SECTION 6:
Assessment

ASSESSING INDIVIDUAL STUDENT NEEDS

Students' difficulties in reading comprehension, writing and content learning can involve a variety of underlying weaknesses. Ongoing assessment of key component areas is essential to tailoring instruction to meet individual student needs. Important component areas include accurate word identification, fluent reading in context, oral vocabulary and oral language comprehension, spelling, conventions of writing, and the use of comprehension and writing strategies.

As noted earlier, ongoing assessment can involve many measures already used as part of everyday classroom work; this kind of assessment does not need to be inordinately burdensome for teachers. For instance, teachers can observe students' oral vocabularies and language comprehension as part of classroom discussions or oral presentations; they can monitor spelling and use of writing conventions through analyses of students' day-to-day written work, and they can assess accuracy and fluency of word identification through students' oral reading. For students requiring additional assessments, a specialist, such as a reading consultant, special educator, or speech/language teacher, may sometimes provide assistance.

Table 5 displays examples of patterns of literacy-related difficulties that may be seen among students in Grades 4-12, including students' performance on assessments, some characteristics teachers may observe in classroom situations, and the kinds of activities that may be helpful with each pattern. (See also Leach et al., 2003; Spear-Swerling, 2004a, 2004b.) Although a variety of causes may underlie each pattern, an understanding of different patterns is nevertheless useful for informing instruction.

Consider, for example, students with a pattern of difficulties specific to oral vocabulary knowledge and oral language comprehension (but approximately grade-appropriate word-identification skills). These students may include native English speakers who simply have not been exposed to the kind of vocabulary or language competencies important to success in formal schooling, as well as students who have genuine learning difficulties involving language. They may also include some English language learners who learned to read in a native language that is alphabetic (e.g., Spanish); these students can often transfer to English alphabetic skills acquired in their native language, but they may experience comprehension difficulties involving lack of exposure to English vocabulary. Regardless of the underlying cause, however, all of these students need an instructional emphasis on acquiring English vocabulary knowledge and/or language competencies.

The patterns in the table and the suggestions for classroom practice apply to all content areas. However, teachers could observe some variability in a given student's performance based on factors such as student motivation, student background knowledge, specific content requirements, or the teacher's style of teaching. For example, a student with difficulties specific to reading fluency might have a knowledge base in history, or a strong interest in history, that helps him/her to perform somewhat better in that content area than in others; a student with oral vocabulary or language weaknesses might

perform better with a science teacher who incorporates a great deal of hands-on laboratory work in the classroom than with one who relies heavily on a lecture style or on textbook reading. This variability illustrates teachers' power to influence student performance by engaging students, developing students' background knowledge, and altering or adapting their styles of teaching.

All teachers must be able to address a substantial range of individual differences in the classroom, but some students still will require additional support or remediation, especially those whose difficulties are more serious relative to other students. For instance, an eighth-grader who has severe difficulties specific to word-identification accuracy will likely need phonics instruction. Although the student must have adequate opportunities for content learning, which may require the use of alternative texts and oral presentation of some content, the student's remedial needs in terms of word identification also must be addressed. Phonics remediation may be provided by a remedial reading teacher or special educator, with content teachers involved in addressing the student's content learning needs.

Finally, although the focus of this section has been on struggling students, other students will demonstrate a consistent pattern of high achievement on assessments. These students can be found in all classes and in all school districts. They also should have their needs met, through opportunities to learn new skills, to broaden and deepen their content knowledge, and to do appropriately challenging classroom work.

TABLE 5. EXAMPLES OF PATTERNS OF READING/WRITING DIFFICULTIES SEEN IN STUDENTS IN GRADES 4-12

Patterns	Performance	Observations	Activities
Difficulties specific to word identification accuracy (often accompanied by poor reading fluency)	Student has difficulty recognizing individual words, especially out of context, or sounding out unfamiliar words (e.g., as shown on measures involving decoding of nonsense words). Rate of reading is often slow. Spelling is poor. Oral vocabulary and oral comprehension are approximately grade-appropriate or better.	Student can comprehend well when information is presented verbally, but has difficulty comprehending when reading. Student has difficulty reading grade-appropriate text due to difficulties in recognizing or sounding out individual words. Spelling problems may also make writing very difficult.	Teach important vocabulary, concepts and (where possible) comprehension strategies orally. Allow student to exploit oral strengths as much as possible (e.g., oral presentations/projects in lieu of some written work). Make sure reading materials are at the right level of difficulty, especially in terms of word-identification demands. Teach phonics and structural analysis of longer words, as well as application of those skills to spelling.

Difficulties specific to reading fluency	Student can read most grade-appropriate words accurately and can sound out most unfamiliar words, but reading is slow and/or labored relative to grade expectations. Spelling may also be poor. Oral vocabulary and oral comprehension are approximately grade-appropriate or better.	Student can comprehend well when information is presented verbally, and generally reads accurately in grade-level materials, but rate of reading is slow. Student may complain that reading tasks take an inordinately long time and that if she/he tries to read more quickly, comprehension suffers. Spelling difficulties may affect writing.	Where possible, allow extra time for completion of reading/writing tasks. Make sure reading materials are at the right level of difficulty, especially in terms of word-identification demands. Additional activities to develop fluency, such as repeated readings, may be helpful.
Difficulties specific to oral vocabulary/oral comprehension	Student recognizes most grade-appropriate words accurately in or out of context. Student can decode most unfamiliar words and reads with reasonable speed in grade-appropriate materials, but oral vocabulary and/or oral comprehension are low relative to grade expectations. Vocabulary and language weaknesses are generally evident in writing as well as reading.	Student has comprehension difficulties even when reading text she/he can read accurately and with ease. Comprehension difficulties manifest themselves in oral comprehension tasks as well as in reading tasks. Student may experience difficulties with content of writing.	Provide additional teaching of key vocabulary and oral language competencies, and encourage their application to reading/writing tasks. Make sure reading materials are at the right level of difficulty, especially in terms of vocabulary load and linguistic complexity.
Generalized reading difficulties in multiple component areas involving both word identification (accuracy and/or fluency) and oral language (vocabulary and/or comprehension)	Student has difficulty with word-identification accuracy or fluency, but also with oral vocabulary and oral comprehension. Spelling usually is poor.	Student has difficulty reading grade-appropriate materials accurately and/or fluently, but also experiences oral comprehension difficulties. Reading and writing performance may be especially impaired due to problems with multiple components of literacy.	Provide remediation of basic word identification skills/fluency, as well as additional teaching of key vocabulary and oral language competencies. Make sure reading materials are at the right level of difficulty, both in terms of word-identification demands and vocabulary load/linguistic complexity.

ASSESSING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF A COMPREHENSIVE CLASSROOM LITERACY MODEL

In addition to assessing individual students' needs, all Grades 4-12 teachers, including content area teachers, must examine their own instructional practices and programs on an ongoing basis. The following self assessment, which is based on the work of Nancy Boyles, a Southern Connecticut State University professor, provides a framework for teachers to reflect on daily instruction and for administrators to use when observing teachers.

SELF ASSESSMENT OF LITERACY INSTRUCTION FOR GRADES 4-12 TEACHERS

DO I:

❑ use national, state and district standards and curriculum to select the content and strategies I teach?

❑ use formative and summative assessment data to guide my selection of content, strategies and materials to be used?

❑ inform my students of the learning objectives for each lesson?

❑ purposefully use a variety of teacher-learner classroom configurations?
    ❑ whole class?
    ❑ small group?
    ❑ pairs?
    ❑ individuals?

❑ regularly work on content-based materials at each student's instructional reading level?
    ❑ monitor small groups several times a week?
    ❑ regularly use assessment data to identify instructional levels?

❑ provide instruction using materials that are at student instructional reading levels?
(Instructional level is that reading level at which a student automatically recognizes and understands approximately 90 percent of the words in the selection and can comprehend approximately 75 percent of the material. The student needs teacher support and guidance to adequately understand and evaluate material written at the instructional level. Textbooks typically are written at instructional level. Independent reading level, on the other hand, is that reading level at which a student knows approximately 98 percent of the words and can comprehend the selection with 90 percent accuracy with NO teacher support or guidance. Textbooks are rarely designed by their authors or publishers to be at students' independent reading level.)

❑ access the Internet and other technologies to differentiate for individual students?

❑ have criteria for selecting texts?

❑ use texts of different genres, cultures and complexities?

❑ adequately scaffold my students' instruction **before reading?**
    ❑ help activate students' prior knowledge, generate predictions and establish purposes for reading, and teach a few new words from a chapter or text before students encounter them in the reading?
    ❑ use vocabulary activities to teach and monitor the learning of new words?
    ❑ ask students to scan expository texts for bolded or italicized words critical to comprehension?

❑ adequately support my students' comprehension **during reading?**
    ❑ help students become actively engaged as they read and use essential comprehension strategies?
    ❑ regularly help students learn about and use comprehension strategies using the explicit teaching model?
    ❑ display strategy posters in the classroom for students' easy reference?

- ❑ move systematically from the use of shorter reading assignments to longer assignments in order to foster students' independent use of strategies?
  - ❑ help students apply comprehension strategies to both fiction and information texts?
  - ❑ help students articulate the role of specific strategies and the use of strategies in general?
  - ❑ ask students to describe how using a comprehension strategy enhanced their understanding of a text?
  - ❑ help them as readers?
  - ❑ assess whether students understand the purpose of comprehension strategies in helping them become better readers?
  - ❑ consciously move students to independence in their use of comprehension strategies?
  - ❑ have students read chunks of text silently to construct basic meaning?
  - ❑ ask students to read silently during small group instruction?
  - ❑ ask students to read silently to prepare for whole class discussion?
  - ❑ have students read orally when appropriate to enhance fluency and supply evidence for the text to support a response?
  - ❑ ask students to read orally portions of the text in response to a question?
  - ❑ avoid using a "round robin" format?
  - ❑ monitor fluency and use of word identification strategies?
  - ❑ adjust instruction based on information gathered?
  - ❑ help students gain increased knowledge of how words work when they encounter hard to recognize words in context?
  - ❑ prompt students during oral reading to promote word solving?
  - ❑ conduct follow-up lessons regarding needed word-solving strategies?

- ❑ adequately scaffold students' activities **after reading** to extend and assess comprehension of the text and understanding of the reading process?
  - ❑ ask students to respond orally to the text in various ways?
  - ❑ ask questions based on CMT/CAPT reading comprehension objectives?
  - ❑ conduct follow-up discussions with students in small groups?
  - ❑ ask students to find specific evidence in a text to support a response?
  - ❑ help students develop the habit of looking back at the text for specific evidence?
  - ❑ ask students to respond in writing to open-ended comprehension questions based on their reading?
  - ❑ explicitly teach how to create a written response by explaining the criteria, modeling quality responses, and providing practice in answering open-ended questions?
  - ❑ move students toward independence in responding to open-ended questions?
  - ❑ ask students to explain in writing what comprehension strategies they use and how the strategies help them understand the text?

- ❑ use informal and formal assessments to guide my instruction?

- ❑ develop rubrics with my students and colleagues?

- ❑ collaborate with other professionals to determine criteria for proficient and exemplary work?

- ❑ work with colleagues to examine student work?

- ❑ use valid benchmark assessments to measure student progress?

- ❑ work with colleagues to examine data to inform student progress, instruction and assessments?