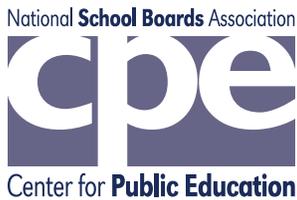


BEYOND FICTION

The importance of reading for information



Compared to their international peers, American students are actually quite good readers of literature. Yet, their performance falls dramatically when asked to read for information. Current efforts to raise academic standards—including the Common Core State Standards—are right to pay more attention to the role of nonfiction reading in producing college- and career-ready graduates. This brief explains why.

RESEARCH BRIEF

The role of nonfiction reading in elementary and secondary education, strangely enough, has become controversial. Until recently, few Americans outside of English language arts (ELA) educators probably gave much thought to how much time students should spend reading for information compared to reading literature. However, general debate over the Common Core State Standards – national K-12 academic benchmarks voluntarily adopted by over 40 states – has provoked new public scrutiny over the type of texts assigned to students.

Here’s why: One of the distinguishing characteristics of the new ELA standards is the explicit call for more reading, interpreting, and analysis of nonfiction texts alongside novels, drama, and poetry. The Common Core authors defend the move as crucial in order to assure students leave school “able to read and comprehend independently and proficiently the kinds of complex texts commonly found in college and careers” (NGA & CCSSO, 2010).

However, Common Core critics claim that the emphasis will drive literature out of classrooms, with some questioning whether informational reading even contributes to students’ college and career readiness. Others maintain that nonfiction texts will bore students (Huffington Post, 2012; Layton, 2012; Stotsky, 2012).

In this brief, CPE examines the role of informational reading in post-secondary education, workplace, and day-to-day life, and looks at how well American students and adults currently perform in this domain. Our review shows that informational literacy is a necessary skill for adults to have in their personal toolbox. Unfortunately, we also find that adult proficiency in this area is lagging, even though our younger students are making significant reading gains.

Whether your state or district follows the Common Core or is defining its own standards, this brief will show that nonfiction reading deserves co-star billing next to its literary sibling. We conclude with questions school leaders should consider when examining their current ELA programs in order to ensure their students develop into strong, critical consumers of complex, informational texts.

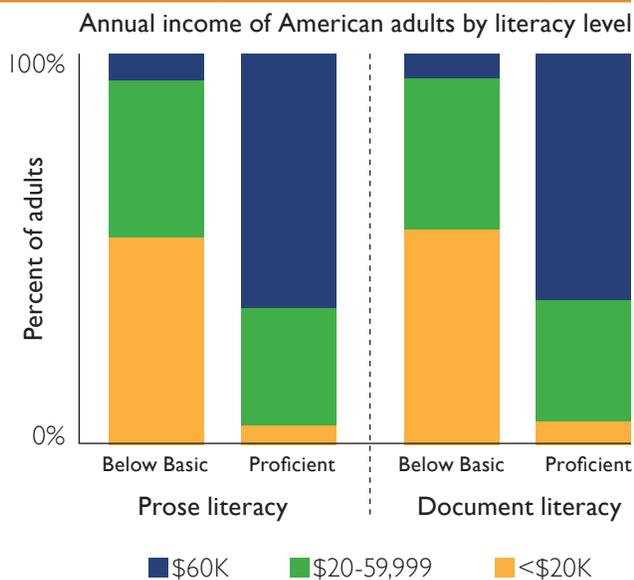
Reading Literature is Half of the Equation

Unfortunately, many adults in the U.S. simply lack the literacy skills they need to negotiate work and everyday life. The literacy rates of American adults overall are below the international average (OECD, 2013). What this means for those at the bottom is startling. Approximately 30

million American adults are unable to read and understand a newspaper article, while another 27 million cannot follow directions on a street map because they lack the literacy skills required to understand and use simple documents (Kutner et al., 2007). Higher unemployment levels and lower wages are some of the consequences for individuals with weak literacy skills. Those costs continue into the community in the form of lost taxes, higher demand for social services, and lower voter participation (Jerald, 2009) (Chart 1).

Interestingly, American students are good at reading literature. Among fourth-graders, only Finland's students outperform their U.S. counterparts by statistically significant margins on international assessments of reading for "literary experience" (PIRLS, 2011). However, our fourth-graders' performance drops off when it comes to informational reading, slipping behind four other countries. Similarly, our teens perform above the international average when reading "to reflect and evaluate" — skills developed through

CHART 1: As literacy levels increase so do wages



SOURCE: NCES, Literacy in Everyday Life, April 2007

CHART 2: US students do well reading literature, but performance drops off dramatically when reading for information

	Countries that outperform the US when reading for the purpose of:	
	literary experience/reflect & evaluate	acquire & use information
US 4th grade ranking PIRLS, 2011	Finland	Finland, Hong Kong, Russian Federation, Singapore
US 15-year-olds ranking PISA, 2009	Australia, Canada, Finland, Korea, New Zealand	Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Japan, Korea, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland

Rankings based on statistically significant differences in scores between US and other countries.

SOURCES: NCES, Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, 2011; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Programme for International Student Assessment, 2009

close reading of fiction and poetry. Only five nations perform significantly better. But when asked “to acquire and use information” from written texts, a skill required in everyday life and work, our 15-year-olds drop behind their peers in 14 countries (PISA, 2009) (Chart 2).

Clearly, schools need to build on their success in teaching literary skills to ensure that our students are able to assimilate a wider variety of material for a wider variety of purposes. This won’t be achieved by simply replacing fiction texts with nonfiction. Rather, school officials need to broaden students’ exposure to all forms of written content and incorporate *more* reading across *all* subjects.

Informational Reading in the Common Core

Informational content comprises most of the reading required in college and the working world. Yet, expository texts make up just 7 percent of instructional reading at the elementary level and a mere 15 percent in middle school, and the complexity of those texts has declined in recent decades (NGA & CCSSO, 2010). The Common Core attempts to change that by encouraging a different balance between informative and literary content as shown in Chart 3.

According to the Common Core authors: “English teachers will still teach their students the literature and literary nonfiction texts that they choose. However, because college and career readiness overwhelmingly focuses on complex texts outside of literature, these standards also ensure students are being prepared to read, write, and research across the curriculum, including in history and science” (Common Core, 2010).

Toward this end, the Common Core delineates reading standards specifically for history/social studies, science, and technical subjects at the secondary level, in addition to standards for the English language arts classroom.

To be sure, a cross-curricular approach to secondary reading instruction brings implementation challenges since middle- and high-school teachers generally function as subject-matter specialists and traditionally have lacked the training and responsibility for reading instruction (Barth, 2013; O’Brien & Zakariya, 2009). As with any major instructional shift, teachers will need time and ongoing support to integrate the changes.

The Need for Informational Reading

Research shows that students need sustained exposure to informational texts to build critical reading strategies (NGA & CCSSO, 2010) and that instruction in informational texts, along with literary content, enhances students’ overall literacy skills. A study by the RAND Reading Group, for instance, found that students learn reading comprehension strategies more effectively when they use them to make sense of content-based texts and apply them in real-life situations, rather than learning the strategies as abstract principles (O’Brien & Zakariya, 2009).

Furthermore, a lack of exposure to informational texts—and the reading strategies necessary to comprehend the content—may play a role in pulling down the overall reading achievement of American students.

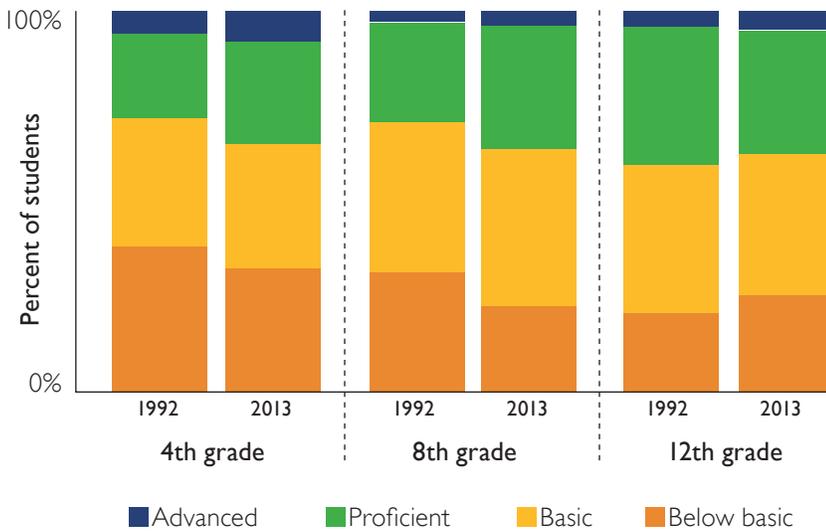
Furthermore, a lack of exposure to informational texts—and the reading strategies necessary to comprehend the content—may play a role in pulling down the overall reading achievement of American students.

CHART 3: Recommended balance of texts by school level

grade level	percent of time on literary reading	percent of time on reading for information
elementary	50%	50%
middle school	45%	55%
high school	30%	70%

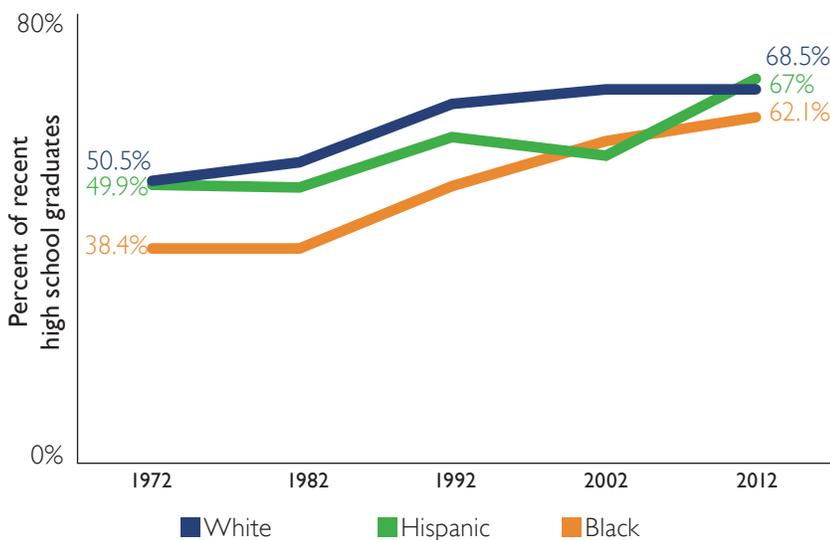
SOURCE: NAEP 2009 reading framework, recommended by Common Core Standards, 2012

CHART 4: Reading performance is improving at 4th and 8th grade, but not at 12th grade



SOURCE: NCES, Nations Report Card, 2013

CHART 5: About two-thirds of high school graduates of all racial/ethnic groups are going immediately to college—a number that has consistently grown over the last 40 years



SOURCE: NCES, Digest of Education Statistics, 2013. Enrollments of 16–24 year-olds in two- and four-year post-secondary institutions within 12 months of graduation. Includes GEDs.

Results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) show that many students simply aren't mastering the skills they need to interact with texts effectively. Despite posting reading gains overall, nearly a third of fourth-graders still score below NAEP's "basic" level in reading, meaning those students are not able to "locate relevant information, make simple inferences, [or] use their understanding of the text to identify details that support a given interpretation or conclusion" (NCES, 2014; NCES, 2013b). While eighth-graders perform somewhat better, one in five still scores below "basic," meaning they cannot locate specific facts in an article or summarize the main idea of an informational passage (NCES, 2014; NCES, 2013b).

By the time they reach high school, "students need advanced literacy skills to read and learn from the more sophisticated assignments and texts they receive for disciplinary studies, particularly in math, science, English, and history" (O'Brien & Zakariya, 2009). Yet, those are precisely the skills many American adolescents are lacking. A mere 5 percent of 12th-graders score at the "advanced" level on the NAEP reading exam, demonstrating the highest skills necessary to analyze informational texts and extract specific facts to support their conclusions (NCES, 2013b). The vast majority of 12th-graders—62 percent—do not score above the "basic" reading level (NCES, 2013) (Chart 4).

The need to accelerate reading performance is most acute with students of color, whose scores continue to lag behind their white peers. While we have made significant progress in narrowing achievement gaps at the fourth- and eighth-grade levels over the last decade, 12th grade has not made similar gains (NCES, 2013). But

ready or not, more students of all groups are continuing their education in two- and four-year colleges and universities than ever before (NCES, 2013) (Chart 5).

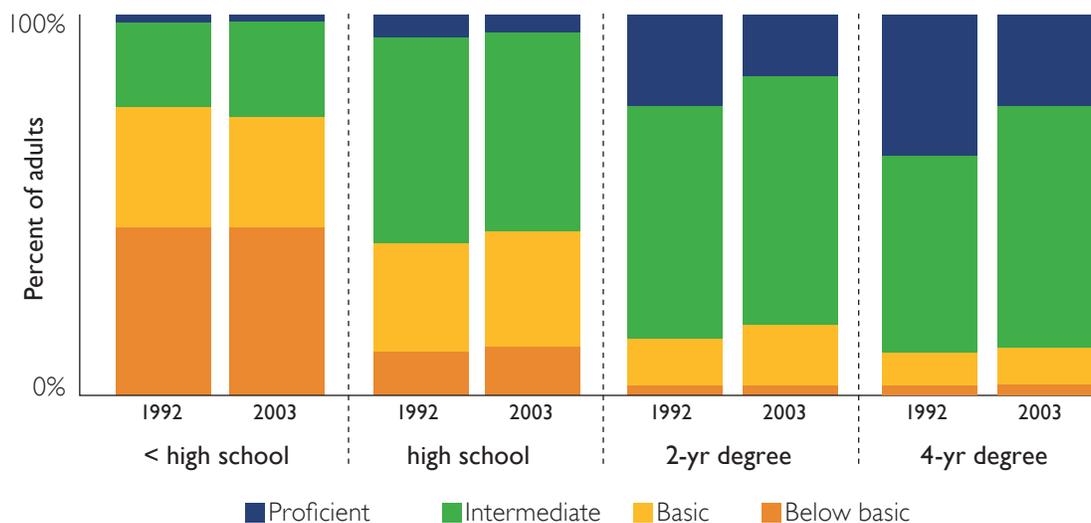
Becoming College- and Career-Ready

Once these students graduate from high school, many continue to struggle with poor literacy skills as college students and young adults. In 2013, the ACT found that only 44 percent of high school graduates who took its college-entrance exam demonstrated an aptitude to handle the reading requirements of first-year college coursework (ACT, 2013). Not surprisingly, 12 percent of entering college freshmen received some remediation in reading (NCES, 2012).

While this number is a fraction of the 42 percent who took remedial math, the stakes for these students are higher as research shows that the need for remedial reading slashes students' likelihood of earning a credential by half. Only 30 percent of freshmen who took remedial reading earn a college degree or certificate within eight years of enrollment (NCES, 2012; Adelman, 2004).

Most importantly, though, students with poor literacy skills ultimately become adults with poor literacy skills, and they face fewer job options and lower earning potential. The Paris-based Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) administers international assessments of 15-year-olds (Programme for International Student Assessment or PISA) and adults (Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies or PIAAC) in its participating member countries. When researchers analyzed data from PISA alongside PIAAC data, they found that cohorts that scored below average on PISA's literacy assessment as teens likewise scored below average on PIAAC 10 years later as young adults (OECD, 2013). Although the overlap in the populations assessed under PISA and PIAAC is imperfect — it doesn't account for differences in life experiences after high school, for instance — the trends observed

CHART 6: US adults' document literacy rates declined at nearly every education level between 1992 and 2003



SOURCE: NCES, National Assessment of Adult Literacy, 2003. Adults age 16-65.

between the two assessments still indicate a connection between the poor literacy skills of teens and the poor literacy skills of the same age group as young adults (OECD, 2013).

Moreover, the average prose and document literacy skills for U.S. adults have remained essentially the same, despite an increase in the overall educational attainment of the population (Kutner et al., 2007). By 2003, a higher percentage of U.S. adults completed an associate or bachelor’s degree and fewer left high school before graduating than in the 1990s (Kutner et al., 2007). Yet during that same period, the average prose and document literacy skills of college-educated adults actually *declined*, as it did for adults with a high school diploma (Kutner et al., 2007) (Charts 6 and 7).

CHART 7: Adults who lack basic literacy skills are at a serious disadvantage

Below basic adults MAY be able to:	Below basic adults are NOT able to:
Locate easily identifiable information and follow written instructions in simple documents	Use a television guide to find out what programs are on at a specific time (basic)
Locate where to sign a form	Identify a specific location on a map (intermediate)
	Interpret a table about blood pressure, age, and physical activity (proficient)

SOURCE: NCES, National Adult Literacy Survey, 2003

The U.S.’ high ranking in post-secondary achievement masks low literacy

By many standards, the U.S. is one of the most highly educated nations in the world. When compared to other OECD-member countries, the U.S. has “one of the smallest proportions of adults with less than high school education, and one of the largest with more than high school” (OECD, 2013). Yet, one in six U.S. adults has weak literacy skills, according to an OECD survey of adult skills, making “weak literacy more common in the U.S. than on average across [comparison] countries” (OECD, 2013) (Chart 8).

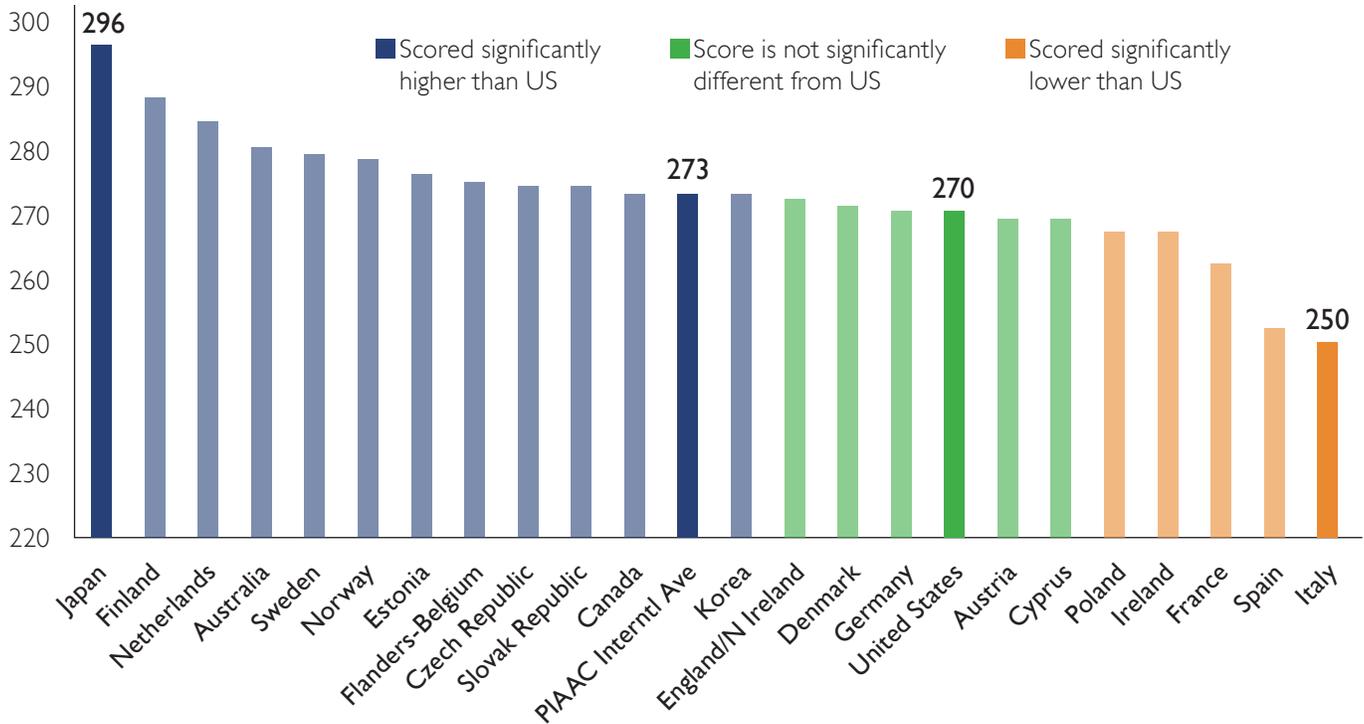
Those weak literacy skills have significant consequences for the adult population. Adults with the lowest literacy skills are more likely to report poor health, be unemployed, and earn lower incomes (Kutner et al., 2007; OECD, 2013). More than 25 percent of individuals with below basic literacy skills live in households earning less than \$10,000 per year (Kutner et al., 2007). By comparison, approximately 30 percent of individuals with the highest literacy skills live in households earning \$100,000 per year or more (Kutner et al., 2007).

Furthermore, the connection between socioeconomic status and literacy is stronger in the U.S. than in other countries, meaning that U.S. adults from low socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to have poor literacy skills than their international counterparts. They are, in turn, more likely to pass those poor literacy skills on to their own children, regardless of race or ethnicity (OECD, 2013).

In fact, adults with the lowest literacy skills are the least likely to engage their own children in activities that promote literacy development, such as reading to them or playing rhyming games (Kutner et al., 2007). Among adults with the lowest literacy skills, 41 percent say they never read to their children (Kutner et al., 2007).

CHART 8: US adults perform below the international average in literacy

Average scale score for literacy for adults 16-65 by participating country



SOURCE: OECD, Programme for the International Assessment for Adult Competencies, 2012

Information + Literature: A Complete Strategy

Among other things, America’s schools are charged with equipping the next generation with the literacy skills they need to succeed in life. Teaching informational texts alongside literature lets students practice critical comprehension strategies across subjects with real-world content, boosting students’ literacy skills overall. Additionally, “[s]trengthening our students’ performance in reading for information and analyzing complex nonfiction texts will not just prepare our graduates for the rigors of college it will make them more competitive in the workplace” (Barth, 2013).

Today, the notion of literacy “goes beyond simply being able to sound out or recognize words and understand text” and instead focuses on the idea of “[u]sing printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential” (Kutner et al., 2007, p. 2).

Reading standards need to be high and rich enough so graduates are ready for the demands of college, careers, and citizenship. Exposing students to a balance of nonfiction and fiction can provide them with valuable literary knowledge as well as the practical literacy skills they need to function in daily life. It also will help to break the cycle of poor literacy skills among our nation’s most disadvantaged groups.

CHART 9: Ideally, informational reading should be varied, complex and engaging

A sample of recommended informational reading Common Core State Standards		
Grades 2-3	Grades 6-8	Grade 11 – college-career ready
Aliki, A, <i>Medieval Feast</i>	Douglass, Frederick, <i>Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass an American Slave, Written by Himself</i>	Jefferson, Thomas, <i>The Declaration of Independence</i>
Ruffin, Frances E., <i>Martin Luther King and the March on Washington</i>	Steinbeck, John, <i>Travels with Charley: In Search of America</i>	Orwell, George, "Politics and the English Language"
Kudlinski, Kathleen V., <i>Boy Were We Wrong About Dinosaurs</i>	Preamble and First Amendment to the United States Constitution	<i>Declaration of Sentiments</i> by the Seneca Falls Conference on Women's Rights, 1848
Floca, Brian, <i>Moonshot: the Flight of Apollo 11</i>	Macaulay, David, <i>Cathedral: the Story of Its Construction</i>	Bell, Julian, <i>Mirror of the World: A New History of Art</i>
	Peterson, Ivars and Nancy Henderson, <i>Math Trek: Adventures in the Math Zone</i>	Tyson, Neil deGrasse, "Gravity in Reverse: The Tale of Albert Einstein's 'Greatest Blunder'"

SOURCE: Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects, Appendix B: Test Exemplars and Sample Performance Tasks, 2010. Retrieved at www.corestandards.org

Standards are, of course, only the first step. School leaders must also make sure their schools have the capacity to teach students to new standards. First and foremost, teachers will need time and coaching to align their instruction and increase their own skills. This will be especially important for middle- and high-school teachers who fall outside of the English/language arts department and who typically lack the training and experience to deliver reading and literacy instruction. Schools may also require new curriculum and instructional materials, as well as extra supports for students who need it.

To begin, we suggest that school leaders consider the following questions:

- Does the existing curriculum provide a balance of informational and literary texts? Are the texts sufficiently complex for the appropriate grade level? If not, what steps are necessary to promote more informational reading in our classrooms?
- Do our schools provide reading instruction across subjects or only in ELA?
- What support or professional development do content-area teachers need to incorporate reading instruction into their lessons? Do our school schedules allow for embedded professional development time for teachers to collaborate, coach and be coached, and learn from each other?
- How do our students perform on state and national reading assessments? Do students perform consistently across grade levels or does performance decline in specific grades, among specific groups, or in specific content areas? Do we have enough trained guidance counselors to help with data analysis?

- Do the assessments provide a content analysis of items that highlights performance by different reading purposes? Is there a system in place to give teachers access to this data?
- What interventions do teachers and schools use to support struggling readers? Are we able to serve all of the students who need these services?
- What partnership opportunities exist in our community to extend school capacity? For example, can we collaborate with local colleges on professional development opportunities for staff or on developing new curriculum? Are there business or community organizations to help provide mentors and tutors for students?
- What programs exist in our schools to promote the literacy development of adult learners?
- What resources are available to help parents reinforce their children's literacy development at home?

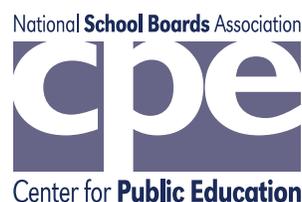
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