

Preface

Raising reading achievement in middle and high schools is a challenging undertaking, even for the most effective educators. There are many reasons: (a) most adolescents read less, not more, as they mature, preferring to spend time on jobs, sports, and extracurricular activities; (b) technology is consuming more and more of their interest and free time that was devoted to reading in the past; (c) most middle and high school teachers have not been trained to diagnose specific reading difficulties or expected to teach students how to read strategically; (d) achievement in middle and high school is highly dependent on the preparation students have received in their elementary schools which may or may not use research-based programs in early reading instruction; (e) peer pressure often creates an antiachievement mindset among adolescents; (f) rigid scheduling and graduation requirements limit options for struggling students to receive the instructional time they need to catch up; and (g) high turnover among building and central-level administrators makes meaningful change difficult to bring about and sustain.

Educators, corporate CEOs, and politicians periodically elevate secondary school achievement to the top of their agendas. Hope springs eternal that a promising new program or a fresh infusion of money will provide easy solutions for low literacy levels and high dropout rates. But results are seldom instantaneous, leading educators to abandon reforms and lapse into yet another cycle of doing what they've always done. However, with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002), raising literacy levels in secondary schools has taken on a new urgency. Absent the ability to read proficiently, a significant percentage of young people have always fallen through the cracks or been left behind, but *now*, their failure to make annual yearly progress (AYP) carries consequences and sanctions for educators.

In 1998, I wrote *The Principal's Guide to Raising Reading Achievement* and developed a workshop based on my personal experiences with raising achievement in a suburban Chicago elementary school. Thus began the exhilarating experience of working with thousands of educators across the United States and Canada. Many middle and high school principals

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attended the programs, frustrated by how little they knew about reading instruction and how few success stories were available to inspire and inform them. They were overwhelmed with the enormity of the task and desperate for solutions. In response to their need for help, I wrote *Raising Reading Achievement in Middle and High Schools: Five Simple-to-Follow Strategies for Middle and High School Principals* (McEwan, 2001). The book introduced five “big ideas” for winning the battle against illiteracy. In this second edition, these practices have taken on a new urgency.

There are no *easy* answers to the problems of helping adolescents become more proficient readers, but there are increasing numbers of (a) teachers who are embracing their new roles as content literacy specialists, (b) research-based programs that are successfully teaching nonreading adolescents to read, and (c) courageous principals who are refusing to accept failure as the norm. This second edition contains updated descriptions of current research, suggestions from successful practitioners, and descriptions of new programs especially designed for adolescent learners.

A CHANGE IN FOCUS

While the role of principals as instructional leaders is as important as ever, the focus of this revised edition has been broadened to include teacher leaders as well. The five simple-to-follow strategies of the first edition have been enhanced with over twenty research-based “teaching for learning” tips and seven cognitive strategies of highly effective readers that teachers can infuse into their content instruction on a daily basis.

THE GOALS OF THIS BOOK

I have written with these goals in mind:

- To remind you of the power and possibilities that you and your colleagues have at your disposal to make a difference in the lives of your students.
- To focus your attention on ten instructional and environmental variables that can be altered to raise reading achievement.
- To give you a short course in how children learn to read, regardless of age or grade, so that you can make informed decisions about curriculum and instruction.
- To demonstrate the importance of systematically teaching every student, even the best and brightest, how to employ the cognitive strategies that skilled readers routinely use.

- To inspire you to take on the assignment of motivating your students to do three things: (a) read more than they are currently reading, (b) read more challenging and well-written books, and (c) be accountable for understanding and remembering what they read.
- To show you how to build a reading culture in your school.

WHO THIS BOOK IS FOR

This book has been written for several audiences. It is primarily intended for secondary educators to help them develop and implement literacy plans for raising reading achievement in their schools. It can also serve as a resource for site-based literacy and improvement teams as they grapple with what needs to change in their schools. The addition of the following professional development tools will aid central office administrators, principals or department chairs seeking to lead faculty book study groups or other professional development activities: (a) a prereading assessment, (b) reflection and discussion questions at the end of each chapter, and (c) a postreading assessment.

New administrators and teachers or those without backgrounds in reading instruction or curriculum will find the book especially helpful. Reading specialists, special education teachers, literacy coaches, intervention specialists, and central office administrators can use it to evaluate middle and high school reading programs and formulate school and district improvement goals. Last, the book provides a source of information for reading educators at colleges and universities as they seek to make their classroom experiences more relevant to practitioners.

WHAT THIS BOOK IS NOT

Although there are certainly many practical suggestions contained herein (dozens more than in the first edition), this book is not intended as a comprehensive instructional guide nor does it contain explicit lesson plans for classroom teachers. It is designed to help you explore a variety of options so that you might be better prepared to exercise leadership in your learning community. The guaranteed-to-work prescription for which you may have been searching does not exist. School improvement initiatives must be rooted in a school's culture and are better framed by a team of educators, parents, and students in response to the unique challenges posed by the community and its students. This book cannot take the place of developing teacher leaders and building internal professional development

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capacity. There are many ways to address the challenges posed by low or declining achievement, but determining what is best for your school will require research, data gathering, study, discussion, and consensus building by a site-based team.

OVERVIEW OF THE CONTENTS

Chapter 1 provides a brief history of secondary reading achievement in the United States that includes: (a) an examination of the results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading tests; (b) a consideration of the recommendations made by recent task forces; and (c) the costs to students, their families, and the economy of illiteracy. Chapter 2 introduces the first of the five strategies: *Focus on changing what you can change*. You will be challenged to examine your beliefs regarding why students don't learn to read and then asked to consider ten variables that can be altered to raise achievement.

Chapter 3 describes the second strategy: *Teach the students who can't read how to read*. Regardless of how desperately some may cling to the idea that the job should have been done by someone else or that the ability to read text will develop magically, we must provide nonreaders and struggling readers with the explicit, systematic instruction they need now. If they cannot decode words, we must begin there. You will be given a short course in how students learn to read and then be introduced to multiple programs that get results with the lowest-achieving readers.

Chapter 4 explains the third strategy: *Teach every student how to read to learn*. This strategy is a major key to improving overall reading achievement in your school; it is also the strategy that will require the most dramatic and systemic change. If students are unable to "use reading for their personal and professional needs in such a way that their prior knowledge gets synthesized and analyzed by what they read" (Curtis & Longo, 1999, p. 10), we can and must teach them how to do this. Teachers will be introduced to the power of personally modeling their cognitive processing for students and then incorporating strategy instruction into content lesson plans. The chapter defines and describes the seven strategies of highly effective readers that all students need in order to be successful.

Chapter 5 introduces a strategy that is underappreciated and misunderstood: *Motivate all students to read more, to read increasingly more challenging books, and to be accountable for what they read*. The vicious cycle that paralyzes students when they fail to read enough must be reversed. Reading a lot increases fluency, vocabulary, and knowledge. E. D. Hirsch, Jr., (2000) puts it this way: "The more you know, the more readily you can

learn something new.” But merely reading a lot is not enough. Students must read increasingly challenging text and also be held accountable for understanding and in many cases retaining what is read. There are no manuals that show teachers how to motivate students to read more. There are no programs that can share the joy of books with students. All teachers must undertake this assignment with their own brand of enthusiasm and creativity.

Last, Chapter 6 sets forth the final strategy of the five simple-to-follow strategies: *Create a reading culture in your school*. Twelve benchmarks of a reading culture will be examined as they relate to building a community that not only provides instruction and motivation for reading but demands that students and teachers be committed to daily reading as a skill and a practice. A case study illustrating one school’s successful efforts to raise reading achievement will be presented.

A NEW FEATURE

One of the biggest challenges faced by secondary teachers is how to organize their classrooms and design lessons to maximize success for all students—struggling readers, gifted scholars, and all of the students in between. To that end you will find more than twenty “teaching for learning” tips. These tips can be found in one-page sidebars throughout each chapter and include research-based best practices for raising achievement, not only in reading but also in every content area. Each tip contains a “how to get started” section, one or two recommended resources for individual or group study, and brief research citations that support the power of the practice for raising student achievement. Reading and using the Teaching for Learning Tips can easily be done independently of reading the text in each chapter. While all of the tips are related to raising student achievement, they are not all directly connected to the topics of the chapter where they are found. So be sure to browse through the complete list of the Teaching for Learning Tips located at the end of the Contents, page x.

THE CHALLENGE

I hope that after reading this book, you will be motivated to set about raising reading achievement in your school. Changing the attitudes, accountability, and achievement of your students with regard to reading may require some changes on your part as well. Begin today by reading a book—a professional book, a classic that you missed when you were

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growing up, or a novel or biography for pure enjoyment. Think aloud with others about your processing of the text. Ask colleagues and students about what they are reading and why they chose a particular book. If you are really ambitious, sign up for a reading methods course at your local university. Exercise your leadership and creativity to lead your colleagues and students to higher levels of literacy.

I invite you to visit me at www.elainemcewan.com where you can learn more about my writing and workshops and enroll in online seminars based on my books, or contact me directly at: emcewan@elainemcewan.com