

Testimony of Andrés Henríquez  
Program Officer, Carnegie Corporation of New York

**COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND LABOR  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
HONORABLE GEORGE MILLER, CHAIR**

Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary and Secondary Education  
Honorable Dale Kildee, Chair

*“Improving the Literacy Skills of Children and Young Adults”*

November 19, 2009

***Introduction***

Chairman Kildee, Ranking Member Castle and members of the subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to speak today. My name is Andrés Henríquez and I serve as a program officer at Carnegie Corporation of New York, which is the philanthropic organization established in 1911 by Andrew Carnegie to do "real and permanent good in this world".

I am particularly proud to be serving at Carnegie Corporation as the foundation nears its 100th year as a philanthropy.

Carnegie Corporation's name has been practically synonymous with literacy for close to a century. The foundation's legacy includes over 2000 free public libraries established by Andrew Carnegie. We also funded the development and initial production of the PBS television series, Sesame Street, now celebrating its 40th anniversary. And our focus on education extends globally.

Today I will speak with you about our recent initiative called Advancing Literacy, which is working to expand knowledge and practices in literacy beyond third grade. Our work has shown that strong literacy skills beyond grade 3 is the cornerstone for success in high school and for college readiness and beyond.

This insight grows out of an earlier initiative to reform high schools, which we funded with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The high school reform work, which was aimed at promoting systemic and district-wide reform in seven urban communities, produced a critical--if unexpected--finding.

Almost half of the students entering 9th grade were reading several years below grade level. It became clear that the kinds of outcomes we wanted to achieve from this initiative--higher graduation rates, more students going on to college, more students taking Advanced Placement courses--were going to be difficult to achieve because of students' low literacy levels.

The problem was not limited to these seven districts. In fact, I learned that 8th grade reading scores had not improved in more than 30 years. And, 70% of entering 9th graders were reading below grade.

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Simply put: these high school students were not understanding or engaging with text.

We discovered that struggling readers represent a substantial proportion of students who are dropping out of our high schools. As 4th graders, their scores are among the best in the world. But by eighth grade their scores are much, much lower. By the time they get to 10th grade, U.S. students' scores are among the lowest in the world.

The surprising conclusion from this work was that good early literacy instruction does not inoculate students against struggle or failure later on.

And let me just say, while this issue is exacerbated by poverty and is particularly prevalent in poorer urban districts, the comprehension problem is also common in middle class suburbs, exurbs, and rural areas throughout our country. This is a problem in every single one of your districts. It is clear from our NAEP, or our Nation's Report Card, that too few students are reading at the most advanced levels.

And many students who do graduate from high school are not prepared for college-level coursework. This lack of strong literacy skills is so widespread that many colleges and universities have introduced remedial reading programs for the large numbers of freshmen unable to cope with the quantity and complexity of college-level work.

70% of students who take one or more college remedial reading course do not attain a degree or certificate within 8 years of enrollment. And this handicap extends into our workforce: private industry estimates that it now spends as much as \$3.1 billion per year to bolster the writing skills of entry-level workers.

President Obama has pledged that by the year 2020 we will have the highest percentage of college graduates in the world. We've done a great job convincing nearly every high school student in the land that, with a college degree, comes the promise of career success.

But it is all meaningless if those high school graduates don't have the fundamental literacy skills necessary to succeed.

***So, where does this leave us:***

We had thought--or hoped--that if you worked to get a student to read with proficiency by 4th grade you could call it 'success' and move on. If they weren't proficient by 4th grade, you'd prevail upon 'hope' that they would catch-up in later grades.

Yet, it is after 4th grade that far greater demands are placed on students' literacy skills, and far less time is spent teaching literacy proficiency. At this point students are no longer learning to read, but reading to learn.

That's what led us to create the Advancing Literacy Initiative. The goal has been to target reading for young people in grades 4-12. Since then we have established and built research,

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policy and practice specifically in adolescent literacy. Our reports and studies have created a body of work to better understand the literacy needs of our students.

***So, why do we have this problem of adolescent literacy to begin with?***

Middle and high schools students must decipher more complex passages, synthesize information at a higher level, and learn to form independent conclusions based on evidence. They must develop special skills and strategies for reading text in each of the different content areas including science, math and history.

The demands of literacy change and intensify quickly after 4th grade: Texts are longer and more complicated and vocabulary is more specialized. Additionally, students must grapple with the increasing importance of comprehending graphic representations, particularly in science and mathematics.

There are also infrastructural issues:

- There's a shortage of qualified literacy experts to coach and teach students and teachers in the middle grades and high school;
- Teachers will argue that they are not literacy teachers but teachers of content so it is difficult for content-area literacy instruction to take place;
- There's a decrease in student motivation to read as children progress from 4th grade through 12th grade;
- And, middle and high schools are not accustomed to using assessments to identify and target students who need literacy assistance.

***So, what can we do?***

Over the last 40 years our nation's adolescent literacy rates have been stagnant. Recent success in improving early literacy is a very good start. But, good early literacy is only a foundation, not the whole structure. We must reengineer our nation's schools to support adolescent learning and the ambitious goals of "literacy for all." This is how we can get there:

*1st, Increase Title I support for middle and high schools.*

At the moment only 5 percent of federal Title I funds go to middle and high schools. If the nation is to remain competitive we must increase our high school graduation and college-going rates among our most disadvantaged students.

An infusion of resources at the secondary level focused on higher levels of literacy is critical to making this happen.

*2nd, Establish Fewer, clearer, higher Common standards.*

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This will help to increase attention to reading and writing and especially focus on comprehension that can be embedded in other content areas.

*3rd, Fully fund and expand a comprehensive preK-12 literacy continuum with specific support allocated for grades 4-12.*

This way more students and their teachers will have access to federal support. Last week the LEARN Act, was introduced and was the first critical step to meet recommendations at the federal level. We acknowledge the work of Chairman Miller and Representatives Polis and Yarmuth for introducing this promising piece of legislation.

*4th, Investigate the costs and benefits of linking the Nation's Report Card to international literacy tests.*

While NAEP has been indispensable in tracking America's educational progress, it provides no sense of how America stands in relation to other nations. Funding an effort to equate long-term trend NAEP test with international literacy tests such as PISA and PIRLS would allow us to get an instant snapshot of how our young people are performing vis-a-vis the rest of the world.

*Finally, increase federal funding for evidenced-based research for adolescent literacy.*

We need to intervene and individualize instruction with students as soon as they begin to lose ground. We need increased government funded research at NICHD and IES that could demonstrate how best to assess adolescents in order to determine their need for intervention and support.

In conclusion, the status quo in middle and high schools in America is no longer acceptable. It is based on a 20th century vision of the literacy skills which no longer guarantee success after high school. High school graduates today face higher expectations in the new global economy than ever before. To become college and work-ready citizens, our students must receive explicit instruction in content-area reading and writing.

Our goal must be to build a national movement that supports young people in becoming engaged and competent readers in the 21st century.

Thank you for your attention this morning.

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**Appendix A Carnegie Corporation of New York's Advancing Literacy Initiative: Works and Commissioned Papers. Most posted on [www.carnegie.org/literacy](http://www.carnegie.org/literacy)**

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