



for Educators by Educators

PHASE I PROJECT FOR ADOLESCENT LITERACY PROJECT REPORT

March 2025

BACKGROUND

Origin Story

Over the past decade, literacy and reading instruction have received renewed attention that has resulted in significant policy changes. As of the end of November 2024, an [Education Week analysis](#) showed that 40 states and the District of Columbia have, since 2013, passed laws or implemented new policies related to evidence-based reading instruction. This effort – including changes to policy, practice, and increased funding – has been largely focused on early literacy (K-5).

Poor literacy skills significantly impact an individual's life and options. Those with low literacy skills have poorer health outcomes, fewer job options, less economic security, and more social isolation. These effects are well studied and are often referred to as important drivers for new literacy policies – even though these efforts have mostly ignored adolescents struggling to read on grade level. Results from the 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reinforce the urgency: [8th grade reading scores fell by two points, continuing a steady decline that started well before the Covid-19 pandemic](#). NAEP results also show a troubling and widening gap between the highest and lowest performers, with the lowest scoring 8th graders demonstrating the largest declines in reading proficiency. **While approximately two-thirds of eighth graders exceeded NAEP's "Basic" level of achievement in reading, 33% of students entering high school scored below the "Basic" threshold, the most in the history of the NAEP exam.**

Keenly aware of the challenges, and deeply committed to improving the outcomes for adolescents, a group of educators working with older struggling readers initially found each other on Twitter, sharing their experiences and concerns in the hopes of finding support and community – and ultimately drawing attention to this important gap in the current literacy conversation. Christina Cover, a leader in the online community, reached out to [Seek Common Ground](#) (SCG) to see if this issue could be elevated into a more organized effort. That is how the [Project for Adolescent Literacy](#) (PAL) was born. PAL's work is grounded in centering the knowledge and experience of educators who work daily with struggling readers. PAL's founders believe that instruction is the most powerful school-related tool for improving student achievement and that is why understanding the experiences and needs of middle and high school teachers is vitally important to solving the adolescent literacy challenge—and why educators must be part of cocreating solutions.

Thanks to financial support from the Barr Foundation, PAL has completed phase one of its work, an educator-led and educator-centered research effort to learn more from middle and high school educators across the country about adolescent literacy, to hear their challenges and successes, and begin to understand what the field needs to ensure that all adolescents are reading on grade level. This report captures key takeaways from the first phase of PAL. This effort is led by educators Christina Cover (New York), PAL Project Lead, alongside the PAL steering committee including Dr. Julie Burtcher Brown (Vermont), Kate Crist (Nevada), Rachel Manandhar (California), and Dr. Tinaya York (Illinois), and facilitated by SCG co-founders Sandy Boyd and Claudia Quintero.

PAL's Mission

A commitment to tackle a nationwide issue as complex as struggling adolescent readers requires systems and market changes, multiple phases, and dedicated partners. PAL believes:

- all stakeholders invested in improving adolescent literacy, including educators, school leaders, families, students, publishers, community leaders, and decisionmakers need to be part of the solution to the adolescent literacy crisis.
- we must keep educators at the center of the discussion in order to find sustainable, cocreated solutions that ensure lasting improvements to adolescent students' reading achievement.
- centering educators is a unique approach in education policy and practice, but one that we believe is critical to ensuring all students graduate ready for education, jobs, and life in the 21st century.

Methodology

Educators, of course, are not a monolith, so PAL knew we had to start by getting a better understanding of the current situation by listening to what teachers across the country were experiencing in their classrooms. PAL steering committee educators had common, shared experiences with one another, but they wanted to know if their experiences were unique or more universal. To accomplish this, PAL conducted a three-stage, educator-focused research process that included: (a) a national survey of educators' experiences, (b) focus-group conversations with educators, and (c) empathy interviews with individual teachers. The questions that guided our research were:

- What are educators across the country experiencing and what are their challenges and successes in serving the needs of struggling adolescent readers?
- What are the strategies, materials, and stories that should be shared with their colleagues?
- How do we make adolescent literacy a school, community, and national priority?

First, we created, administered, and analyzed responses to a secondary educator survey using SurveyMonkey (survey respondents' demographic data closely resemble the composition of the educator workforce across public schools in the U.S.). Then, we convened a series of focus groups with middle and high school general education/content area teachers and reading specialists/interventionists in separate small groups.

Focus groups were facilitated by the public opinion research firm Prime Group. Finally, steering committee members conducted educator empathy interviews with individual teachers. For more details on the methodology of each stage, please see Appendix A and for more details on survey response demographics, please see Appendix B.



If you would like to use the survey questions, focus group, and/or empathy interview facilitation guides so you can more deeply engage educators in your school, district, or state, please email us at pal@seekcommonground.org and we would be happy to make them available.

FINDINGS

Our main takeaways from the survey were that most educators who responded (54% of whom were very experienced with 16+ years in the classroom) feel that they know how to address literacy issues with individual struggling adolescent readers. However, when educators were asked to share what materials they use for instruction and how they know they have succeeded, the confidence, clarity, and consistency of responses diminished. Over 120 different materials (resources, curricula, interventions, etc.) were named, many of which were used in combination with other materials. Many educators reported using a collection of materials because there is no single resource that caters to the broad range of older struggling readers' instructional needs. In addition, most respondents did not indicate that they use valid, reliable data to inform their instruction. We heard in focus groups and empathy interviews that for educators with less experience, there is an even greater need for access to high-quality materials, strategies, and supports to help struggling readers.

When responding to a question about the reason for adolescent student's reading difficulties, many educators pointed to inadequate literacy instruction in the elementary school years. In terms of the barriers educators face to effectively address the issue of struggling adolescent readers, over a third (36%) of respondents said it was due to the lack of time they have to focus on this issue. When responding to a question about systems to support effective instruction, more than half (54%) of the respondents said they do not believe their schools have policies to support struggling readers even though the same percentage (54%) agreed their school leaders were paying attention to this issue. In addition, 72% of respondents reported that they believe fellow educators support their work to improve literacy instruction and 66% reported that other educators in their school were supported in providing instruction to support struggling adolescent readers.

Throughout the process, especially through the focus groups and empathy interviews, we found that educators are passionate and care deeply about their students and communities. They have thoughtfully considered adolescent literacy issues and have worked hard to address them in their classrooms and schools. They also expressed gratitude for being included in these discussions, having a chance to be heard, to speak openly and honestly about an issue that is close to their hearts, and to share stories with others who understood the challenges they face. They are frustrated but also want to be part of the solution.

As discussed in more detail below, in all three stages of research, PAL found that across the U.S., in urban, suburban and rural schools, **educators see struggling adolescent readers in their schools and classrooms every day and that while they work to address students' needs they do not have the right assessments, materials, supports (background, professional development, access to specialists), and school culture to address the needs of struggling students effectively and comprehensively (as a whole school and community priority).**

ANALYSIS

After reviewing and analyzing all the quantitative and qualitative data across research methods outlined above, we identified several key takeaways. We want to acknowledge that across the survey responses, focus group discussion, and empathy interviews, educators identified that those who are most impacted by this issue are economically disadvantaged students, Black and Brown students, multilingual/English learners, and students with learning disabilities. Ensuring the success of all students, including those from historically marginalized groups, and their teachers, is at the center of PAL's mission.



"I'm using [speech to print] a lot and I was able to find a program that I'm able to go through that that is working well. And then alongside that I'm creating a lot of my own things that are for everything else, because of course it's not just about reading the word it's also about understanding the sentence structure, it's about reading fluently, it's about vocabulary. Our students are lacking a lot of vocabulary so ... I'm sort of doing mix of things but I tried to create everything myself last year and it was just a nightmare I just didn't have the time for it."

Causes and Prevalence of Struggling Adolescent Readers

The top five most common responses to the question of "what do you believe is the main cause of why adolescents are struggling to read in your classroom/at your school" were:

- lack of opportunity provided in early grade levels to learn how to read well (39%)
- lack of parental support (12%)
- lack of intervention resources at older grades (11%)
- student learning differences (10%)
- a weak culture of reading (9%)

In the remaining responses, respondents identified lack of time to practice, screen time/technology, social promotion, low exposure/access to a variety of books, lack of motivation, lack of confidence/anxiety/trying to hide that they are struggling, English/multilingual learners not being strong readers in their first language, the Covid-19 pandemic, training/knowledge needed for teacher programs/professional development, and little attention span/focus.

Focus group participants reiterated what the survey found: that literacy challenges are a widespread concern in their schools and are especially prevalent among historically marginalized groups of students. Many focus groups participants believe that older struggling reader's difficulties are related to issues with student engagement competing with distractions and attention issues, problems which have worsened since the Covid-19 pandemic.



"Reading is the absolute crux of a successful future for all students and given that we have vast evidence base and the programs to prevent literacy failure it astonishes me that we are still failing so many students so badly. It is a huge social justice issue and mental health issue which is entirely solvable."

BARRIERS TO SUCCESS

Assessment & Data

Many educators through our research mentioned the need for better systemic identification of, and data collection on, struggling readers. Several participants in the focus groups mentioned that the lack of high-quality screening assessments for adolescent literacy remains a persistent barrier. Focus group members discussed how they believe that valid and reliable screening tools do exist, but they are often inaccessible or not commonly utilized by districts to provide teachers with accurate information about which students require support and in which skill areas. Information that is clear and actionable may be especially important for content-area teachers who may lack the training (as many educators noted in all three research instruments) needed to interpret diagnostic data to inform their instructional practices. Having this type of data can inform just-in-time supports and accelerators in content or general education (also referred to as **Tier 1**) settings, and appropriate targeted instruction or intervention settings (also referred to as Tier 2 or 3 respectively).

From the survey results we learned that teachers' use of data varies. When asked how they “measure the success of your work with struggling adolescent readers,” most respondents indicated they depend on classroom-based assessments and anecdotal evidence (46% of mentions) and a variety of normed assessments (31% of mentions). Eighteen percent use other or unspecified methods and 4% use diagnostic/informal assessments. One respondent said they have no way to assess their students, and another shared that they assess reading levels by the reading level of books their students choose to read. This shows the range and lack of tools readily available to educators to identify and understand the reading skills students coming into their classrooms have and their progress throughout the school year. Some respondents identified that even when they have used screeners, they are not sufficient or appropriate for adolescents.

One respondent shared, *“Our district has attempted to use universal screening methods, but those screeners fell short of giving useful specific data which identified specific strengths and weaknesses for intervention...”* Similarly, another respondent shared, *“I find standardized diagnostics less than useful because they don’t measure the exact skills/ materials we are using with students. Standardized diagnostics also tend to use texts that are not culturally relevant to our students.”*

Instructional Materials & Professional Development

Seventeen percent of respondents named resources (curriculum/programs/materials) as barriers and 15% mentioned professional learning opportunities for teachers. One teacher highlighted the need for *“well designed curriculum that embeds research-based supports at logical points in the learning and in a way that is vertically aligned throughout our school.”*



“In the classroom, educators are often left to their own devices to assess older students’ reading levels and to identify appropriate instructional materials to support them while also learning grade-level middle and high school content.”

We also found an interesting paradox from listening to teachers: over 50% of respondents said they “know how to support students in my classes or at my school who are struggling adolescent readers” (53% agreed and 24% strongly agreed) and “have found teaching practices and/or strategies that work with struggling adolescent readers” (57% agreed and 23% strongly agreed). Additionally, 49% said they agreed that they “teach using instructional materials/curriculum that help struggling adolescent readers grow in their reading skills” (22% strongly agreed). And yet, when asked “what specific instructional materials and/or curriculum you currently use for reading or writing instruction that you find especially effective for struggling adolescent readers?”, 124 *different* curricula/programs were mentioned, 60 *different* pedagogical approaches were mentioned, and 23 respondents said they did not have anything. (See Appendix C.)

There are unanswered questions around **instructional materials, which we define to include curriculum, programming, materials, etc.**, that schools are adopting, buying, and implementing (or not — 4% of respondents reported that they had no materials available to them). Educators noted there is no broad, evidence-based curriculum that provides confidence in the materials themselves, let alone the consistent implementation of them to support struggling adolescent readers across a school. In the focus groups, which were divided by grade band and teacher type (i.e. content-area teacher or interventionists), we found that reading specialists have a broad command of the instructional resources available, while content-area teachers and non-reading specialists are more likely to develop their own materials and adapt other resources. Content-area teachers indicated that they are making do with the limited training they have received and the limited time and resources they can access. Despite these constraints, the educators we talked to strive to incorporate literacy skills into their instruction, such as teaching prefixes in biology or analyzing news articles to build background knowledge of subject matter. A common refrain from participants was that some of the “best” reading resources are not age-appropriate for adolescent students and can be demoralizing to use. These resources can also be culturally insensitive. Many focus group participants had spent their own time modifying materials, often using AI tools to streamline the process and make the content more suitable for their students.



One survey respondent noted “I wish I had materials that were accessible for students decoding below a 2nd-grade level that are not juvenile-looking.”

In addition, educators collectively conveyed a resounding need for support. Educators working with older struggling readers are eager to find strategies and moves that can help them connect with older students (including relevant content) and move the needle on reading deficiencies they may have. When asked “what materials, curriculum, training, supports or other resources do you wish you had?” a third of respondents mentioned staff training/professional development and another third mentioned instructional materials and curriculum. With regards to professional development, one respondent envisioned: *“I wish I had a weeklong PD where secondary teachers learn a little bit about how elementary teachers teach reading and what some common pitfalls are. I would like to know how to differentiate instruction since we have a span of kids in our classes reading from 3rd grade to 12+ levels.”* Regarding instructional materials, another educator opined *“I dream of designing a 9-12 curriculum encompassing word study, fluency, comprehension, and writing through grade-level and/or high-interest texts.”* Educators asked for comprehensive and integrated materials including high-leverage practices as well as instructional routines that are effective across content areas and grade levels. The remaining responses, in descending order, were additional staffing including reading specialists and literacy coaches; expanding reading intervention classes/reading support; and assessment resources to inform data-driven decision-making.

Educator Roles & Silos in Middle and High Schools

When educators were asked what barriers they were facing in the classroom or school that impacted their “ability to meet the learning needs of struggling adolescent readers,” the number one response was **insufficient time** (36%). One survey respondent, an interventionist, noted *“I have 5-7 students for 35 mins/day. There are about 40 students per grade who need serious reading intervention. I wish more of my day could be dedicated to 1:1 and small group reading to practice these hard skills.”* Across the focus groups, lack of time was universally acknowledged to be the greatest barrier to addressing the crisis in adolescent literacy. With more time, educators believe they could provide students the individual attention they require.

The focus group participants acknowledged that time will likely remain a barrier for the foreseeable future – reading specialists and interventionists are already overextended and content-area teachers must prioritize their primary subject matter. Given that, as survey respondents identified, many students did not receive the instruction they required to become proficient readers in earlier grades, there is a great need to identify and utilize instructional practices that accelerate literacy outcomes at the secondary level and make up for lost time – time that is not currently available to educators teaching adolescent students. Additionally, 17% of respondents said **class sizes** were a barrier and 15% mentioned **scheduling/course availability**.

Unlike elementary schools where most teachers teach multiple subjects, secondary schools tend to be more siloed. Still, when asked if there are *“other educators at my school who help me support students in my classes who are struggling adolescent readers,”* 56% agreed and 16% strongly agreed. One respondent shared that *“spreading the word to Gen Ed teachers and collaborating with them has been really powerful because you’re starting to plant seeds around the school and then collaborating with my class with these students that are reading behind level... you might not realize this, but they’re reading at a third-grade level and they’re sitting in your ninth-grade biology class.”* Yet in some cases, there seems to be confusion around who is responsible for teaching older students how to read and what to do when students are struggling. As one educator mentioned:



“I know how to teach the 9-12 standards that assume a child can read. I don’t know how to teach them to read.”

Another challenge in the adolescent literacy conversation is that most middle and high school educators are not trained to teach students how to read but instead are experts in their specific content area. This gap makes the curricular materials conversation even more critical for content teachers. As one educator shared, *“I am NOT a reading teacher. I feel like I need to go back to school and take classes in phonics! I know where the deficiencies are, but I am not sure how to implement what is needed to address those deficiencies.”* When it comes to considering curriculum and programming review, educators also raised the divide that exists between content-area/Tier 1 educators and interventionists/Tier 2 and 3 educators, acknowledging that interventionists have more information and skills to support these students, but that pulling students out of grade-level content classes negatively impacts student in other ways. This is particularly true for students with special needs, multilingual learners, economically disadvantaged students, and other marginalized student groups.

A siloed school culture also impacts students, making academic success throughout the school day harder for struggling students. One respondent showed a clear connection between literacy and content understanding: *“If you talk to the teachers in our building, I think the academic concerns would be lack of completion of work outside of the classroom. If you peel back the layers ...I think there might be an issue with [students] being able to access the material at grade level because of the lack of background knowledge, lack of vocabulary, and then honestly just the lack of being able to decode multisyllabic words.”*

School, District, and State Policies and Practices

Educators and classrooms operate within a school building, composed of people and **policies** that create a culture. Many educators we heard from shared frustration with a lack of policies that help operationalize everyone's role in making sure students are reading at grade level. One educator noted the importance of having a ***“school wide approach and recognition that all teachers are reading teachers.”*** There is also often a lack of clarity at the school-level and district-level around **identifying and procuring high-quality secondary assessments and materials** and what **professional development** middle and high school educators should have to be prepared to identify and/or teach older struggling adolescent readers how to improve their skills, including what role content teachers have versus reading specialists or other interventionists. When asked whether their “school has policies (e.g., programming/scheduling, budget allocation) that support struggling adolescent readers” 40% disagreed and 14% strongly disagreed. Sometimes individual schools and individual teachers find ways to build momentum around this work. However, without sustained systemic support, that momentum can quickly be lost. For example, one survey respondent mentioned that their school *“started to train the staff on morphology and syllables last year so that every teacher could include word work in their content. No more PD funds so it’s unlikely that work will continue. It was definitely met with resistance.”*

Even though educators said they have found effective practices (77% agreed or strongly agreed) and have the know-how (80% agreed or strongly agreed) to help their struggling adolescent readers, more than half (54%) disagree or strongly disagree that their school has policies to support these students.

We also heard that not all schools have the **staffing, schedules, or spaces** to offer reading intervention. For example, some educators in the focus groups said that their school does not have a library or reading interventionists/specialists on staff. Participants in the focus groups noted that content-area teachers often lack proper training on how to address adolescent literacy struggles and while reading specialists can provide training and support, many schools either do not have specialists or share them across multiple sites, limiting their availability. One focus group participant shared that they *“have two literacy coaches, but it’s for 200 teachers or something, and so they’re spread really thin.”* Another educator shared their belief that *“...you really have to train teachers on a deep level and restructure how you do school”* to properly address struggling adolescent readers, which also relates to how much time educators and students have in a day for both intervention and grade-level instruction. Additionally, there is a need for more professional development as well as specialists and coaching for ongoing learning and refinement of teaching strategies that work with all teachers and all students.

Schools must also adhere to district and state policies, including **improving graduation rates and course requirements for graduation**. Teachers in the focus groups raised the concern that education priorities such as improving graduation rates and reducing dropout rates has exacerbated the issue of struggling older readers, sometimes pushing students through the grades despite ongoing literacy struggles or even pushing students out of the system all together. Educators shared that students can earn D's in classes all through high school and graduate with a diploma regardless of their literacy skills. As one survey respondent said, *“[It] makes me angry at a system that has passed them along.”* With regards to English language learners, focus group participants shared that students may struggle with English but also may lack adequate literacy levels in their home language, especially if they have had limited or interrupted learning (also known as SLIFE, students with limited or interrupted formal education). Educators wondered what policies might look like if schools were rewarded for improving outcomes for struggling readers and therefore minimize pushing older students out.

Leadership Awareness & Support

When asked whether “struggling adolescent readers at my school receive help from the educator(s) knowledgeable about literacy skills and are improving their reading skills,” 13% strongly agreed and 53% agreed. One educator noted that *“more than curriculum materials, what I have found effective is infusing literacy strategies in content area classes. This requires providing support and training for teachers. Leadership needs to be on board.”*

A major takeaway from the PAL research is the need for greater **awareness** of the prevalence and complexity of struggling adolescent readers, especially for school leaders. Many educators appreciated PAL’s attention on the issue and many respondents, most of whom have been in the classroom for over a decade, believe there has not been enough attention on struggling adolescent readers. Repeatedly, educators mentioned that even their school and district level administrators have not given the issue the attention needed to solve the challenge in a coherent way that would create systems change in schools. When looking at their **leadership**, 43% agreed and 11% strongly agreed that their *“school leadership is paying attention to struggling adolescent readers.”* In the qualitative portion of this question, however, we saw a wide range of what it means to pay attention. One focus group participant shared: *“I would say that pockets of teachers and administrators have that sense of urgency...”* while another said, *“we’re trying to convince our school and our district leadership that this is an issue, but we are really struggling with how to communicate that.”* While a few of the educators in the focus groups feel well-supported by their schools, many report that administrators and education leaders do not fully grasp the scope of the problem.

When we asked educators at the end of the survey to share anything else they would like to mention, one-third of the respondents added that there is a need to better prepare teachers, systems, funding, curriculum, even going back to the university level: *“The standard of teaching teachers at a university level needs to improve so that the essential knowledge needed [to teach reading]...are available to everyone.”* Focus group participants also agreed that teacher preparation for dealing with literacy instruction is inadequate and several participants noted that not until recently did these programs teach proven methods such as phonics-based instruction. Another quarter of respondents wanted to add that they feel frustrated, discouraged, and need help:



“I’m so frustrated and have been asking for help and support in this area for years but can’t seem to make much headway.”



“I don’t have enough time to teach 3 yrs of school in one year. It’s discouraging.”



“I feel that this is an issue that teachers have known about for many years, but we were not heard.”

Adolescent educators are uniquely impacted by their role (specialist/interventionist/general education teacher), grade band (middle/high school), and support (training, professional development, leadership, peers, etc.) as well as time constraints. Some educators are trying different things, creating their own materials, even with a lack of support, yet it is unclear, based on the question we asked about “how do you know that your work with struggling readers is effective,” if these are effective since there is little in-classroom evidence that is tracked or supported over time. It is important to note that educators also had concerns about having unproven or seemingly arbitrary curriculum imposed on them, noting that their districts often procure materials without educator input that then sits unused in supply rooms.

Absenteeism and Behavior

Many educators shared that they know their students are **masking** their literacy issues and pretending as if it is not an issue. One educator shared that *“... the students who ... are struggling the most and have the most internalized self-talk to themselves like I'm no good, I can't read, I'm stupid, they bandied about it, they joke around about it.”* Many educators pointed out that literacy issues manifest themselves in other areas of concern to the field, including mental health, behavior issues, and absenteeism. These additional social components impact the learning environment for educators and fellow students, including chronic absenteeism that can lead to students being pushed out of school due to truancy policies.

Supporting a Community and Culture of Educator Cocreation

Many survey respondents noted that there is a culture in secondary schools of individualism, leading teachers to believe they need to figure out solutions on their own to accelerate their students' learning. This approach may lead to feelings of isolation. One of the biggest takeaways from the survey as well as the focus groups was the desire educators have for more **community**. They noted a need to spotlight the good that is happening and for there to be an easy way to see what works directly from their peers. Educators hoped that if someone could shine a light on the good and share it — highlight classrooms, educators, schools, and districts, that are having verifiable success with struggling readers — then more educators, and therefore students, can benefit from those successes. Twenty-three percent of the survey respondents said that they were appreciative of the chance to share and network. As one said, *“I would love to be a part of a community of people who work with adolescent readers who are also invested in using research-based approaches.”*

Educators also identified benefits from working alongside other educators, administrators, school leaders, and their students to improve instruction for older struggling readers. Educators also see themselves as lifelong learners, and as new evidence-based and effective information arises, they are willing to learn and implement new techniques and instruction known to work best for older struggling readers. There is a passion to do this well and do right by students.

Learning happens across schools and districts, and educators would appreciate a more intentional integration by leadership from across schools from Pre-K to 12th grade; by roles e.g. from teaching assistants to superintendents; and across the tiers of instruction and administration. In the survey, we learned that 72% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they have support from other colleagues and that was reinforced in the empathy interviews where educators felt supported as they shared stories of triumph, as well as challenges. And yet, the need and requests for professional learning, leadership, and culture change are clear as well, showing their willingness to learn together to reach that goal.

The Bigger Picture

There has been an increasing amount of attention on literacy in the early grades, as well as at the adult level, which has driven most of the **funding and resources** towards those two areas, leaving middle and high school struggling readers under-resourced. Educators know the magnitude of the **impact** on future life outcomes when their students do not learn how to read at grade level. When asked why this issue was important to them, the most common (42%) reason shared was to help students have a better life with future success and break negative cycles. One respondent added *“It is the biggest [thing] students can do to improve the quality of their lives and prepare them for the future. It is the gateway to a successful life.”* Educators also saw the connection to democracy, critical

thinking, citizenry, and community and society (19%). One educator said, *"We need an educated electorate to maintain and support our democracy."* About 14% saw that the lack of literacy impacts students' freedom with some highlighting the connection between a lack of literacy skills and the school to prison pipeline, social justice, human rights, and other societal issues. Next, 12% of survey respondents talked about access and opportunity, noting that *"reading opens (or closes) social and economic doors for students"* and another educator noted the role of literacy in autonomy, personal safety and critical thinking, stating that *"You don't fool someone who reads the fine print."* Finally, 9% see it as a moral imperative and our responsibility: *"no child should leave school unable to read."* Educators are concerned that students are graduating without the skills required to manage community college classes or jobs to enter a viable pathway in the workforce. This is not just about passing tests or passing a grade, but the future trajectory of the student's life – this is why educators see this as a collective problem in need of collective solutions.

WHAT 'S NEXT?

Based on our six-month, Phase I research on the knowledge and experience of middle and high school educators, PAL is now planning the next phase of our work. Phase II will continue to be educator-centered and seek to support the needs of teachers working with struggling adolescent readers as identified in Phase I—and move the field to do their part to meet this challenge.

Create a Learning Community for Educators

Across all three stages of PAL's first phase research, we heard that teachers are eager to learn with and from each other. They have asked PAL to create a community of practice where they can share materials and strategies for their classrooms as well as proven school-wide professional development and practices that better support struggling adolescent readers.

In Phase II, PAL intends to continue building the learning community it started in Phase I, providing educators with a space to learn, share, and improve their practice together. Specifically, educators have communicated a desire for a learning community that (a) provides useful professional learning, (b) builds peer support and a community of practice, (c) creates a bank of quality, evidence-based resources, (d) communicates the latest research, and (e) offers "office hours" with experts and fellow educators who have found success. Building on the norms of the first PAL Learning Community sessions, we will continue to prioritize and center educator voices in and invite researchers, journalists, academics, and educational advocates to listen and learn firsthand from teachers in the classroom.

As the Prime Group public opinion research focus group moderator, Wen-Tsing Choi, highlighted: *"The benefit of community for educators cannot be overstated. Despite coming from diverse backgrounds, teaching in varied school environments with different levels of support, and engaging with a wide range of students, the participants enjoyed the chance to meet one another."*



"I would love to be a part of a community of people who work with adolescent readers who are also invested in using research-based approaches."



"Thank you for the opportunity to participate in the survey. I have long advocated for our adolescent learners and I look forward to learning from you and this important project."

Identify What's Working, Share the "Bright Spots"

While middle and high school educators believe that they need better assessments, instructional materials, professional development, and a culture that supports adolescent literacy, they cannot wait for others to produce those materials. Many pointed out that they had seen examples of effective educator practices that led to student success. Educators are eager to see (through videos, observations, etc.), share, and learn one another's strategies and tangible practices that have worked. Finding and sharing these "bright spots" will be a major focus of the learning community in Phase II. Materials and strategies will be gathered and shared, along with a feedback form to gather feedback from educators implementing them in their classrooms. Simultaneously, PAL will create a draft rubric that can be used to evaluate more materials in the future.



"Working alongside my colleagues helps to build momentum in my own journey to improve my practice to best meet the needs of my struggling readers."

In addition to sharing materials, educators want to learn from successful classrooms, schools, and districts, places that are “beating the odds.” PAL will look for these examples and highlight for others by collecting and sharing research, case studies, and testimonials widely.

Identify High-Quality Curriculum Materials

Educators need high-quality instructional materials appropriate for adolescents that provide struggling readers access to grade-level content so that they do not fall further behind. We heard repeatedly from intervention specialists that they had access to some of these materials. However, content teachers repeatedly indicated that none, or very few, such materials are available. In both intervention and content teacher groups, we found that educators must regularly create materials tailored to adolescents’ needs. While we uplift bright spots and learn more about what works for struggling adolescent readers, PAL will discuss how best to evaluate the quality of, and participate in, the creation of materials for struggling adolescent readers, a process we expect will occur in Phase II and beyond.

PAL is keen on materials being free and open source so that they are as accessible as possible for all teachers, therefore ensuring there is no gatekeeping of materials from educators, and ultimately students, who need the resources the most.

Culture, Policy, and Practice Road Map

Finally, educators want to be part of a school culture where helping struggling adolescent readers is a whole school and community effort. There are several policies and practices that may help make this vision a reality. Creating a “road map,” “playbook,” or checklist for classrooms and schools that provides practical guidance on how all educators throughout a system can support struggling adolescent readers is a starting point. This road map could be built from information gleaned from educator experience, bright spots, models, and partnerships. It will be a living resource, updated as new ideas, strategies, and models emerge.

A road map could help decision-makers at multiple levels to make the next best decision to support educators and struggling adolescent readers. First, building awareness among leaders will be helpful in moving the needle. Second, clarity about the role each of the adults have in this ecosystem will lead to a more aligned effort. For example, what should the procurement or purchasing district leaders know before making curriculum purchasing decisions for middle and high school educators? For a school principal, what is the balance for staffing and scheduling that makes for a school day that ensures students are accessing grade-level content and foundational literacy skills in a connected and integrated way? Some other topics that could be included in a road map are routines in the classroom, thinking about process and product, identifying high-quality free resources, meeting the moment with urgency, and using a framework determining what can be done immediately.



What works? “A school wide approach and recognition that all teachers are reading teachers.”

Too many students who need effective reading instruction are only served by intervention or reading specialists. PAL believes it is important to reimagine core instruction and redesign general education instruction to more effectively meet the needs of more students. PAL’s aspiration is to continue to build policies and systems that allow for all secondary teachers to address any issues their adolescent student may have.

Student Experiences

Many middle and high school students have not been effectively taught the requisite literacy skills needed to fully access their education. Lacking foundational skills may drive some students to act out through classroom disruption, absenteeism, behavior issues, or dropping out of school. Educators referenced these “masking” behaviors throughout the PAL research phase. Over time, not being in school, and in some places where truancy policies remove students from the school all together, the student is just nudged out, falling further and further behind, not only in school, but also in life.

Part of PAL’s work moving forward will be to gather and feature stories of students who have been impacted by literacy issues as middle and high school students. Understanding the impact of these issues directly on students is critical to charting the path forward and designing solutions with students as the ultimate beneficiaries of this effort. No child should feel they are alone in learning how to read, no matter their age. Learning directly about the student experience from struggling adolescent readers and the efforts educators have made to support them on their journey will ground PAL’s work with a strong foundation.



“I have had students graduate from this institution who are not able to read, and they’ve returned to the school district angry that we stamped our names on a diploma and sent students out to their adult lives illiterate.”

Moving the Field

It is our hope that by supporting educators as outlined above and in amplifying their successes and struggles, PAL can catalyze improved outcomes for older struggling readers. Our efforts will include increasing awareness among groups such as school leaders, policymakers, publishers, journalists, community leaders, and families. Solving the adolescent literacy challenge will require a systemic commitment to see and meet the needs of struggling middle and high schoolers with policy, practices, materials, and supports that meet their unique needs. In the first phase of PAL’s research, educators indicated their desire and readiness to lead this effort and collaborate to meet this pressing challenge. The second phase of PAL’s work will endeavor to build on the research and help educators (through building a community, sharing tools and resources, creating a roadmap and raising awareness) improve academic and life outcomes of their students.

If you are interested in collaborating with us on any of the next step, please email us at pal@seekcommonground.org.

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APPENDIX A: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Survey

To start, the PAL steering committee drafted and launched a survey using SurveyMonkey to get a better sense of what educators were experiencing as they worked with struggling adolescent readers. The questions were reviewed by a public opinion researcher, Wen-Tsing Choi of the Prime Group. Our goal with this survey was to get a better understanding of what is happening in classrooms today. All respondents are currently working with adolescent struggling readers. The survey was out in the field for a month starting on August 26, 2024, and we received 539 responses.

The questionnaire includes questions that are both qualitative (open-ended) and quantitative (Likert scale) to gather broad trends through both nuanced and contained answer options. We also released the same survey for non-public school educators to make space for helpful practices in classrooms outside of public schools. Outreach to middle and high school teachers in the field was done via PAL and Seek Common Ground networks, including social media.

We received survey responses from 42 U.S. states, Washington D.C, Northern Mariana Islands, as well as Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa. Eighty-four percent of the survey respondents were female, 13% were male, and 3% identified as nonbinary or preferred not to answer. When we asked what type of school educators worked in (they could check all that applied) 72% of survey respondents said they worked in a public school and 26% identified their schools as Title I schools, 8% public charter, 7% other, and 3% community school. There was also a mix of district types with responses from urban (21%), suburban (18%), and rural (14%) schools. (According to the [National Center for Education Statistics](#) (NCES), in the U.S., 27% of schools are urban, 31% are suburban, 13% are in towns, and 28% are rural.) In terms of experience in the classroom, 54% of survey respondents have been teaching for over 16 years with the remaining 46% of respondents having fewer years in the classroom and the smallest percentage of teachers (4%) having had taught for 0–2 years. Given that the average tenure for teachers in the US was 14.5 years in 2021 (NCES) but has fallen since the COVID-19 pandemic (NCES), this survey had more experienced educator respondents, an important factor to consider when reviewing the results. Teachers early in their career undoubtedly face tougher challenges with respect to struggling adolescent readers and are in greater need of strategies, materials, and access to peers.

Most survey respondents were general education/content teachers (48%), followed by reading specialist/interventionists (23%), special education teachers (21%), teacher leaders (13%), other (12%), and instructional coaches (10%). Overall, in terms of race, survey respondents closely matched U.S. teacher demographics (NCES) (more details in Appendix B: National Educator Survey Demographics).

Focus Groups

After identifying some major trends from the survey, the steering committee worked on a set of topics and questions that could benefit from more in depth, focus group discussion. In partnership with the public opinion research firm, the Prime Group, we developed a focus group facilitation guide that included those questions.

Focus groups were conducted via Zoom by Prime Group researcher Wen-Tsing Choi from September 24 to October 2, 2024. We wanted to be mindful of the age groups teachers were working with as well as their areas of expertise. Therefore, the groups were organized into five groups: high school educators (content-area teachers, special education teachers): five participants; high school reading specialists: four participants; middle school educators: one participant; middle school reading specialists: four participants; educators at Title I schools: four participants. All 18 participants were survey respondents who expressed interest in participating in a focus group and all participants were compensated for their time. The Prime Group produced a report synthesizing common themes across the focus group discussions.

Empathy Interviews

Finally, to go even deeper into the educator perspective, steering committee members invited interested survey and focus group participants who wanted to talk with steering committee members one-on-one. Steering committee members co-developed an empathy interview protocol and two members were on each call to ask the questions and take notes. A total of eleven empathy interviews were conducted and their qualitative responses were analyzed using a synthesis protocol where steering committee members reviewed notes and gathered common themes.



If you would like to access the focus group facilitation guide and/or empathy interview guide for surveying your school, district and/or state educators, you can email pal@seekcommonground.org.

APPENDIX B: NATIONAL EDUCATOR SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS

Table 1

Demographics of Survey Respondents: Race

Race	Percentage of respondents	Comparison to national teacher demographics
White	85%	80%
Black	9%	6%
Hispanic	6%	9%
Asian	5%	2%
American Indian	3%	Less than 1%
Two or more	2%	2%
Pacific Islander	1%	Less than 1%

Note. N = 318; National teacher demographics as reported by [Pew Research Center](#).

Table 2

Demographics of Survey Respondents: School Community

In what type of school community do you teach in? (Check all that apply)	Percentage who took the survey
Public	72%
Title I	26%
Urban	21%
Suburban	18%
Rural	14%
Public charter	8%
Other	7%
Community	3%

Note. N = 324

Table 3

Demographics of Survey Respondents: Years Teaching

How many years have you been teaching?	Percentage who took the survey
0-2	4%
3-5	7%
6-10	17%
11-15	18%
16+	54%

Note. N = 324

Table 4

Demographics of Survey Respondents: Grades Teaching

Current grade level you teach (Check all that apply)	Percentage who took the survey
6th grade	31%
7th grade	37%
8th grade	34%
9th grade	34%
10th grade	35%
11th grade	38%
12th grade	34%
Other	11%

Note. N = 324

Table 5

Demographics of Survey Respondents: Role

Role (Pick the one(s) that best captures your role)	Percentage who took the survey
General Education Teacher/Content Teacher	48%
Reading Specialist, Interventionist	23%
Special Education Teacher	21%
Teacher Leader	13%
Other	12%
Instructional Coach	10%

Note. N = 324

APPENDIX C: SURVEY RESPONSES, INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

Table 1

Question 10: What specific instructional materials and/or curriculum do you currently use for reading or writing instruction that you find especially effective for struggling adolescent readers?
(279 responses, 527 total number of resource mentions)

Categories	Example responses	Total item Count	Percentage of total resource mentions
Specific Curricula and Programs 124 different curricula/programs mentioned in total	"Orton-Gillingham Approaches" - 25 mentions "Wilson Reading System" - 21 mentions "Rewards" - 17 mentions "Lexia Power Up" - 16 mentions "Writing Revolution" - 15 mentions Multiple individual mentions such as "Take Aim at Vocabulary", "Rime Magic", "Winston Grammar"	329	62%
Pedagogical Approaches 60 different approaches mentioned in total	"Self-made" - 16 mentions "Reading aloud" - 11 mentions "Vocabulary routines" - 10 mentions "Grade level text with scaffolds" - 9 mentions "Text to speech/speech to print" - 8 mentions Multiple individual mentions such as "teacher-created materials", "support students in a gradual release system"	175	33%
No materials	"I don't know", "I have no such targeted materials", "N/A"	23	4%

Note. The materials shared here do not necessarily represent or are endorsed by the PAL Steering Committee.

Table 2

Question 12: How do you measure the success of your work with adolescent readers?
(282 responses, 473 total number of resource mentions)

Categories	Example responses	Total item Count	Percentage of total resource mentions
Classroom-based assessments/ Anecdotal evidence	Subject-specific content area assessments, formative/summative assessments, non-specific “progress monitoring”, work samples, comprehension tests, oral reading, grades, classroom observations, conferencing with students, conversations with colleagues, engagement in class, student confidence	218	46%
Normed Assessments	NWEA Measure of Academic Progress (MAP), Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), State Summative Assessments, Standardized Tests for Assessment of Reading (STAR Renaissance)	148	31%
Other/Unspecified Methods	IEL Evaluations, “assessment”, “school psychologist”, “data”	87	18%
Diagnostic/Informal Assessments	Read 180, CBM Reading, IXL, Core Phonics, Quick Phonics Screen (QPS), Phonological Awareness Screening Test (PAST), San Diego Quick	20	4%

Note. The materials shared here do not necessarily represent or are endorsed by the PAL Steering Committee.