Effective Instruction for Non-Proficient Adolescent Readers
4 things every secondary literacy educator needs

Meeting the instructional needs of non-proficient adolescent readers is challenging. Non-proficient readers in grades 6 and above need instruction in a wide array of skills that include everything from reading fundamentals to higher-order thinking skills. Often times, educators do not have adequate time or the appropriate resources to effectively meet every student’s needs. To improve teaching practices and address the instructional challenges of non-proficient adolescent readers, every secondary literacy educator should consider the following:

1) Informative assessment

High-stakes assessment data provides an incomplete picture of reading proficiency. Instead, educators must uncover the specific reasons why their students are having reading difficulties through the use of benchmark and progress-monitoring assessments. Because reading is a complex, composite set of skills, educators need these types of assessments to precisely and efficiently pinpoint each student’s performance in the component skills. Academic language—otherwise known as the “language of school,” because it is different from the language of everyday conversation—is one of the skills that is critical to assess. Understanding why a student is having reading difficulties is the first step to remedying the underlying problems and drives the most appropriate and personalized instruction strategies.

2) Targeted, personalized instruction

With the data provided by benchmark and progress-monitoring assessments, educators can personalize instruction for each student. Both the volume and complexity of texts students are expected to read increase each year, which makes personalized instruction critical to reading proficiency. Educators must address not only a variety of learning needs but also levels of reading proficiency that range from non-reader to just below grade level. Unaddressed skill gaps only widen with each year, so teachers must be able to meet students at their current level and move them through the curriculum as quickly as possible but as slowly as needed.
3) Resources for instruction and practice

Teacher resources include both materials for educators to deliver direct, explicit instruction, as well as differentiated materials for students. An eighth-grade ELA teacher might have students whose literacy skill sets range from second to eighth grade, and may therefore need support in adapting lessons and delivering fundamental elementary literacy instruction. Meanwhile, non-proficient adolescent readers benefit from materials that both meet them at their current skill level and provide opportunities to practice with peers—so resources for these students should support student-led, collaborative learning.

4) Student motivation and engagement

To motivate non-proficient adolescent readers and keep them engaged in their learning, the curriculum must not only be highly interesting and relevant, but also be able to meet the student at their current skill level—if a teenager reads at a third-grade level, the student needs content that feels like it is meant for an older student even if it addresses elementary literacy skills. Understanding both the purpose of an assignment and what is expected of them helps adolescents build competence—the ability to do something successfully and know why it is important. Activities that involve choice satisfy the students’ desire for autonomy, increasing students’ intrinsic motivation.