Preventing

Through intensive reading instruction, the Reading Edge gives adolescents the boost they need to become successful readers.

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There is a literacy crisis in U.S. secondary schools. Too many students enter high school reading far below grade level (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2003). The problem is worst among disadvantaged students: On the 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress, 43 percent of disadvantaged 8th graders scored below the basic level, compared with 19 percent of nonpoor students (Institute of Education Sciences, 2005).

The middle school years offer the last chance for many struggling students to build the literacy skills they need to succeed in demanding high school courses. To give their students a boost in this crucial skill, many middle schools now offer reading instruction to all or most students. It matters a great deal, however, *how* middle schools teach reading. Compared with elementary school students, middle schoolers have more sophisticated interests and social skills, and those who struggle in reading have little patience for methods or materials designed for young children. Effective middle school reading instruction must respond to adolescent students' developmental needs and build on their strengths.

The Reading Edge

At Eastern Greenbrier Middle School and C. H. Price Middle School, reading is job one for every student. Greenbrier is located in Ronceverte, West Virginia, a town rich in natural beauty and recreation opportunities, but with high poverty rates—more than 50 percent of the school's students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Price Middle School is also located in a rural setting—Interlachen, Florida—and 69 percent of its students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. In 2006–07, Greenbrier and Price allowed researchers to randomly assign half of their 6th graders to the traditional reading course and the other half to a new reading program called the Reading Edge, developed by the Success for All Foundation. Designed to break the cycle of reading failure that many young adolescents experience, the Reading Edge incorporates the following components.

Cooperative Learning

Research has found that cooperative learning is effective at all grade levels (see Rohrbeck, Ginsburg-Block, Fantuzzo, & Miller, 2003; Slavin, Hurley, & Chamberlain, 2003), but this approach is particularly appropriate to the developmental needs of middle school students. Young adolescents are strongly interested in competition, in taking responsibility, and in one another. Cooperative learning builds on these attributes, allowing students to be noisy, active, and social in the pursuit of academic excellence.

In their Reading Edge class, students

Reading Failure

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are assigned to four-member teams and are told that they are responsible for the success of their teammates as well as themselves. Students study together and coach one another, but on regular assessments they must show what they can do on their own. Teams are recognized as successful when members improve on their past performance. Students encourage and help one another because they know their team only succeeds when every team member succeeds.

In a Reading Edge class at C. H. Price, the visiting Success for All coach observed a team of students who were developing a comfortable rapport as they absorbed an expository book called *Feeding the World* by Peter Winkler. The text introduced complex issues at the intersection of economics and science, and the students needed to call on all their available strategies to understand it.

After partners took turns reading, clarifying, and summarizing several passages, they identified the main ideas and used a graphic organizer (an "idea tree") to record them and the corresponding supporting details. Next, students answered questions about what they had read using *team talk*, a Reading Edge routine that guides collaborative text discussions. In team talk, all students read the questions silently. Then one student reads a question aloud (checking to see that all team members are actively listening); the next student restates the question, clarifying any troublesome issues; a third student answers the question; and the fourth student agrees, disagrees, or adds to the answer.

During the *Feeding the World* discus-

sion, students struggled to answer the following question: "According to the text, what are the consequences of using chemicals like pesticides and fertilizers to help solve the problem of feeding the world? List the pros and the cons of this solution." One student did not understand the importance of the phrase, "according to the text." He attempted to answer the question using only what he knew about pesticides and fertilizers and found that he could not support his answer very well. His partner pointed out that this question was asking them to retell what the author had to say about using chemicals, not what the reader thought—a comment that sent all team members back to the text for the answer. It was apparent that without the opportunity for sharing, most of the

tion, thus building confidence in their ability to use strategies to understand text and answer academic questions.

Proactive Classroom Management
Young adolescents are naturally rambunctious. Their energy can be a problem if it's not channeled into productive activity, but it can also be a powerful positive force if properly directed. To build on this developmental strength, teachers need to design rapidly paced, varied, active classroom lessons—lessons that continually engage students in motivating activities that are worthy of their attention and energies. Reading Edge teachers use research-based classroom management methods that emphasize engaging all students, maintaining a rapid pace with high levels of success,

and not to the whole class, the pace did not lag. When a question was an important cog in the wheel of understanding, the teacher added numbered heads, a technique in which the students do not know who will be called on to answer a question to the group, so they must make sure that everyone on their team is ready.

Instruction in Metacognitive Skills
An important developmental strength of young adolescents is their rapidly growing ability to think about and manage their own learning (Pressley, 2003). Reading Edge classes build on this strength, teaching students proactive strategies for comprehending difficult text, such as summarization, prediction, questioning, and clarification. Working in teams, students learn how and when to apply each strategy so that they can become strategic and thoughtful readers, gaining skills that will help them study and learn in school and beyond. They are encouraged to test out different strategies and find the ones that work for them personally.

"Man, I love this—this is not work, it's learning!" exclaimed one student who had spent the first few months in reading class with his head on his desk, refusing to participate. At the beginning of the year, he obviously had little hope that anyone could help him with the skills he had failed at so many times. But school became a different place for him once the learning task was personal-

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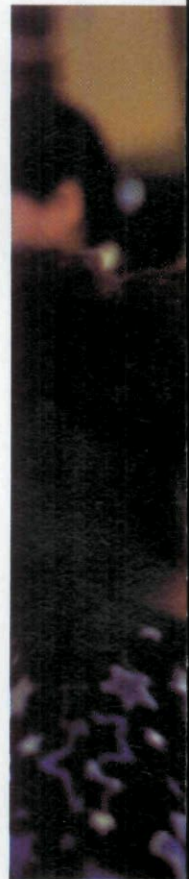
team members would have written a weak answer and moved on.

This discussion question posed further challenges when one student was not sure what "pros and cons" meant, and another student did not know how to go about finding them. After one team member gave an example (the pros and cons of trading a particular football player), the rest of the team split up the task of looking back in the text and listing the pros and cons of pesticide and fertilizer use.

In the past, the comprehension challenges posed by this question might have led to off-task behavior. In this case, the students used their team as a safe place to dissect a troublesome ques-

and giving continual individual and team feedback (Emmer, Evertson, & Worsham, 2006). Strategies include think-pair-share, numbered heads, and discuss and defend.

At Greenbrier, the Success for All coach observed students with widely diverse reading levels benefiting from the teacher's use of think-pair-share. The teacher was able to keep everyone's attention focused on the class discussion by deftly moving from her instruction to a timely question and then to an opportunity to share an answer with a partner, all in a short time. Allowing everyone the opportunity to answer every question kept students on task. Because everyone was simultaneously talking to a partner

strategy use; and points they earn for class work, homework, and tests. The Learning Guide also helps students stay organized. Students keep track of their work as they complete it and identify the work they still need to master.

Frequent Assessment and Feedback

Young adolescents work best when they can see that they are achieving success and earning recognition. The Reading Edge facilitates this success by grouping students in classes according to their reading levels and then moving them forward as rapidly as possible, changing groupings every nine weeks—or sooner if a student's progress warrants it. Even students who are initially placed at a reading level far below their grade level are motivated by knowing that they can move up rapidly as they improve their skills.

The Reading Edge provides students with many opportunities to succeed and to receive accurate feedback about their progress. Students can earn recognition by reading books at home and reporting on them, by sharing how they used vocabulary words in new contexts, and by succeeding as a team in helping all team members master new content and improve on past performance.

After a group of students at Greenbrier finished a quarterly reading assessment, their coach asked them why they had worked so diligently at the computerized assessment despite little adult supervision. The students answered that they wanted to know how much progress they were making toward their goals. Asked to explain what would motivate them to work even harder, students joked about rewards they would like (mostly pizza and ice cream), but then came up with the idea of a business card on which they could record their scores. The business card would motivate them, they said,

ized—framed in terms of finding out which reading strategies worked best for him.

Goal Setting

Unlike most elementary students, middle school students can imagine alternative futures and plan toward goals. Schools can build on this developmental strength by having students discuss their personal aspirations and set learning goals in collaboration with their teachers and teammates. This motivates students to work hard and persevere in the face of inevitable frustrations.

Every Reading Edge class begins the year with a social and academic problem-solving curriculum in which students learn how to communicate

effectively, work collaboratively, and set both short- and long-term learning goals on the basis of their personal ambitions. At the same time, students take a baseline reading assessment and are placed in a reading class by instructional level. Teachers share with students how they performed on the assessment and engage students in straight talk about reading difficulties they may have had in the past. Teachers and students then jointly set goals, and students commit to meeting those expectations.

Students track their progress using a Learning Guide, a self-assessment tool in which they record their personal goals; their strengths and areas that need improvement; new vocabulary words for each lesson; personal reflections on

because it would give them a tangible document that they could carry to show their achievement to their families and friends.

Program Elements Work Together

When cooperative learning, classroom management, metacognitive skills, goal setting, and frequent assessment and feedback merge and overlap, the result is synergy. A classroom observation of one Reading Edge teacher, Ms. Harrison,[1] shows how program elements seamlessly work together.

Students have begun reading Gary Soto's *Baseball in April*. Ms. Harrison asks them to use team talk to discuss the day's Big Question: What do we mean by "first impressions"? A buzz emerges from the teams of four.

After one minute, the teacher uses the "Shave and a Haircut" melody to get the students' attention: "Da-na-na-na-na . . ." to which the kids respond, "na-na!" The room immediately falls silent. "I want you to think about the first thing others think when they see you. Is there anything you would want to change about the first impression you make?" Ms. Harrison calls on students, expanding on and reinforcing their answers. "Are first impressions always accurate?" In response to student mumbling, she comments, "I hear the potential for some team talk. Discuss accurate first impressions and inaccurate first impressions." Teams unravel this idea while she walks among them, clarifying, questioning, and prompting.

Thirty seconds later, "Da-na-na-na-na . . ." "na-na!" "Let me hear from Macy." Macy shrugs her shoulders. "Okay. Talk about it with your team again." Teams resume their discussions for another 30 seconds, after which Ms. Harrison uses the same strategy to recenter the students' attention.

"Okay. Get out your new books. You first saw this book yesterday. Talk to your team about what you first thought when you saw this book. What were your first impressions?" Thirty seconds of talk ensue. "Who would like to share from their team?" One boy comments that his team thinks there will be Spanish-speaking people in this book, judging by the author's name. "Good prediction on the basis of the author's last name!" Another boy jokes that the book will include someone getting beaten up, because on the cover, boys in the back of a pick-up truck carry bats. Ms. Harrison doesn't skip a beat. "Ah! So, at first you saw the picture, and then you saw the title. Did your first impression change? We're going to see if you guys are right in your first impressions."

She asks students what a theme is. One student suggests "a play." She asks them to think about Universal Studios, and several shout, "A theme park!" She points out that they are using their background knowledge. "Team talk question: What is a theme?" After 20 seconds, she asks one team to share what they think.

They suggest, "The main idea?" Ms. Harrison responds, "Or the thing the author wants us to think about when we've finished the book. If we have to identify it, we need to know where to look. Where do we look for clues to identify the theme? Talk with your team." After 30 seconds, she elicits responses including "on the back of the book," "chapter titles," and "in the character's actions." Teams discuss other ways of predicting the theme.

Ms. Harrison reads briefly from Chapter 1 of *Baseball in April* and then directs the students to pair off within teams and read the rest of the section, alternating as reader and listener. After this partner reading, the following dialogue rounds out the lesson:

MS. HARRISON: What do we see the character Alphonso doing?

MARC: Pushing on his teeth!

MACY: Doing his hair!

MS. HARRISON: What is the author trying to tell us about Alphonso? What is the theme we're getting at?

GARY: He's weird!

MACY: He's normal!

JOSÉ: Weird for girls, normal for boys.

MS. HARRISON: Who do you think Gary Soto is telling us this is normal behavior for?

TIFFANY: Boys.

JOSÉ: Teenagers.

MS. HARRISON: It kind of goes back to our Big Question today about first impressions, because normal teenagers are worried about . . .

MACY: What other people think.

MS. HARRISON: So the theme could be worrying about first impressions—what people think.

Evaluations of the Program

In the study conducted at Greenbrier and Price middle schools, both schools randomly assigned 6th graders to Reading Edge classes or to those that used traditional reading textbooks (Chamberlain, Daniels, Madden, & Slavin, 2007). Students were pre-tested in fall 2005 and post-tested in spring 2006 on the Gates McGinitie Reading Test. Controlling for pre-tests, students in the Reading Edge classes scored significantly higher than those in traditional instruction. A second group of 6th graders were pre-tested in fall 2006 and post-tested in spring 2007, and the results were nearly identical.

In another evaluation of the program (Slavin, Daniels, & Madden, 2005), seven middle schools around the United States that used the Reading Edge were matched with local schools that used traditional text-books. Reading Edge schools averaged a gain of 24.6 percent on state reading assessments in three years. Control schools gained only 2.2 percent, and other schools in the same states averaged a gain of 4.2 percent.

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Not Too Late

Middle school is not too late to accelerate the reading achievement of young adolescents. Our experiences with the Reading Edge, now used in 140 middle schools across the United States, tell us that schools can significantly improve the reading performance of middle school students. Students at this level can still become strategic, self-aware, and successful readers, developing the skills and motivation they will need to handle difficult secondary school content.

This outcome requires reading methods that respect and build on the developmental strengths of young adolescent students—their interests, social enthusiasm, desire for independence, and craving for honest, positive feedback. The Reading Edge provides just one example of how high levels of reading can become a reality for students at a crucial moment in their progression to high school graduation and beyond. EL

[1]Teacher and student names are pseudonyms.

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