

NJCLD Hosts Symposium on Adolescent Literacy and Students With Learning Disabilities

The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) hosted a symposium on June 5, 2009 entitled, *Adolescent Literacy and Students With Learning Disabilities: Building Effective Programs and Partnership*. More than 100 invited educational practitioners, policy makers, researchers, higher education representatives, parents, members of the media, and representatives of the NJCLD member organizations attended the symposium held June 5, 2009. The purpose of the symposium was to share timely information on adolescent literacy issues, provide opportunities for cross-stakeholder collaboration, and promote the dissemination of the NJCLD's most recent report, *Adolescent Literacy and Older Students With Learning Disabilities*.

Froma P. Roth, an NJCLD representative of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA), presented an overview of the report acknowledging that the overall picture of adolescent literacy in the United States is less than promising, and even more discouraging for older students with learning disabilities (LD). Significant numbers of adolescents, especially those with LD, do not read and write at levels needed to meet 21st-century demands. According to the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (2003), 21% of LD students score 5 or more grades below in reading than grade level peers. Roth also noted that 25 of the fastest growing professions have greater than average literacy demands while the fastest declining professions have lower than average literacy demands.

The NJCLD report points out that emphasis on early reading and writing for young children alone is insufficient; a similar investment must be made in literacy instruction for older students. Evidence shows that intensive, high-quality literacy instruction can help struggling adolescents acquire the skills they need to succeed in middle school, high school, and beyond.

Brett Miller, Program Director of the Reading, Writing, and Related LD Program at the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), presented *Reflecting on the Field of Adolescent Literacy: Perspectives From NICHD*. Reporting on literacy activities at NICHD, Miller related the mission of the agency, which includes language to ensure that "all children have the chance to achieve their full potential for healthy and productive lives, free from disease or disability." NICHD studies individuals with and without reading disabilities because readers who do not struggle help to promote an understanding of how reading usually develops, which is critical context for interpreting research results when working with struggling readers or those with a disability. NICHD's current directions in adolescent literacy include the work of an Adolescent Literacy Consortium and Learning Disabilities Research Centers. Future work is envisioned to include a focus on writing, the reading and writing relationship, late-emerging reading disability, reading comprehension, and continued emphasis on intervention.

Nancy Hennessy, an NJCLD representative of the International Dyslexia Association, presented a report, *Complexities of Instruction*, that stated, "Many adolescents with LD transition to secondary education with under-developed language, literacy, and executive function skills and struggle to meet grade level expectations." Increasing literacy demands across the grades require informed instruction. Hennessy discussed

the need for all educators to “have the knowledge, skills, and attitudes identified as critical for literacy instruction; for special educators to have a thorough understanding of language, reading, and writing development and disabilities as well as evidence-based instructional practices; and for content area teachers to have knowledge of reading comprehension and writing demands of their subjects.”

Hennessey concurred with other researchers that “learning is the work” and that learning theories need to inform practice and research with struggling adolescents. A theoretical model that addresses the component skills of word recognition and language comprehension and that results in proficient reading was presented. Some recommendations for instructional emphasis included the development of word recognition skills, knowledge of text structures, vocabulary and depth of word meaning, domain and prior knowledge, cognitive strategies, and increased motivation and engagement. General factors to consider when planning instruction and intervention include target areas that are critical to reading and writing proficiency, combining strategy-based instruction with skill-based instruction, teaching literacy strategies within context, providing clearly scaffolded and sequenced instruction, providing repeated opportunities, identifying and incorporating strategies and tools, and actively using student performance data.

Barbara J. Moore, an NJCLD representative of ASHA and Director, Special Youth Services, of the Anaheim Union High School District in Anaheim, California, presented on *Designing Systems Change*. According to Moore, the adolescent literacy challenge is more than just improving instructional strategies. Today’s students and schools are facing issues that include high dropout rates, teen pregnancy, motivation, a declining economy, escalating behavioral issues, significant social-emotional needs, and increasing demands of accountability. New literacy demands of Internet and multimedia text have further increased the challenge.

There are major system change initiatives currently in the works, and while they have been generated for different purposes, they all strive to achieve the same goal, which is to make school a place where *all* students can achieve, thrive, and be safe. The four major initiatives prevalent throughout the United States are response to intervention (RTI), an approach that provides different levels of intervention to students who are struggling; professional learning communities, an approach that provides for small learning communities of professional educators within a school for the purpose of addressing student and school needs; school-wide positive behavioral intervention and supports, which deals with school-wide behavioral issues by establishing expectations and implementing systematic and consistent approaches that are positive and proactive; and systems of care, an approach that inverts the pyramid for the purposes of considering the social-emotional needs of students. Moore described her experience as the director of special youth services using student performance data as a leverage point to spearhead necessary systems change.

The presentations were followed by a panel discussion moderated by Nancy Hennessey and including panelists Amanda Karhuse, National Association of Secondary School Principals; Brett Miller; Barbara J. Moore; Patti Ralabate, National Education Association; and Kippi Sutphen, parent representative.

The panel discussion focused on a number of issues pertaining to adolescent literacy. These included public policy issues, the basis of systems change, universal design for

learning and response to intervention as frameworks for transformation, future research initiatives, and parental perspectives.

This symposium represents the commitment of the NJCLD to promote ongoing communication and collaboration on the topic of adolescent literacy and students with LD. For the PowerPoint presentations from the symposium and additional related resources, visit the NJCLD's Web site at www.ldonline.org/njclld.

References and Related Resources

Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST), www.cast.org/.

Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), www.nichd.nih.gov/.

National Association of Secondary School Principals, www.nassp.org.

National Center on Response to Intervention, www.rti4success.org.

National Education Association, www.nea.org.

- Universal Design for Learning: making learning accessible and engaging for all students, www.nea.org/assets/docs/PB_UDL.pdf.

National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities. (2008). *Adolescent literacy and older students with learning disabilities*. www.ldonline.org/njclld.

National Longitudinal Transition Study-2. (2003). National Center for Special Education Research at the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education.

RTI Action Network, www.rtinetwork.org.

The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities is dedicated to promoting the education and welfare of individuals with learning disabilities. For additional information on the work of the NJCLD, contact Dr. Mary Beth Klotz, NJCLD Chair, at mbklotz@naspweb.org.