Lexia®

SCIENCE OF READING **LEADERSHIP**
SUMMIT

EDUCATIONAL INSIGHT

Supporting the Diverse Needs of Adolescent Readers

OBJECTIVE

Discover how examining adolescent learner profiles and the factors that shape their literacy development can empower district leaders to design equitable, diagnostic, and systemwide approaches that accelerate reading growth for all secondary students.

GUIDING QUESTION

As you read, determine how this article challenges you to identify specific changes you will make to your district's assessment, professional learning, and intervention systems to better meet the diverse needs of adolescent readers in your district.

ACTIVITY

- Independently read the article and take notes using the guiding questions.
- With your group, share your "light bulb" moments. Discuss the following questions:
  - What's one key takeaway or summary of the article that stood out to you?
  - What's a new idea or approach you learned that could benefit your district?
  - What's something you can take back and share with your teams or apply in your own context?
- Work with your group to complete a three-sentence summary of your discussion. Be sure that each team member has a copy of the summary.

WHITE PAPER

Supporting the Diverse Needs of Adolescent Readers

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Introduction

Proficiency in reading impacts all subjects across the secondary curriculum. Adolescents differ in their reading proficiency (Snow, 2002) and, therefore, differ in their levels of academic success. Some students demonstrate deep knowledge and vocabulary in class discussions but read slowly and inaccurately. Other students are fluent readers who nevertheless do not understand what they read. These students seem to be proficient readers yet fail to meet grade-level expectations. There is variability in reading proficiency among adolescent readers—word recognition, fluency, oral language, vocabulary, general knowledge, higher-order thinking skills, cognitive capabilities, and motivation (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Snow, 2002)—but it is not always easy to pinpoint exactly why an adolescent reader struggles. For instructional leaders, this variability presents a system-level challenge: how to differentiate support across diverse learner needs while ensuring all students progress toward college and career readiness. One thing is certain, though: students in grades 6 and above who read proficiently can expect greater academic success and economic opportunities.

Across the country, states have implemented college- and career-readiness standards to ensure that by high school graduation, all students have acquired the knowledge, skills, and work habits they need to succeed in college, work, and life. The overarching goal of instruction is for students to read increasingly complex grade-level-appropriate materials independently and proficiently. Students' progress toward meeting this critical goal is measured by end-of-year assessments of reading.

Each year, secondary teachers await the assessment scores for validation of students' achievement, administrators anticipate improved scores and higher graduation projections, and parents hope their children's academic performance is on track. Each year's results indicate mixed results—success for some, improvement for others—but still, too many adolescent readers remain non-proficient. The end of-year assessment results tell which students are not reading proficiently, but fail to answer the critical question of why. District leaders, tasked with designing equitable systems of support, cannot rely on outcome data alone. Without knowing and addressing the why, educators cannot improve the proficiency of adolescent readers.

For district administrators, understanding the root causes of non-proficiency is critical for driving system-wide improvement. It enables the alignment of instructional resources, professional learning, and intervention strategies with actual student needs, not just assessment outcomes. The purpose of this paper is to explore the causes of non-proficient reading as well as possible solutions for helping adolescent students in grades 6 and above learn to read well and find reward in reading.

What Are the Necessary Components of Reading?

The Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Hoover & Gough, 1990) proposed that reading comprehension is the product of two mutually dependent components: decoding and linguistic comprehension. Each component is necessary but not sufficient alone. This means that inefficiency in one or both components leads to overall reading failure. Understanding these two components is critical for instructional planning at every level of the system. When district leaders ensure these foundational elements are addressed through curriculum, assessment, and professional learning, student outcomes improve.

Decoding

The ability to read increasingly complex grade-level-appropriate material assumes that students have mastered the lower-level skills of reading, such as decoding and fluency. Decoding is the ability to translate symbols on a printed page into their spoken equivalents. The goal of decoding instruction is for the reader to be able to recognize words accurately and instantly (Ehri, 1991). Instant word recognition, or automaticity, leads to fluency. Fluent reading frees the reader's cognitive resources to attend to meaning (Perfetti, 1985). Adequate decoding provides the reader access to the meaning on a printed page, but increased decoding ability alone will not increase reading comprehension without a corresponding level of linguistic comprehension.

Linguistic comprehension

Linguistic comprehension is the ability to derive meaning from sentences and texts through listening. Meaning is dependent on the reader's general vocabulary and prior knowledge. For literary and informational text, meaning is also dependent on a specialized language that is different from the language of everyday conversation. This complex and necessary language is known as academic language. Literary and content-specific vocabulary and morphology (e.g., prefixes, roots, suffixes) as well as grammar and syntax comprise academic language (Nagy & Townsend, 2012; Schleppegrell, 2012; Snow & Uccelli, 2009).

Without adequate linguistic comprehension, the reader receives little reward for his or her effortless decoding. The contrast between the two components of reading distinguishes the possible causes of non-proficient reading and creates four distinct learner profiles. For district administrators, this distinction supports the case for integrated instructional models—those that build both code-based and meaning-based competencies through high-quality materials and targeted supports.

What Are Learner Profiles?

The table below presents the four different learner profiles suggested by The Simple View of Reading. Students may have 1) adequate linguistic comprehension and decoding, 2) adequate linguistic comprehension but inadequate decoding, 3) inadequate linguistic comprehension but adequate decoding, or 4) inadequate linguistic comprehension and decoding (Aaron, Joshi, & Williams, 1999; Catts, Hogan, & Fey, 2003). These profiles provide a research-based framework for understanding why students may not be reading proficiently, and are especially useful at the district level for aligning assessment, instructional materials, and intervention supports.

Profile 1 Adequate linguistic comprehension Adequate decoding	Profile 3 Inadequate linguistic comprehension Adequate decoding
Profile 2 Adequate linguistic comprehension Inadequate decoding	Profile 4 Inadequate linguistic comprehension Inadequate decoding

Four learner profiles based on the two components of reading comprehension (Aaron et al., 1999; Catts et al., 2003).

Profile 1

Students with adequate listening and reading comprehension are more than likely able to read grade level-appropriate and increasingly complex text independently and proficiently.

Profile 2

Students with adequate linguistic comprehension but inadequate decoding may be students with diagnosed or undiagnosed dyslexia (Lyon, Shaywitz, & Shaywitz, 2003). Here, inadequate reading comprehension is unexpected in relation to adequate linguistic comprehension, which may be at or above grade-level expectations. The cause of poor reading comprehension for these students is probably the lack of automatic decoding and fluent reading.

Profile 3

Conversely, students with inadequate linguistic comprehension but adequate decoding are able to read fluently and spell accurately. However, they struggle to understand what they are reading, or what they are listening to (Hogan, Adlof, & Alonzo, 2014). Poor listening and reading comprehension suggest that these students may have a language-based learning disability.

Profile 4

Students with inadequate linguistic comprehension and decoding may be garden-variety poor readers (Stanovich, 1988) who may always struggle with either or both components. These students may have strengths in other cognitive abilities (e.g., spatial-oriented skills, problem-solving ability, musical ability).

District leaders can use these learner profiles to inform tiered literacy supports and target PD efforts, ensuring that educators understand the different instructional responses required for each profile.

Profile considerations for English Language Learners

English Language Learners (ELLs) may exhibit any one of the four profiles. It is important to ascertain these individuals' linguistic comprehension and decoding skills in their first language as well as in English. Assuming ELLs have had sufficient instruction and experience to learn English, their learner profiles in English most likely will mirror their learner profiles in the first language (García & Godina, 2004). Consequently, if they have a history of linguistic comprehension or decoding difficulties in learning to read in their first language, they will experience the same difficulties in learning to read in English. ELLs with limited exposure to English may struggle to read English simply because of their lack of English language proficiency. For district administrators, these considerations underscore the importance of selecting and implementing assessments that evaluate reading components across languages where possible. They also point to the need for sustained professional development and instructional coaching to help educators accurately identify and respond to the needs of Emergent Bilingual students.

Additional profile considerations

The majority of non-proficient readers will match profiles 2, 3, or 4, but some students may struggle with reading for reasons other than linguistic comprehension or decoding. For example, they may have executive function issues (e.g., attention, monitoring, remembering details, organizing information); experience difficulties quickly understanding and responding to information (i.e., slow processing speed); or lack motivation; all of these, alone or in combination, can result in inadequate reading comprehension, regardless of proficiency in linguistic comprehension and decoding. A reader with adequate linguistic comprehension and adequate decoding could therefore exhibit inadequate reading comprehension for one or more of these reasons.

From a systems perspective, recognizing these additional contributors allows district administrators to promote more holistic approaches—such as integrated MTSS frameworks and partnerships with student support teams—that account for cognitive, behavioral, and engagement-related factors affecting literacy performance.

What Are Learner Personas?

Learner personas are representations of students with the traits and behaviors of the four different learner profiles. Learner personas can help identify the causes of non-proficient reading and the instructional needs of real students who share the same traits and behaviors. Because the learner persona who represents Profile 1 is a proficient reader, that persona is not described. When used alongside assessment data, learner personas offer district leaders a valuable tool to deepen teacher understanding of reader variability and build coherence across curriculum, intervention, and professional learning systems. By anchoring support decisions in representative student experiences, administrators can more effectively lead schoolwide or districtwide improvements in literacy outcomes.

Darnell (Profile 2)

Darnell has inadequate decoding yet adequate linguistic comprehension. He is a conundrum to his teachers. His hand is always the first one to go up to answer a question. He has a robust vocabulary that he displays during class discussions. When engaged in a debate, his deep knowledge and keen logic are evident, and his arguments are sound and perceptive. For these reasons, his teachers are perplexed by Darnell's "unexpected underachievement" (Ferrer, Shaywitz, Holahan, Marchione, & Shaywitz, 2009). In spite of his strong oral language skills and engagement during class discussions, Darnell's written work demonstrates little initiative or effort. Although he has worked diligently, his work is rarely complete and has many spelling errors. In a self-effacing manner, he avoids reading aloud whenever possible by deferring to his peers. When he does read aloud, he misreads words, his reading is labored and disfluent, and a less self-assured student emerges.

Linda (Profile 3)

Unlike Darnell, Linda reads accurately and fluently and is eager to read aloud at any time. She writes immaculately and is a competent speller. However, Linda does not comprehend most of what she reads beyond a literal level of understanding. She is unable to integrate information in a text with her background knowledge to infer an answer to a question about the text, and she does not understand the nuances of language (i.e., shades of meaning) or nonliteral language (e.g., idioms. metaphors, similes). She has difficulty following oral directions, as well as trouble processing and integrating information during class discussions. Her written compositions are well organized but lack maturity and depth. Her teachers see Linda as a motivated student, but they are concerned that she will eventually give up in frustration. Linda exemplifies Profile 3, the learner with adequate decoding but inadequate linguistic comprehension.

Tyler (Profile 4)

Tyler demonstrates inadequacies in both decoding and linguistic comprehension. Tyler's inadequacies are due to his high mobility, which has disrupted his learning, created gaps in his knowledge, and impacted his motivation. His mother is a single parent who has taken advantage of one-month-free rent offers for years, which often requires Tyler to cross school and district zones several times during a school year. Inconsistency across various curricula means that Tyler is either bored and acts out because the same content is being presented, or he is lost and stops paying attention because the content is more advanced. He will go to any length to avoid reading and writing, and for him, both of these are labored and full of errors. He prefers listening to text read aloud, oral discussions, and presentations, but he lacks Darnell's overall depth of knowledge and vocabulary. Tyler does display pockets of insightful knowledge and has gained "street smarts" as a result of protecting his three younger siblings and assisting his mother with household chores and responsibilities. From a district perspective, Tyler's profile highlights the need for system-level strategies that address the instructional consequences of student mobility, such as cross-campus alignment of literacy practices, embedded diagnostics, and continuity of intervention supports.

Izabella (Profile 4)

Izabella, whose first language is Spanish, sometimes has difficulties following oral directions and the flow of a class discussion and does not always understand nonliteral language. Her decoding of English words with reliable and frequently recurring patterns is improving, but she struggles with less-frequent and irregular patterns. Her written work is progressing but continues to show spelling, syntactic, and semantic errors that sometimes interfere with her communication. With her difficulties in linguistic comprehension and decoding, she seems to exemplify Profile 4. Nonetheless, Izabella reads fluently in Spanish and can comprehend texts at both literal and inferential levels in Spanish. In her first language, Izabella exemplifies Profile 1. Currently, her English language proficiency designation is Level 3, according to WIDA Performance Definitions. All her teachers are pleased with her progress and realize that Izabella's continued progress in understanding and decoding English is paramount to her academic success. Because her greatest instructional need is to learn to read and write English well, her persona at the present time mimics Profile 4. As she receives the explicit instruction she needs in English, she will begin to exemplify Profile 1. For district administrators, Izabella's profile illustrates the importance of data-informed placement and progress monitoring that accounts for both English development and literacy transfer across languages.

Leading Systemwide Literacy Improvement: A Guide for District Administrators

The learner profiles and personas described above illuminate the diverse and often hidden challenges that secondary students face when it comes to reading proficiency. For district administrators, these examples underscore the urgency of building systems that do more than identify which students are struggling. They must also uncover why.

Adolescents bring a wide range of strengths and needs to their literacy development. Unlike younger students, many older readers mask decoding deficits behind strong oral language or fluent but superficial reading. Others may decode with ease but lack the linguistic comprehension required for academic texts. Still others have experienced fragmented instruction, linguistic transitions, or interruptions in schooling. These challenges are developmental, but also deeply systemic.

District administrators are uniquely positioned to shape the systems that support adolescent readers. This means addressing more than curriculum adoption or graduation metrics. It means designing professional learning, assessment systems, and instructional practices that meet the real and varied needs of secondary students.

System-Level Actions to Support Adolescent Literacy

1 Prioritize Diagnostic Insight Over Outcome Data Alone

State assessments signal whether students are meeting expectations, but they do not explain why. District leaders should ensure that middle and high schools have access to fine-grained diagnostic tools that assess decoding, fluency, syntax, vocabulary, and comprehension. These tools allow educators to form accurate learner profiles and tailor instruction to individual needs.

2 Invest in Secondary-Specific Professional Learning

Effective adolescent literacy instruction is not just an ELA responsibility. Districts must ensure that content-area educators, interventionists, and special educators receive professional learning that covers:

- Structured Literacy principles and decoding instruction at the secondary level

- Academic language development and the demands of disciplinary texts

- Instructional strategies for multilingual learners across proficiency levels

This work cannot be relegated to a single PD day. Sustained, embedded learning opportunities—such as coaching, collaborative planning, and course-based study—are essential.

3   Design for Continuity and Coherence

High mobility, inconsistent instructional models, and siloed supports can undermine progress. District leaders can mitigate these risks by:

- Aligning literacy practices across schools and grade levels

- Embedding intervention and assessment within core instruction

- Ensuring shared frameworks for identifying and responding to student needs

4   Lead With Equity and Asset-Based Practices

Students like Tyler and Izabella remind us that reading struggles often intersect with broader systemic factors. District leaders should review data through an equity lens and ensure that literacy improvement plans include supports for:

- Mobile students and students experiencing chronic absenteeism

- Emergent Bilinguals and students with interrupted formal education

- Students whose reading needs are masked by behavioral or engagement issues

5   Elevate Literacy as a Systemwide Priority

Finally, adolescent literacy cannot live on the margins. District administrators can integrate literacy goals into strategic plans, monitor progress through leading indicators, and ensure that funding decisions reflect a commitment to structured, evidence-based reading instruction for all students in grades 6–12.

Improving adolescent literacy is not a quick fix—it is a strategic imperative that requires intentional, systemwide leadership. By leveraging learner profiles, diagnostic tools, and targeted professional learning, district leaders can ensure that every secondary student receives the instruction they need to become a confident, capable reader.

How Does Assessment Inform Instruction?

Many secondary students are just like Darnell, Linda, Tyler, and Izabella. Although state-mandated assessments indicate these students have not met the standards, they do not provide information about why. Fine-grained and valid assessments that measure the underpinnings of the components of reading comprehension can identify the underlying issues. Both lower-level reading skills (e.g., word recognition, spelling, syntactic awareness) and higher-level reading skills (e.g., listening and reading comprehension) should be measured. Students' performance on these assessments will identify their strengths and weaknesses; that is, identify the why. District leaders play a critical role in ensuring that such assessments are adopted, implemented with fidelity, and interpreted in ways that inform action. When integrated into a system of support, these tools enable more equitable instructional decision-making across classrooms, schools, and student groups. Addressing the underlying causes of non-proficient reading through personalized evidence-based instruction will have a positive effect on students' understanding of course content, as well as on their college and career readiness.

Darnell's instructional focus:

On word recognition and reading comprehension assessments, Darnell's scores were below those of his peers. However, his score on a listening comprehension assessment was well above those of his peers, which suggests that he has the necessary vocabulary, syntactic awareness, general knowledge, and critical thinking to comprehend when the demands of decoding are removed. Lack of accurate and automatic decoding is why Darnell seems to be underachieving. His most pressing instructional needs are explicit, systematic decoding and spelling instruction that will develop accurate and fluent reading and improve his spelling. He will also benefit from morphology instruction (i.e., study of Latin and Greek word parts), which will serve two purposes: aid his accurate and automatic decoding of long words and further his growth in academic vocabulary. Decodable text will help Darnell build fluency, while exposure to grade-level-appropriate complex text will continue the advancement of his vocabulary, syntactic and general knowledge, and critical thinking.

At the district level, students like Darnell highlight the need for structured decoding instruction in secondary settings and professional learning that equips teachers—particularly content-area educators—to recognize and respond to dyslexia-related decoding challenges.

Persona: Darnell (Profile 2)		
Strengths	**Weaknesses**	**Instructional Needs**
• vocabulary • syntactic knowledge • listening comprehension	• word recognition • spelling • fluency • reading comprehension	• decoding and spelling • fluency practice with decodable text • morphology • listening to and analyzing increasingly complex text

Linda's instructional focus:

Linda's word recognition assessment score was well above those of her peers, but on vocabulary, syntax, and reading comprehension assessments, Linda's scores were below her peers' scores, which is why she is a non-proficient reader. She needs explicit, systematic instruction in grammar and vocabulary. Morphology instruction will be helpful in furthering her academic vocabulary. Most importantly, Linda needs to learn skills (e.g. identifying and understanding similes) and strategies (e.g. making an inference based on a simile) that are required to read increasingly complex text. Initially, she will require intensive scaffolding when reading complex text. Concrete examples (i.e., specific, picturable), graphics, and repetition are essential scaffolding strategies for Linda.

For district administrators, Linda's profile points to the need for professional development that deepens teacher capacity in academic language instruction, especially in content-area classes where students like Linda may be overlooked due to fluent decoding.

Persona: Linda (Profile 3)		
Strengths	**Weaknesses**	**Instructional Needs**
• word recognition • spelling • fluency	• integration of information • vocabulary • nonliteral language (e.g., idioms, metaphors, multiple meanings) • syntactic knowledge • listening and reading comprehension	• vocabulary and morphology • nonliteral language • grammar • skills and strategies for understanding increasingly complex text • scaffolded reading of more complex text • concrete examples, graphics, and repetition

Tyler's instructional focus:

Tyler's assessment scores of lower- and higher-level reading skills are all below those of his peers. The disruptions in his learning and the resulting gaps in his knowledge and lack of motivation explain why Tyler is a non-proficient reader. His greatest instructional needs are intensive, explicit, and systematic decoding and spelling instruction. Although he does show a relative strength in listening comprehension, he still needs explicit, systematic instruction in vocabulary, morphology, and grammar. Decodable text is important for the development of his fluency. Listening to and analyzing increasingly complex text will advance Tyler's academic vocabulary, syntactic awareness, and general knowledge. Text that matches his interests and pockets of knowledge will be motivating. Most of all, Tyler needs consistent and sustained instruction.

From a district perspective, Tyler's instructional plan underscores the importance of continuity in intervention services and the role of cross-site instructional alignment in supporting mobile or underserved student populations.

Persona: Tyler (Profile 4)		
Strengths	**Weaknesses**	**Instructional Needs**
• "street smarts" • pockets of insightful knowledge • relative strength in listening comprehension • oral discussion and presentation	• motivation • gaps in knowledge • word recognition • spelling • fluency • vocabulary • syntactic knowledge • reading comprehension	• decoding and spelling • vocabulary and morphology • grammar • decodable text for fluency • opportunities to listen to and analyze complex text that matches interests and pockets of knowledge • consistent and sustained instruction

Izabella's instructional focus:

Not surprisingly, Izabella's scores on assessments of lower- and higher-level reading skills in English were below those of her English-speaking peers, which is why she struggles with reading proficiency in English. Her instructional needs are explicit, systematic instruction in English decoding, spelling, and grammar. Additionally, Izabella needs opportunities to read decodable texts to increase fluency and appropriate texts in English to increase her vocabulary, background knowledge, and understanding of nonliteral language. Morphology instruction will be helpful in increasing her academic vocabulary and will be of interest to Izabella because many Latin-based affixes and roots in English are the same or similar in Spanish. As Izabella gains fluency and language proficiency in English, she can begin to read increasingly complex text with scaffolding that will decrease as she gains reading proficiency in English.

District leaders should ensure that instructional materials, assessments, and PD offerings reflect a commitment to asset-based, language-informed literacy instruction, especially for Emergent Bilingual students progressing through English proficiency levels.

Persona: Izabella (Profile 4)		
Strengths	**Weaknesses**	**Instructional Needs**
• lower- and higher-level reading skills in Spanish • Level 3 English language proficiency	In English: • word recognition • spelling • fluency • vocabulary • nonliteral language • syntactic knowledge • listening and reading comprehension	In English: • decoding, spelling, and fluency • vocabulary and morphology • nonliteral language • grammar • opportunities to read texts independently • more complex text as fluency and language proficiency increases • scaffolding with concrete examples and graphics

Summary

Reading proficiency is the key to academic success and economic opportunities, and time is of the essence where non-proficient adolescent readers are concerned. Fine-grained assessments can identify students' strengths and weaknesses in critical reading skills and create learner profiles. Learner profiles, exemplified by personas, can guide the delivery of personalized instruction that will meet the learning needs of non-proficient readers. Knowing and addressing the why—the underlying cause—will improve students' ability to analyze and comprehend increasingly complex text, leading to greater proficiency and academic success, as well as the economic opportunities that follow.

For district administrators, the call to action is clear: accelerate literacy gains by embedding these insights into system-wide practices. This includes adopting diagnostic tools that surface instructional needs, prioritizing professional learning that reflects the complexity of adolescent reading, and ensuring that every secondary educator—across ELA and content areas—is prepared to support diverse learner profiles. Systemic, informed leadership can transform the literacy trajectory for adolescent students.

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