monitor students for college readiness early and identify those who are not on target, revise state standards to reflect college expectations, specify grade-by-grade requirements in literacy, and align state assessments with these college-ready standards.

David Spence reflected on how the messages from the first day of the meeting related to his experience with the K-12 and higher education systems and policymakers. He remarked that improving student performance, high school graduation rates, and college attendance and graduation will require states to prioritize work on literacy. This will require willpower, implementation, and scale up. He also acknowledged that this will require making changes throughout the pre-K through early higher education system. He noted that states have the leverage to make such changes through their state standards and accountability systems. Since reading is so fundamental to student success in any endeavor, he suggested that we all consider how to align policies and funding with this priority. High schools, colleges, and business leaders need to agree on a firm set of readiness standards. These standards must be vivid and explicit to ensure everyone knows what is expected of students.

Professional development and pre-service training are also critical elements of this effort. Once the California State University system, where Spence served as executive vice chancellor, instituted placement tests, they developed an extensive professional development program to respond to the initial poor student performance. Licensure exams could also incorporate the skills and knowledge teachers will need to address their students' literacy needs.

Carolyn Witt Jones began her talk by stating that “the whole idea of middle grades literacy is critical . . . and is a major piece of the larger reform agenda in our country.” **From the business perspective, which she represents, education reform is vital to the health of communities and economic development.** She also asked the audience to think about new terminology: thinking of “influential employers” instead of “business” in local communities and states.

Her organization, the Partnership for Successful Schools, a private sector, nonpartisan statewide organization, has been working to determine what it will take to educate Kentucky students to high levels and define the roles and responsibilities for organizations such as the Partnership to meet this goal. In response, they have been heavily involved in public information campaigns,

community engagement around education, supporting educators, and policy development. They also weigh in on local practice and are working directly with eight schools throughout the state and developing case studies to inform policy responses.

Influential employers are concerned about who is currently in the education pipeline and whether those students will be prepared for the 21st century expectations. These leaders want to know whether changes can be made fast enough and want to be assured of achievement results before they will help lobby for additional funding.

Jones concluded her remarks with suggestions for the state teams as they completed their policy plans:

- Maximize the power of private sector partners. Private sector partners have the power to convene, research, write white papers, ask critical questions, and lobby at the local and state levels. These partners can also provide political coverage for policymakers and should be included in conversations early on.
- Examine state and local policies to ensure that the good policies stay in place.
- Build broader capacity and a wider array of supporters for the work; include parents, workforce leaders, and students in state communications and policy development efforts.
- Be specific in requests from business leaders. Just saying “we need your help” is not very effective. The Partnership’s experience suggests that a specific ask usually works best.
- Draw on the collaboration of Pre-Kindergarten through postsecondary players. Showing how districts and universities, for example, can work together can be powerful.

Asked to identify concrete steps for state teams to consider, the panelists responded with the following: align and benchmark standards to college expectations, identify students who are not on target for college readiness by at least eighth grade, and engage a wide variety of stakeholders in the effort.

An audience member asked panelists to comment on the resistance in some states to more rigorous standards. Carolyn Witt Jones agreed that she sees this resistance from parents who are concerned that students will risk scholarship opportunities if they take more difficult courses and get lower grades. Some parents, she said, also question why their children will need upper level courses that they themselves did not require for career success. Jones suggested that young people themselves who often say they wish they had worked harder in middle and high school can be a powerful ally. In addition, she recommended data about the skills that will be required in college and jobs available to the next generation. Cyndie Schmeiser pointed to empirical evidence that whether they go on to college or workforce training programs, students need the same skills.

Susan Frost asked the panel how in the midst of growing national and state attention to science, mathematics, and technology we can focus on students’ literacy needs. The panelists acknowledged the perceived competition and referred back to the ACT data and the points made in the day prior by Michael Kamil: **“Students who are not on target in reading are dramatically not on target in math and science,”** said Cyndie Schmeiser.

Following the full group discussion, the meeting participants attended breakout sessions described below:

Meeting the Literacy Needs of English Language Learners ([PowerPoint Presentation](#))

Diane August, Senior Research Scientist, Center for Applied Linguistics

August provided the most current research on teaching reading and writing skills to English Language Learners.

Tailoring Literacy Instruction to Special Education Populations ([PowerPoint Presentation](#))

Sylvia Linan-Thompson, Director, Vaughan Gross Center for Reading and Language Arts

Linan-Thompson discussed effective approaches for training educators to meet the literacy needs of special education students.

Making the Connections between Literacy and Mathematics Achievement ([PowerPoint Presentation](#))

Asha Jitendra, Faculty, Center for Promoting Research to Practice, Lehigh University

This session offered participants evidence for including literacy instruction in mathematics courses and suggested ways policymakers can ensure that literacy instruction is part of mathematics and other core content area classes.

Infusing Writing Instruction across the Curriculum ([PowerPoint Presentation](#))

Steve Graham, Currey Ingram Professor of Special Education and Literacy, Vanderbilt University

Based on [Writing Next](#), Graham reviewed the cumulative research about the most effective elements of adolescent writing instruction.