



# A CRITICAL MISSION:

Making Adolescent Reading an  
Immediate Priority in SREB States

*The Report of the Committee  
to Improve Reading and Writing  
in Middle and High Schools*

Governor Timothy M. Kaine, Virginia, Chair

# SREB

The Southern Regional Education Board is a nonprofit and nonpartisan organization based in Atlanta, Georgia, that works with state leaders and educators to improve education. SREB was created in 1948 by Southern governors and legislatures to help leaders in education and government work cooperatively to advance education and improve the social and economic life of the region. SREB has 16 member states: Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia and West Virginia. Each is represented by its governor and four gubernatorial appointees. For more information, visit [www.sreb.org](http://www.sreb.org).



Governor Timothy M. Kaine, Virginia

## Helping Our Students Reach Higher, Achieve Much More

### Message from the Chair of the Committee

Research shows that poor reading and writing skills prevent many students from graduating from high school, completing college and contributing in the workplace.

Nationwide, students in the middle grades and high school are failing to develop the reading and writing skills they need in order to meet higher academic standards later in their educational careers.

While many among us may not realize how serious the problem has become, we all battle the effects — and inaction will only make matters worse.

Research shows that poor reading and writing skills prevent many students from graduating from high school, completing college and contributing in the workplace. Without better-educated residents, our states and the entire nation will falter as we face new economic challenges and intense global competition.

While most of the 16 Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) states have seen recent gains in reading achievement in the early grades, the same cannot be said of achievement in the middle grades and high school. There is also evidence that students who struggle to meet academic standards in subjects such as science and mathematics have poor reading skills.

The good news is clear: We now know how to solve this problem.

Leaders from SREB states joined me last year on the SREB Committee to Improve Reading and Writing in Middle and High Schools. During three special meetings in Richmond and another gathering with state leaders at the SREB Annual Meeting in July 2008, we consulted with some of the nation's top literacy research and policy experts. SREB's staff examined what states were doing already — and how our states might make more progress.

At the July meeting, the Committee presented our draft recommendations and discussed these proposals with other leaders from across the region. After further updates to our findings and careful review by key legislators in SREB states and national literacy experts, we formed the final recommendations outlined in this report.

Many of us concluded that developing students' reading comprehension skills should be the first priority for the middle grades and high school. Reading with comprehension defines learning in every subject — including mathematics and the sciences.

Since reading with comprehension varies by subject, all teachers in all subjects need to be able to assist students in understanding different texts. While all teachers need not become reading experts, teachers should know strategies to help students sharpen their reading skills across all key academic subjects. In short, teachers in every subject hold the solution to the reading challenge.

Across the country, states have an obligation to take immediate action to improve students' reading and writing skills. Accordingly, the Committee recommends that each state set policies that will lead to improved practices at the state, district and school levels. These policies should call for each state to:

- define the specific reading skills students need in order to master each key subject.
- identify the best teaching strategies to help middle grades and high school students develop their reading comprehension skills in each subject.
- ensure that these strategies are applied statewide in all public schools by including them in professional development for current teachers and in preparation and licensure for new teachers.
- provide the extra help that struggling readers need, so that all students read at grade level in the middle grades and high school.

Improving students' reading and writing skills must be the first priority in education for every state leader — and for all teachers.

I hope you'll consider the Committee's findings and recommendations in more depth on the following pages. This work and the policy changes to come should help our states significantly improve public schools.

Thank you for your interest in improving education for the people of our region. It's my honor to work with SREB and the Committee as we seek solutions that will ensure a stronger economic future and opportunities for social progress in all of our states.

Improving students' reading and writing skills needs to be the first priority for every state leader — and for all teachers.





President Dave Spence

## Advancing Students' Reading Skills Key to Higher Achievement in Every State

### Message from the SREB President

By raising students' reading skills to more advanced levels in the middle grades and high school, SREB states can raise the overall level of education students receive higher than ever before.

As SREB releases this major report, I want to thank Governor Kaine personally for chairing the SREB Committee to Improve Reading and Writing in Middle and High Schools and for steering this important initiative to an outstanding conclusion. I also want to thank the 25 Committee members, who along with the governor gave time to this effort and helped shaped a significant policy response to a critical issue.

SREB strongly believes that **improving middle grades and high school students' reading comprehension skills is the most important action states and schools can take to improve achievement in all subjects.**

As Governor Kaine suggests in his introduction to this report, reading comprehension *is* learning in all subjects. The quest to improve students' math and science achievement in our region depends on students *being able to read* math and science texts well — which requires skills and strategies distinctive to those subjects.

In preparing this report, SREB and the Committee found that reading comprehension is so fundamental *because* it is prerequisite to learning in all subject areas — and that it requires continuous development after the elementary grades. No SREB state, however, has a comprehensive program of reading instruction after the elementary grades to ensure that students reach the necessary levels of reading comprehension they need for success in high school and beyond. Therefore, we believe developing such efforts should be the most immediate priority for all schools and educators.

SREB does not often recommend state policy changes that reach so directly into classrooms, but this issue is so critical — and research is so clear about the need for change — that this situation is different.

By raising students' reading skills to more advanced levels in the middle grades and high school, SREB states can raise the overall level of education students receive higher than ever before. The region can no longer afford to accept stagnant reading achievement in the middle grades and high school.

I hope that you will consider this report and recommendations carefully and will call on us to assist you and other state leaders and educators in promoting this priority.

Why does adolescent reading require the immediate attention of state leaders, policy-makers and all educators?



## The Committee Recommendations

Reading is the key to helping students reach higher levels of learning in all subjects. Yet student achievement in middle grades and high school reading is low and not progressing.

For these reasons, **improvement of students' reading skills needs to be the top priority in all middle grades and high schools in the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) states.** SREB sought the advice of national literacy experts, surveyed its member states, and formed a distinguished committee of state leaders to study this issue and identify solutions.

*The Committee recommends the following:*

- **Each SREB state should develop a comprehensive set of policies that establishes improvement in reading as the most immediate critical priority for public middle grades and high schools.**

**Established and supported by the governor, legislature and/or the state board of education, these policies should:**

- Require the state to identify the reading skills students need to improve reading achievement and to meet state standards in key academic subjects through high school.
  - Provide for the development of curricula and teaching strategies to help students master these reading skills in each subject.
  - Establish statewide reading intervention programs that schools can use to assist struggling readers in the middle grades and high school.
  - Enable all teachers to embed reading instruction into each subject, through teacher preparation, certification/licensure and professional development.
- **Each state's K-12 education agency should develop a detailed plan to work with school districts to help them implement the policies — and then monitor districts' progress.**





## A CRITICAL MISSION:

### Making Adolescent Reading an Immediate Priority in SREB States

#### A Call to Action

States will not be able to raise high school and college graduation rates unless they help more students learn to read at higher levels.

**The Southern Regional Education Board states — and the nation as a whole — need to take immediate action to solve the serious adolescent reading problem.**

Far too many adolescents cannot read sufficiently well to succeed in school and future careers. Others have not been challenged to develop the levels of literacy they will need to be successful in college and career training. Why? Public schools generally do not teach reading after the elementary grades. Also, many states and school districts have not designed comprehensive programs to help struggling readers in the middle grades and high school catch up when they fall behind.

Ensuring that all students can use reading to help them learn more effectively before they leave high school will make a greater impact on educational and economic progress in every state than any other single educational endeavor.

#### **The consequences of the reading problem**

Too many students begin to fall behind in reading after they leave the early grades. By ninth grade, many struggling readers are destined to become high school dropouts. By college, one in four freshmen must take remedial reading classes — and few of these students finish a degree.

Some SREB states are among the nation's leaders in improving students' reading achievement *in the early grades*, but reading achievement for middle grades students in SREB states and across the nation has seen little improvement in the past decade. SREB states need to make the same progress in reading achievement through the *middle grades and high school* as they have in the early grades.

States will not be able to raise high school and college graduation rates unless they help more students learn to read at higher levels. Helping students build stronger literacy skills will help them perform at higher levels in all subjects.

Poor literacy levels will result in a work force that increasingly will not compete effectively in the global economy. State leaders and policy-makers who are concerned about economic competition from such nations as China and India should recognize that states' competitiveness will falter unless more students have the literacy skills they need to pursue college degrees and prepare for careers.

Low reading levels also cost states money more directly. The Alliance for Excellent Education and others have shown strong links between poor reading skills, low graduation rates in high schools and the economy. High school dropouts in America from the Class of 2008 alone will lose an estimated **\$319.6 billion in lifetime income** because of low education levels. The potential economic benefits for the SREB region of helping more students graduate, earn higher wages and pay taxes run into the **tens of billions of dollars**.

Stronger reading skills also can contribute to a higher quality of life. Research shows that adults who read well often are more engaged in their communities and are better able to assist their own children as learners. Good readers can better understand the world, manage family responsibilities, access information — and simply enjoy the pleasure of reading.

Researchers in the field of adolescent literacy — including some who assisted with this report and its recommendations — have reached consensus on many actions that state leaders and educators can take to solve the adolescent literacy problem. **State leaders need to make middle grades and high school reading the highest immediate priority in education.** This will require states to help all middle grades and high school teachers focus on raising students' reading achievement in every subject.

## The scope of the reading problem

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), commonly called The Nation's Report Card, shows that middle grades reading achievement is stagnant. The percentages of eighth-graders reaching the key benchmarks of Basic and Proficient levels on NAEP increased by no more than 1 percentage point from 2003 to 2007 in the nation and in the SREB median states — and rates dropped in some states. In 2007, only about one in four eighth-graders in the SREB median states who took the NAEP scored at or above the Proficient level in reading. (See graph on Page 4.)

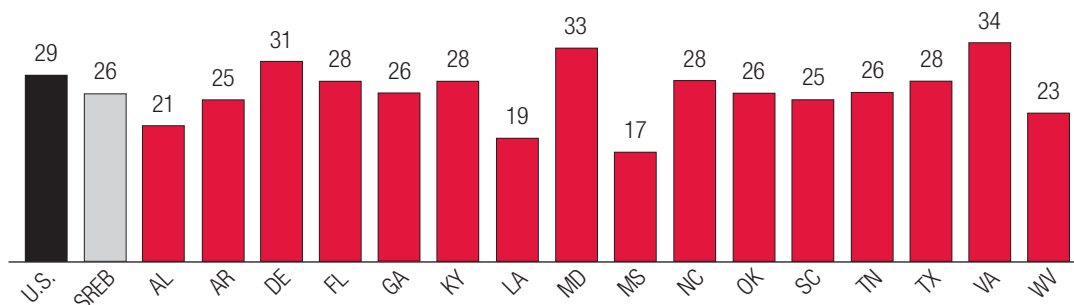
Students who leave eighth grade with weak reading skills quickly fall behind in high school. More students in SREB states repeat ninth grade than any other grade, swelling ninth-grade enrollment by 14 percent in the SREB median states in 2005. Students who falter in ninth grade are likely to become high school dropouts.

NAEP also shows that the percentage of public high school seniors nationwide with reading competency — those scoring at or above the NAEP Proficient level — has fallen in recent years. The rate fell by 3 percentage points from 1992 to 2005, even though two-thirds of high school seniors had completed the recommended courses for college preparation. As a result, more than six million high school students nationally are struggling readers, according to the Alliance for Excellent Education.

Middle grades reading achievement is stagnant in SREB states.



## Percent of Eighth-Graders Scoring At or Above the NAEP Proficient Reading Level, 2007



Too many public school eighth-graders in the nation and in SREB states do not have the “demonstrated competence” in reading necessary to score at the NAEP Proficient level.

Note: SREB median is the average of the two SREB middle states.

Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress

Poor reading achievement has a severe ripple effect for students: ACT Inc. has shown that reading proficiency is fundamental to students’ readiness for college in other academic subjects. **Research from ACT shows that only half of American high school students who took the ACT college admission test have the reading and writing skills they need to succeed in college and the workplace.** In 2006, ACT reported that of the students who did not meet a college-readiness benchmark in reading, only 16 percent met the benchmark in mathematics and only 5 percent in science.

In addition, a federal study of college transcripts shows that two-thirds of college students whose reading skills were so weak that they were required to take remedial reading courses also had to take remedial courses in subjects such as English and mathematics. **“Deficiencies in reading skills ... significantly lower the odds of a student’s completing any [college] degree,”** concluded the study’s lead researcher, Clifford Adelman. And a 2005 Achieve Inc. report on recent high school graduates who entered college showed that 70 percent of college instructors were dissatisfied with students’ ability to comprehend complex reading assignments.

Education researchers are not the only ones citing reading deficiencies as a regional and national crisis. So are business leaders. For the first time, **more than two-thirds of new U.S. jobs require some type of postsecondary education,** according to an Educational Testing Service report. An American Management Association survey, cited by the Center for Workforce Preparation, showed in 2000 that **the percentage of job applicants lacking necessary reading skills doubled from 1996 to 2000, from 19 percent to 38 percent** — not only because applicants lacked basic skills, but because on-the-job reading requirements had increased rapidly.

Low reading achievement limits students’ learning in other academic subjects. Students who cannot read well are likely to struggle in mathematics, science and other subjects.



The evidence is clear: Students who cannot read well are likely to struggle in mathematics, science and other classes — as well as in the workplace.

## The reasons for the problem

Although formal reading instruction stops after the early grades for most public school students, many researchers and educators now realize that it should continue through high school. Reading skills do not advance automatically, even for students who read at grade level when they begin the middle grades. While most students continue to develop speaking skills naturally, they do not develop advanced reading skills on their own — particularly the ones they need for success in high school and college.

No SREB states have included reading in their academic standards for each of the subjects in high school. This means that few teachers have been asked to teach the reading skills that students need in each subject. They consider themselves responsible for teaching their subjects only — not for teaching students reading skills. Some teachers in various subjects have resisted efforts to incorporate reading instruction into their courses for fear that they are being asked to become “reading teachers.” But asking a teacher to become a *reading teacher* is distinctly different from asking a teacher to *help students master texts within the teacher’s own field*.

In fact, subject-area teachers are best qualified to help their students master texts in each course. **Subject-area teachers should not be expected to teach basic reading skills, but they can help students develop critical strategies and skills for reading texts in each subject.** Yet many teachers have had little help and few incentives to learn how to incorporate reading instruction into their classes. That needs to change.

Students in the middle grades and high school need direct, explicit instruction in how to read, learn and analyze information in key fields, including mathematics, science, social studies and career/technical studies. Mastering these skills helps students prepare for texts they will encounter in college, the workplace, and in making medical, financial and family decisions.

“Most [teachers] devote little, if any, class time to showing students, explicitly, what it means to be a good reader or writer in the given subject area. And most students engage in very little discussion of what they have read,” according to a 2007 Alliance for Excellent Education report. The report points out that such a general approach to reading instruction after the early grades may “... lead students to believe that all academic texts are more or less the same, as though the reading that students do in math class were identical to the reading they do in history.”



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Alliance for Excellent Education report, 2007

Mary Neuman and Sajiv Rao of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform summarized the universal, curriculum-wide nature of the literacy challenge:

Students need to be explicitly taught how to strategically and critically read a science textbook, a primary document in history, a Shakespearean sonnet, and a word problem in mathematics. Each of these texts requires a different set of strategies for attacking the text. They are written in different genres, with specific vocabulary, and they all have their own pattern of discourse that needs to be unlocked and deconstructed for students.

## SREB forms committee to take action

In 2007, Governor Timothy M. Kaine of Virginia agreed to chair an SREB committee on adolescent literacy to examine the issue and propose specific policy actions to help states improve students' reading and writing skills — building on many SREB states' successes in raising reading achievement in the early grades.

Representatives from SREB states agreed to serve on the **SREB Committee to Improve Reading and Writing in Middle and High Schools**. The Committee included state policy-makers and educators with experience and interest in literacy. The Committee met several times in 2007 and 2008 and consulted with a panel of nationally recognized adolescent literacy researchers and policy experts. (See Appendix for a list of Committee members and participating experts.)

The panel of experts reviewed for the Committee the key policy research in the field — including reports by the National Association of State Boards of Education, the National Governors Association, the Alliance for Excellent Education and others — and some of the policy changes states could use to improve students' literacy. The experts also highlighted for the Committee many research-based teaching strategies that they would recommend. The panel suggested that states could:

- Align curriculum and instruction with specific literacy standards for all public middle grades and high school grade levels in key academic subjects.
- Increase the amount of time students spend in reading instruction, and ensure that students are engaged in reading instruction in all subjects.
- Provide explicit reading instruction in vocabulary development, reading fluency, comprehension and writing in all subjects.
- Ensure that students who read below grade level receive the help they need, including help outside the regular classroom.
- Require more professional development in reading for aspiring and practicing teachers and school leaders.
- Analyze a wide variety of data on literacy achievement and practices to inform future changes in state policy and classroom practices.

SREB found that many states lack the specific policies they need to help adolescents meet higher standards in reading.



## SREB surveys states on current reading policies

Based on the researchers' recommendations, the Committee directed SREB to examine the status of adolescent literacy policies and practices in each of the 16 SREB states. An SREB survey found that **many states lack the specific policies they need.**

A few SREB states have begun to raise educators' awareness of the adolescent literacy problem, and some states have developed promising adolescent literacy policies and programs. **But no SREB state has tied specific reading skills to its academic standards for each subject in high school.**

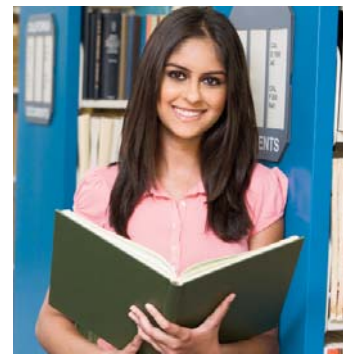
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## The Committee Recommendations

Reading is the key to helping students reach higher levels of learning in all subjects. Yet student achievement in middle grades and high school reading is low and not progressing.

For these reasons, **improvement of students' reading skills needs to be the top priority in all middle grades and high schools in SREB states.** SREB sought the advice of national literacy experts, surveyed its member states, and formed a distinguished committee of state leaders to study this issue and identify solutions. *The Committee recommends the following:*

- Each SREB state should develop a comprehensive set of policies that establishes improvement in reading as the most immediate critical priority for public middle grades and high schools.  
Established and supported by the governor, legislature and/or the state board of education, these policies should:
  - Require the state to identify the reading skills students need to improve reading achievement and to meet state standards in key academic subjects through high school.
  - Provide for the development of the curricula and teaching strategies to help students master these reading skills in each subject.
  - Establish statewide reading intervention programs that schools can use to assist struggling readers in the middle grades and high school.
  - Enable all teachers to embed reading instruction into each subject, through teacher preparation, certification/licensure and professional development.
- Each state's K-12 education agency should develop a detailed plan to work with school districts to help them implement the policies — and then monitor districts' progress.



## Developing *state* policies that establish improvement in adolescent reading as a major priority

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State policies on adolescent reading should be vested at the highest levels of government.

State education leaders and policy-makers should take the lead in developing statewide adolescent reading policies. This effort needs the force of legislation, governor's executive order or other initiative, or all of these. A governor's action combined with legislative support may work best. If both legislative action and executive direction are coordinated, the effort will have the strongest support, especially in the state budgeting process. Policies developed by the state education board or the chief state school officer also may be effective if the legislature and governor actively support them.

State policies on adolescent reading should be vested at the highest levels of government because all of the education systems have a stake in addressing the issue: higher education agencies, career/technical education systems, and workforce development agencies, along with K-12 education agencies. State higher education systems, for instance, need to play a role in setting higher reading and writing standards for high school students so that high school graduates are ready for college. At the same time, K-12 agencies need to play a role in revising and updating the curricula in colleges' teacher preparation programs to ensure that new teachers are prepared to teach reading skills within each academic subject.

State education leaders can use the chart on the next page as a model to help them check their status and guide their progress in developing more effective adolescent reading policies. The chart presents suggested beginning steps and a progression of activities that states may undertake toward full implementation of the policies.

The critical and immediate need to improve adolescent reading will **require states and school districts to shift their focus from other priorities and give reading a greater share of available time, resources and attention.** Making reading a major priority also will require some additional state funding, but reallocation of existing funds can offset some of the costs. States already pay for the development of standards and assessments, professional development and preparation programs for teachers and school leaders, and some diagnostic testing and interventions for students. By including a greater emphasis on reading in these activities, states can pursue their reading goals without allocating significant amounts of additional money.

# SREB

## Steps Toward Establishing Statewide Adolescent Reading Policies

State Policy Scope	Beginning Steps to Establish Statewide Policies	Developing and Implementing the Policies	Operational Development and Implementation	Full Implementation
<b>Organizational Support and Staffing</b>	<p>State identifies a state-level champion (such as the governor).</p> <p>State forms task force or policy development group to draft comprehensive policies.</p>	<p>State identifies reading skills students need in each subject.</p> <p>State engages various stakeholders.</p>	<p>State begins various initiatives that address reading improvement.</p> <p>State has regular communication and coordination among programs.</p>	<p>State makes adolescent reading initiatives a regular part of education programs.</p>
<b>Funding</b>	<p>State provides initial funding by supporting a planning task force on adolescent reading.</p>	<p>State allocates funds to initiate statewide efforts and provides funds for districts and schools to begin reading programs.</p>	<p>State allocates funds to permit both statewide and local reading programs to mature.</p>	<p>State includes funding for reading programs in state education funding formula or ongoing allocation.</p>
<b>State Guidance and Monitoring of Districts and Schools</b>	<p>State sets expectations and guidelines for district implementation of state policies.</p>	<p>State begins professional development for district and school leaders and teachers.</p>	<p>State provides technical assistance for districts to help them carry out the policies, including help with diagnostic tools, interventions for struggling readers, and best practices for teaching reading in key subjects.</p>	<p>State monitors districts as they carry out the policies and holds them accountable for raising students' reading levels.</p> <p>State makes technical assistance and professional development for district and school leaders and teachers a regular part of professional development programs.</p>

Developed by the Southern Regional Education Board.



## Supporting *local* action to implement state adolescent reading policies

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“If we do not make literacy a priority . . . we are going to be doing a disservice to our students who have the same dreams, aspirations and hopes that students have had for generations. They depend upon us to enable them.”

Governor Timothy M. Kaine, Virginia,  
Chair of the SREB Reading Committee

Each SREB state’s adolescent reading policies need to address how districts and schools can support the statewide effort. State adolescent reading policies should include oversight and support to ensure that districts and schools develop and implement reading improvement programs. States should assist districts in helping school leaders understand their role in promoting reading achievement. States also should assist districts with professional development, curriculum design, staff support, and the collection and use of data.

State literacy leadership teams comprising university faculty, middle grades and high school teachers, education leaders and others should be established to help school districts develop literacy improvement efforts and then to monitor districts’ progress. States need to support districts and schools as they develop schedules for teacher training, incentives for teachers who help students learn to read more advanced texts in each subject, and strategies for embedding more reading instruction into more courses.

### ■ Status Report: Adolescent reading policies in SREB states

Several SREB states have used federal grants to develop literacy policies or set up task forces to develop statewide reading programs, but **most SREB states have made little progress in establishing statewide adolescent literacy policies.** Florida and Alabama have taken more action than other SREB states to improve adolescent literacy.

Florida’s statewide literacy initiative, *Just Read, Florida!*, was created by Governor Jeb Bush’s executive order in 2001. The initiative’s goal is to help every child read at or above grade level by 2012 and to make literacy the priority of all state residents. Funding from the state Legislature (\$116.9 million in 2007-2008) helps school districts implement their own literacy plans, which the state requires them to create. Additional funds support professional development and research. *Just Read, Florida!* has provided professional development for more than 45,000 teachers, 4,000 principals and 2,000 reading coaches in its first six years. Statewide efforts also include support for developing and implementing districts’ and schools’ comprehensive reading plans and required interventions for students scoring below specific levels on state reading tests.

The Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI), created in 1998 to raise students’ reading achievement in the early grades, has begun a major expansion into the middle grades. The ARI is a state grant program that provides professional development for educators in the teaching of reading, including summer institutes for entire school staffs.

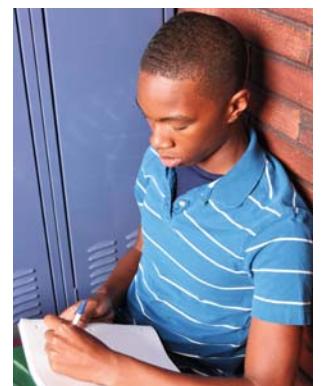
It provides state and regional reading coaches and intervention programs for struggling readers in hundreds of schools. In 2008, state lawmakers appropriated \$64 million for the ARI, which also depends on federal funds. In 2006-2007, the Alabama Reading Initiative Project for Adolescent Literacy began pilot programs in 14 middle grades schools, expanding to 21 schools in 2008-2009.

Early indications are that these two states' programs are helping increase reading achievement, but more research is needed. Alabama had the largest gains in the nation in the percentage of fourth-graders scoring at or above the NAEP Basic level in reading in 2007. Florida fourth- and eighth-graders made sizable gains in reading at the Basic level on NAEP.

A few SREB states have begun working with districts and schools to increase attention to reading. Some states require literacy to be integrated into school improvement plans only for low-performing schools, and other states already require or encourage the development of school literacy plans. However, SREB states overall have not shown a commitment to communicating the importance of adolescent reading and supporting efforts to integrate reading into every classroom.

### ■ Steps SREB states can take to make reading a major priority in all schools, grades and subjects

1. The state should establish adolescent reading as a major education priority by creating **statewide policies** through legislation, governor's executive order or another initiative. Action by the state education board may be effective if the legislature and governor actively support it. The state policies need to be as **formal and permanent** as possible.
2. The state policies should **specify that the chief state school officer and state board of education will implement and manage a statewide adolescent reading initiative**. The policies also could charge an additional state office or agency with the responsibility for monitoring the program's effectiveness.
3. States should require their state education agencies to develop **comprehensive adolescent reading plans to help school systems implement the policies**, including specific instructional practices, local activities, a timeline and funding sources. The instructional practices should be proven to help students learn to read at more advanced levels through high school. The state should identify districts and schools that have strong literacy improvement programs and help others adopt those strategies. States should **hold districts and schools accountable for raising reading achievement levels**.



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# Implementing the Committee Recommendations

The Committee developed guidance for state policy-makers to use as they implement the recommendations. The following sections describe how states, along with schools and districts, can address the region's literacy challenge — identifying the reading skills all students need in the middle grades and high school in key academic subjects, ensuring that the school curricula can help students develop higher-level reading skills, providing extra help for struggling students, and preparing teachers to embed the reading skills in their classroom instruction.

## Identifying reading skills students need in the middle grades and high school in key academic subjects

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Academic standards are course guidelines that shape classroom teaching; the federal *No Child Left Behind Act* requires all states to develop them and to measure student performance. All SREB states have reading standards for students through eighth grade, but **no SREB state has identified the reading skills that students need in key academic subjects through 12th grade.**

Therefore, the Committee urges states to identify the reading skills students need in order to meet academic content standards in each subject in the middle grades and high school.

SREB and the Committee recommend that states should help districts and schools embed reading instruction into each middle grades and high school subject. Also, it will be paramount for states to assist teachers as they incorporate different types of reading instruction into each key academic subject — including the higher levels of skills now required in high school and for students' preparation for college and the workplace. Few subject-area teachers have formal training in helping students develop reading skills in their subjects. But before teachers can be trained, states need to explicitly identify the skills that students need.

Unlike in the early grades, where reading is a subject on its own, for most students, reading in the middle grades and high school is best taught within the context of other subjects. (By the time most students leave the early grades, they have mastered basic reading decoding skills. Those who cannot decode words need special classes.) Identifying the reading skills students need for the middle grades and high school should be done jointly by experts in reading and each academic subject.

The Committee's panel of reading experts recommended that states identify the reading skills students need in order to meet state academic standards in the middle grades and high school.



**Students should be expected to master the reading skills they will need for the next level of education.** When students master eighth-grade reading skills, they should be ready for high school. When students master 12th-grade skills, they should be ready for career preparation or college. Most states' academic standards lack this alignment. Particular attention should be given to students' transition from the middle grades into ninth grade, because many struggling readers have trouble making this transition successfully and drop out of school.

As states make regularly scheduled revisions to their state assessments, they should adjust the tests to measure student progress on the identified statewide middle grades and high school reading skills. The development of high-quality reading assessments for high school students has lagged, but the Committee is not calling for separate reading assessments. State assessments of student progress in reading should be used *after* the reading standards have been fully implemented. Research in the field continues to develop, and SREB states may be able to work together to develop effective assessment strategies.

### ■ **Status Report: Specifying the reading skills students need**

No SREB state has identified the reading skills that students need as part of the subject-area standards for all middle grades *and* high school subjects. But eight SREB states have set reading standards in the middle grades and high school *within English/language arts*. The other eight SREB states have developed reading standards separate from any high school course. When standards are tied to English/language arts, teachers of other subjects assume that reading is the sole responsibility of English teachers. When standards are not tied to any course, reading does not receive the attention it needs from teachers in *any* subject.

Virginia and Texas have separate reading standards for each grade in high school. Reading standards in Alabama, Mississippi and Tennessee are limited to specific courses such as ninth-grade English. But because state reading tests generally occur in 10th grade, few states have reading standards beyond this level.

SREB states also fall short in identifying the specific reading skills that high school students must develop for college and career readiness. To encourage adequate rigor, SREB states should align state academic standards and assessments closer to the NAEP Proficient level, which requires students to evaluate texts critically and to compare and contrast a variety of written materials. These skills currently are not measured well by high school graduation tests in most SREB states. As a result, many teachers across the region are not required to prepare high school students for the reading levels required for college and specialized career training.



“[This is] more important than just about any other matter that we’re going to have to face in education.”

State Senator Jack Westwood, Kentucky,  
Member of the SREB Reading Committee  
and former teacher and principal



“Every teacher is a teacher of reading — not a reading teacher. . . . We tell the teachers, ‘Teach the language of your content area. Teach the language of your subject. That’s what we expect you to do, and we are going to help you do that.’”

Mel Riddile of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, former National High School Principal of the Year and guest speaker at the SREB Annual Meeting

## ■ Steps SREB states can take to identify the reading skills students need from the middle grades through high school

1. States should **convene panels of educators and national experts**, including representatives from the middle grades, high schools, colleges and career-preparation institutions. Each state’s panel should ensure that the reading skills students are expected to learn are linked to academic standards in key subjects.
2. Each state department of education should **produce a guide for improving adolescent reading through high school**. The guide should explain each teacher’s role in helping individual students reach higher levels of reading within each course in the middle grades and high school, and the state’s overall strategy in improving reading achievement. The guide — possibly Web-based — should explain why instruction in reading should be part of every course and how each teacher can contribute to it.
3. As part of regularly scheduled revisions, states need to **ensure that assessments measure students’ progress in developing higher-level reading skills**. State tests should measure students’ ability to read various kinds of materials — scientific, expository, literary and technical — in different fields of study and careers. Reports on each state test should show students’ reading strengths and weaknesses to provide a better guide for teachers’ instruction.

## Developing curricula and teaching strategies to help students master reading skills in each subject

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SREB states need to help all teachers embed reading instruction into their subjects in the middle grades and high school. School leaders need to communicate a vision that the entire school is responsible for helping students improve their reading skills. Teachers need examples of best practices, support from literacy coaches, time for professional development and incentives as they work to improve students’ reading skills.



States and school districts should provide professional development that invites — and enables — teachers to tap research and best practices to improve students’ reading in each subject. Better reading instruction should lead to noticeable differences in student achievement in every subject.

Neither the SREB Committee nor its panel of experts believes that the curricula of the region’s middle grades and high schools need a general overhaul. Instead, both believe that changes in classroom instruction, through the curricula, based on clearly identified reading skills, are key to improving students’ reading achievement.

This means, however, that the development of students’ reading skills beyond the elementary grades should not be limited to English/language arts classes.

Some examples of how reading can be integrated into classroom instruction:

- **History teachers** can help students become better readers *and* better students of history by teaching reading skills within their classes. History teachers can help students understand that history texts often include biographies, are organized by chronological events, and are intended to help readers understand cause and effect with respect to military, economic and social forces among groups of people.
- **Biology teachers** can help students understand that introductory biology texts are loaded with new vocabulary and generally describe categories and processes. These and other science books show students how to formulate and test hypotheses. Science teachers can use these texts to help students develop scientific vocabulary and to introduce them to the fundamental ways that scientists describe their work.
- **Mathematics teachers** can help students understand that a text in this field requires its own kind of reading — involving both the ability to read *number problems* as though they were sentences, and to read *word problems* and understand them as *number problems*. Few reading teachers could help a student learn to read an Algebra I textbook as effectively as a math teacher. Math teachers who help students learn the vocabulary of mathematics — recognizing root words for many terms — can boost students’ verbal and mathematical fluency.

“All teachers should have reading embedded into their classrooms.”

Gayle Conelly Manchin,  
First Lady of West Virginia,  
Member of the West Virginia State Board  
of Education and the SREB Reading  
Committee, and former teacher





Teachers also need to choose texts for students that are demanding enough to help them develop strong reading skills. In each subject, **teachers need to work with students directly in mastering these texts** — because this is how students learn *how to learn in each subject*. Having students read difficult texts with instructional support gives students a stronger knowledge base for reading challenging materials in the future. This kind of learning happens in English class, but mainly focuses on literature. Teachers of other courses need to make it happen in their classes, too. The results can pay off for students for years to come.

### ■ **Status Report: Incorporating reading instruction into all subjects**

SREB found that few states in the region have adopted policies to ensure that reading is taught in *all* middle grades and high school classrooms. **Many educators in the region stress the teaching of reading comprehension only in English/language arts**. However, even in English courses, many students do not receive the level of reading instruction they need. Students need more experiences in reading complex materials, analyzing texts, discussing what they read, and writing reports based on their reading.

### ■ **Steps SREB states can take to develop curricula and teaching strategies to help students master reading skills in each subject**

Making the teaching of reading comprehension a central responsibility of all teachers is crucial to improving students' achievement and preparation for college and career training. State policies should ensure that teachers are prepared to carry out this responsibility.

1. State education agencies should **identify best practices for the teaching of reading skills in academic and career/technical subjects and share them with teachers**.
2. States should ensure that teachers in all subjects receive **intensive training** in integrating reading instruction into each subject. The training should ensure that all teachers can help students advance their reading skills in each subject. The state should provide teachers with sample assignments.
3. States should provide for a network of **literacy coaches** to help teachers find and use the most effective instructional practices.

Even in English courses, many students do not receive the level of reading instruction they need.



## Providing high-quality assistance for struggling readers

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The literacy experts who advised the SREB Committee recommended that **states support interventions for each struggling reader, based on the results of diagnostic assessments.** Such interventions might include tutoring or additional instruction in the middle grades or high school. Help for these students should be customized to their needs and should supplement their regular classroom work, not replace it.

Research shows that most struggling readers are poorly served when students are separated from other classmates and when teachers generally use only low-level texts with those students. Successful interventions should include low student-teacher ratios, frequent assessments leading to instructional changes, extended time for students to work on reading, and explicit instruction that teaches students to use reading skills in all subjects.

Current state assessments alone do not provide teachers and school leaders with sufficient information to design effective interventions for struggling readers. States need a related instrument to pinpoint students' specific weaknesses. A low-cost diagnostic instrument can meet this need. **No SREB state currently provides such an instrument in the middle grades and high school,** although Florida is developing one.

### ■ **Status Report: Helping students develop higher-level reading skills and providing struggling readers with assistance in SREB states**

Some states allow schools to hold back students from promotion to the next grade if they do not demonstrate reading proficiency at specific grade levels. **Most SREB states that have these policies provide interventions for students who are held back — but these programs are not sufficient.**

A few SREB states have begun to address this problem. The Texas Student Success Initiative provides interventions for students who do not pass state reading and math exams in grades three, five and eight and are not promoted to the next grade. The initiative provides teachers in low-performing middle grades schools an opportunity to attend three-day, regional summer literacy academies. Texas also requires interventions for students who have not passed the state high school exams.

Florida's reading interventions are the most comprehensive of any SREB state. Students who score below grade level must take an additional screening test. Based on the student's skill level, a student may be assigned to an intensive reading class.



“Very little reading is taught after fourth grade. Almost none. ... I say, let's invest in getting those kids to read [in high school] and we'll solve a multiplicity of other problems.”

Kristen J. Amundson,  
State Delegate, Virginia,  
Member of the SREB Reading Committee  
and former teacher

No SREB state requires a course for teachers on using reading to help students master the content of their specific academic subjects. No SREB state requires training in the teaching of reading for school administrators before they are licensed.



## ■ Steps SREB states can take to provide struggling readers with the assistance they need

1. States should develop or recommend **diagnostic screening instruments for reading** that can indicate whether students have mastered all of the necessary reading skills identified by the state. These instruments should be made available to schools to determine which students may need reading interventions. **Districts should support schools in using the diagnostic instruments** to screen students and in providing all students who are reading below grade level with targeted interventions.
2. Through professional development (and school-based reading coaches, when available), school districts should **provide training for middle grades and high school teachers** to help them integrate reading strategies taught in the intervention programs into regular classroom activities.
3. States need to require school districts to **focus particular attention on fifth- and sixth-graders who need intensive reading interventions**. These interventions can ensure that students improve their skills before the ninth grade.

## Preparing teachers and school leaders to use effective strategies to teach reading skills

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States need to ensure that teacher preparation programs in colleges and universities help all *aspiring* middle grades and high school teachers and school leaders learn how to embed reading instruction into their classes. States also need to provide support for professional development in the teaching of reading for *current* middle grades and high school teachers and school leaders.

States need to tie teacher licensure, certification and advancement for teachers and school leaders, in part, to training in improving students' reading skills. States also need to provide professional development for literacy coaches.

## ■ Status Report: Preparing teachers to use effective instructional strategies to teach reading skills in SREB states

Most SREB states require middle grades and high school teachers to have only minimal preparation in the teaching of reading — and two states, Arkansas and Delaware, require no training at all. Most SREB states require the equivalent of only one course in reading strategies for initial teacher licenses. No SREB state requires a course for teachers on using reading to help students master the content of their specific academic subjects. No SREB state requires training in the teaching of reading for school administrators before they are licensed.

Many SREB states help provide literacy coaches in schools or districts — educators who are trained to assist teachers with reading instruction. No SREB state has licensing requirements for literacy coaches who work with *teachers*, but all SREB states require a license or endorsement for reading specialists who work directly with *students* in intervention programs.

**License renewal for teachers does not require additional training in reading in any SREB state.** But in Delaware, those who complete a designated group of courses are considered literacy teachers. And Texas offers a “master reading teacher” designation for teachers in high-poverty, low-performing schools. These teachers mentor other teachers and lead reading intervention classes for struggling students.

A majority of SREB states are beginning to provide Web-based professional development in reading. Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma and West Virginia provide online training and Web-based tools, including sample lesson plans, literacy strategies and planning documents.

### ■ **Steps SREB states can take to prepare teachers and school leaders to teach reading skills effectively**

1. States need to **revise teacher certification and licensure** to ensure that all teachers, school leaders and literacy coaches are prepared to help improve students’ reading skills. Aspiring teachers need to complete subject-specific reading courses or show competencies in the teaching of reading before receiving an initial license. Course work in reading for each teacher should be aligned with the teacher’s certification in the subject and should include training in reading intervention strategies appropriate for the teacher’s subject.
2. **Teachers need to complete professional development or course work in literacy** as part of license renewal or change in rank. Professional development should focus on effective instructional strategies in reading for each subject and may be delivered in a variety of ways, including the Web.
3. States need to **provide training and financial support for literacy coaches.** Literacy coaches can provide job-embedded professional development to help teachers plan lessons, try new strategies and apply effective practices. Literacy coaches should model good reading instruction, and plan and critique lessons with teachers.

Teachers need to complete professional development or course work in the teaching of reading as part of license renewal or change in rank.

## In Conclusion



Each state can begin by developing a comprehensive set of policies that makes improving middle grades and high school students' reading skills the top priority in public education.

### Elevating Students' Reading Skills Will Boost Education Levels and Economic Prospects for the Region and Nation

Members of the SREB Committee to Improve Reading and Writing in Middle and High Schools strongly urge every SREB state to address the adolescent reading challenge — and in doing so, raise the overall education levels of the region's residents.

Each state can begin by developing a comprehensive set of policies that makes improving middle grades and high school students' reading skills *the top priority in public education*. States' K-12 education agencies then need to develop plans in partnership with school districts to improve student literacy.

The policies should cover **four areas** identified by the Committee: First, they should call for states to **identify the reading skills students need in order to improve their reading achievement and meet state standards in key academic subjects in the middle grades and high school**. Second, states should **help classroom teachers incorporate the identified skills into curricula and instruction**.

Third, states need to **create statewide intervention programs to help students develop the reading skills they need** — through tutoring, small-group sessions and other types of intensive help for struggling readers in each public school. No longer should states allow students to continue through school with weak reading skills. Without these skills, students will face marginalized lives and bleak job prospects as they become young adults.

Fourth, states need to **ensure that teachers and school leaders are well-trained in how to help students improve their reading skills**. This new type of training should become part of credentialing and professional development for all public school educators — which is especially important because very few educators currently receive it.

Residents of the 16 SREB states deserve the opportunity to elevate their levels of literacy and education. With higher levels of education, they can improve the economic and social prospects of the region — and for these reasons, the reading challenge must be met.

“If you don’t have a literacy program, you’re essentially eliminating a significant percent of a population in your school from ever being successful. You’re sentencing them to a lifetime of marginal employment and second-class citizenship.”

**Mel Riddile** of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, former National High School Principal of the Year and guest speaker at the SREB Annual Meeting



*From left to right: Riddile, Governor Kaine, Delegate Amundson, and attorney and former Tennessee legislator Stephen A. Cobb*



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# Appendix: The Committee

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