

# ALFA Lab

Accelerating Literacy for Adolescents

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## Executive Summary



## **Accelerating Literacy For Adolescents (ALFA): A Talent Development Secondary 9th Grade Literacy Lab Executive Summary**

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### **The Literacy Issue**

Many adolescents enter high school with reading deficits that lead to academic failure and emotional roadblocks. These challenges diminish adolescent readers' chances of becoming active learners. Many of these adolescents, who are not equipped to engage with high school level reading and writing, lack motivation and at the same time are struggling to successfully complete increasingly complex core English requirements. There are a variety of reasons why struggling readers experience difficulty with text-related activities. Typically, the challenged adolescent reader can read the text but lacks the comprehension skills to understand and interpret the complexities of secondary level school texts.

Issues impacting struggling readers in high school can be startling and troubling if supports are not a consideration during the developmental stages of their literacy program. If instruction for struggling adolescent readers is to be effective, it must be orchestrated in such a way that students, regardless of their level of functioning, see themselves as capable learners.

In the publication, *Seeing Themselves as Capable and Engaged Readers* (Alvermann, 2003, p 2.) Donna Alvermann states the following:

Based on a review of the research on effective literacy instruction for adolescent learners that I wrote as part of a paper titled *Effective Literacy Instruction for Adolescents* (Alvermann, 2001) commissioned by the National Reading Conference, it is evident that students with high self-efficacy-the confidence that they have the capacity to produce a desired effect-are more likely to engage in school-related reading than students with low self-efficacy. Perceptions of self-efficacy are central to most theories of motivation, and the research bears out the hypothesized connections.

### **The Approach**

When planning Accelerating Literacy For Adolescents (ALFA Lab), for 9<sup>th</sup> grade challenged readers, considerations were given to student motivation, engagement, strategy instruction, text comprehension, vocabulary development, fluency and technology. ALFA facilitates these

areas through a consistent rotating class structure and engaging curriculum. Students work in small groups each lab session, rotating once to the lab teacher for direct instruction in reading, before rotating three additional times, in teams. The teams work individually and/or collaboratively to complete activities requiring them to apply comprehension skills, word knowledge and writing skills. During *Main Station*, (guided reading) lab teachers lead students through reading selections while emphasizing reading strategies, monitoring for meaning, vocabulary in context, and text-based comprehension skills. Students then complete a series of activities correlated with the core reading selections. The ongoing use of computers, high interest material, a listening post, collaborative experiences and classroom-based assessment maximizes opportunities for ALFA students to engage in relevant and meaningful classroom experiences.

The Alliance for Excellent Education has released a report, *Reading Next-A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy* (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004) that reviews the latest research on adolescent literacy. Several of the essential elements delineated for improving adolescent literacy instruction are inherent in the ALFA Lab program. (e.g., direct, explicit comprehension instruction, effective instructional principles embedded in content, motivation and self-directed learning, text-based collaborative learning, a technology component, ongoing formative assessment of students and extended time for literacy.

In an ideal world, schools would be able to implement all fifteen elements, but the list may also be used to construct a unique blend of elements suited to the needs of the students they serve. This report treats each element as a distinct entity, but it is important to recognize that the elements are often synergistically related, and the addition of one element can stimulate the inclusion of another. The elements should not be seen simply as isolated elements in an inventory of potential elements, but rather as a group in which elements have a dynamic and powerful interrelationship. For instance, it is difficult to implement text-based collaborative learning (Element 4) without a classroom library of diverse texts (Element 6). We expect that a mixture of these elements will generate the biggest return. It remains to be seen what the optimal mix is, and it may be different for different subpopulations of students. *Reading Next-A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy* (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004)

Since most struggling readers in the upper grades have experienced failure in reading over a period of time, there is an urgent need to accelerate their reading progress, as quickly as possible. In the ALFA lab, the core reading texts are integrated with supplemental text for two reasons: to enhance their ability to connect and extend information they've read, and to gradually move students through reading material at increasing levels of difficulty, within a structured supportive setting.

### **Instructional Targets**

The overall purpose for the ALFA Lab is to improve reading achievement and increase the independence of struggling adolescents to a degree that they can successfully meet the literacy requirements of high school courses.

The primary targets for ALFA provide a foundation upon which the course components were established and the various activities developed. Each component is described by specific indicators:

#### Reading Strategies

- explicit instruction with teacher modeling to promote independent, flexible use of strategies

#### Comprehension

- direct reading instruction emphasizing text-based comprehension skills
- activities that require students to examine vocabulary in the context of reading

#### Vocabulary

- explicit instruction that connects vocabulary to meanings, e.g., pre-teaching vocabulary prior to reading a selection; highlighting vocabulary in context during reading; reflecting on vocabulary post-reading
- independent and collaborative activities to reinforce students' word knowledge and understanding of word structure
- ongoing activities that incorporate vocabulary encountered in core text
- regular practice with fluent processing of high frequency words and high school level content vocabulary (word recognition).

#### Writing

- construction of written responses to open-ended questions relating to the text
- use of writing prompts that require students to write for a variety of purposes
- use of the computer to compose writing samples

#### Fluency

- exercises that reinforce word recognition and automaticity
- exercises with high frequency words
- ongoing assessment of word accuracy during timed readings

#### Technology

- use of technology for researching information
- use of technology to enhance application of knowledge and reinforce skills previously encountered.

### **The ALFA Pilots**

Two ALFA Labs were initially established in 2004, the Baltimore Talent Development High School in Baltimore, Maryland and Van Horn High School in Kansas City, Missouri. In Kansas City, the lab was implemented as a first-semester intervention for incoming 9<sup>th</sup>-grade students who would likely experience great difficulties in first-semester, core English. In Baltimore,

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Talent Development’s ALFA Lab served as a triple dose course where students were placed in both the ALFA Lab and Strategic Reading during first semester and English 1 during second semester. As a component of the English Language Arts Division’s Adolescent Literacy Initiative, the ALFA Lab provided an additional option for students requiring intensive literacy support.

Both labs functioned as pilot programs for two academic years, 2004-2006. Data reflects impressive gains.

