

## ***AYPF Field Trip: A Statewide Focus on Adolescent Literacy***

In September, 2009, the American Youth Policy Forum conducted a field trip focused on adolescent literacy to Birmingham, Alabama to learn about the design, implementation, and expansion of the Alabama Reading Initiative Project for Adolescent Literacy (ARI-PAL). The trip was designed to accomplish three goals:

- Give state policy leaders an opportunity to learn about the Alabama Reading Initiative Project for Adolescent Literacy (ARI-PAL) launched in 2006 to promote literacy education across the K-12 continuum, with a recent focus on grades 4-12.
- Provide time for participants to learn about successful policies and interventions that support high school redesign and to discuss various approaches to complex and difficult problems.
- Encourage state policy leaders to benchmark their efforts, share lessons learned (both positive and negative), and build a network of information, resources and peers.

Participants included education policy leaders from Kansas, Louisiana, North Carolina and West Virginia.

### ***Why a focus on Adolescent Literacy?***

In an increasingly competitive global economy, more and more professions require a college degree and higher level literacy skills in order to comprehend complex information. The country currently faces an education crisis as a focus on literacy education typically stops after grade 3, leaving adolescents unprepared for the rigors of secondary and postsecondary education. Although average reading scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) have risen since 1992, achievement gaps persist and far too many students, especially in grades 4-12, still perform at low literacy levels. In 2007, for example, only 31 percent of eighth-graders and 24 percent of twelfth-graders performed at proficient levels. On the global stage, this means a preponderance of Americans entering the workforce ill-prepared to compete with international peers. In looking at literacy statistics within the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) this imbalance becomes clear. The U.S. is 21<sup>st</sup> in science literacy and 25<sup>th</sup> in mathematics literacy among the 30 OECD countries, and in the past decade U.S. college-level degree production has fallen from 2<sup>nd</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup>. Research has shown that to counter this decline, schools must raise literacy expectations, in *all* content areas across the K-12 continuum, with sustained focus well beyond 3<sup>rd</sup> grade.

### ***What is ARI-PAL?***

The Alabama Reading Initiative Project for Adolescent Literacy (ARI-PAL) is one state's response to a national and state crisis in adolescent literacy. The project stems from a K-12 reform model, the Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI), which was launched in 1998. In 2004, however, Alabama policymakers halted the initiative in grades 4-12 to allocate the available resources to K-3. While this led to some significant gains in literacy for K-3 students, as is often the case on a national level, adolescent literacy stagnated or showed very few gains. In 2006, the National Governors Association provided the initial funds needed to implement ARI-PAL, and the initiative was launched focusing on grades 4-8. For schools in the pilot cohort, individual school systems were responsible for funding the reform implementation, including the cost of a site-based literacy coach. The Alabama State Department of Education provided the services of state/regional literacy coaches for professional development programs during the summer of 2006 as well as financial support for ARI-PAL schools during the 2006-2007 school year. Fourteen schools, out of an applicant pool of twenty-six, were chosen for the pilot program. The initiative focused on five major categories – collaborative leadership, assessment, professional development, strategic thinking, and accelerated intervention, with positive results evident after the first year. 2007 *Stanford Achievement Test* results

showed that ARI-PAL schools made more gains in reading comprehension in all grades, with the exception of Grade 7, than schools that were not part of the pilot. Furthermore, the state of Alabama showed the highest improvement on the 2007 NAEP in 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading, the largest gain by any state in the history of the NAEP, giving further momentum to ARI-PAL's expansion to other schools around the state. The literacy initiative has since expanded to more middle schools, as well as high schools. A recent boost in funding from Title 1 School Improvement Grant (Federal 1003-G) funds will enable implementation of ARI-PAL in 28 additional schools, all of which are in years 1-3 of school improvement status.

### ***Trip overview***

Panel discussions included: *Setting the Stage: Background and Policy Context for the Alabama Reading Initiative; Taking ARI to Scale: Implementation, Program Development, and Evaluation; and Implementation at the District and School Level.* Additionally, participants were provided with an overview of education reform initiatives in the state by the AL Deputy State Superintendent of Education, Dr. Tommy Bice. The trip also included two site visits to Aliceville High School in Pickens County and Hayden Middle School in Blount County. These schools are at different phases of implementation of ARI-PAL initiatives, and the visits provided participants with an opportunity to witness literacy reform in action, as well as to interact with district personnel, teachers, principals, and students.

### ***Key Issues, Lessons Learned, and Field Trip Participants' Intended Use of Knowledge Gained***

***In discussions with Alabama hosts, participants gained a keen appreciation for embarking on literacy reform using a systems approach, ensuring strong leadership and committed partnerships were in place, thinking creatively about how best to provide state support and ongoing professional development for literacy coaches, principals and teachers, evaluating which policy changes might be necessary to promote effective learning, and envisioning new ways of preparing students to be lifelong learners.***

#### **1. Utilize a Systems Approach:**

A recurring theme was the need to use a systems approach when embarking on literacy reform. While AL spent significant time and dollars focusing on K-3, there was a keen appreciation that literacy initiatives should not end there, but needed to be scaled up to include middle and high school students. It was also underscored that literacy instruction is very different at the secondary level, where students need to become literate in the content of a number of different subjects and teachers had to be trained accordingly. As trip participants engaged in discussion, some of their questions indicated they were still thinking about literacy instruction in an incremental approach by starting at the K-3 level, moving to the high school level, and neglecting the middle school component. By the end of the trip, some participants did acknowledge they needed to think much more deeply about a systems approach, which had to be maintained even if circumstances necessitated prioritizing certain levels of the education continuum at a given time. A Louisiana participant noted that her state would need to "build a comprehensive system of learning supports so that assistance from the state level is coordinated and easily accessible by districts and schools." There is still work to be done to emphasize the efficacy and necessity of a systems approach to reform.

#### **2. The Importance of Strong Leadership:**

In Alabama the governor's leadership has been valuable in underscoring, at every opportunity, the

importance of having every child emerge from the educational experience as a literate individual. Legislative support has been an important factor, with funding being increased over the years to ensure that the literacy initiative could be fully implemented amongst all K-3 teachers, expanded into middle and high schools, and supported by state-level staff. At the AL State Department of Education (ALSDE) a “round table” was created to bring together various departments to promote the literacy work and to integrate this work with other reforms underway in the state. One participant noted that on her return to her state, she would “encourage state department of education leadership to establish a ‘round table’ similar to Alabama's to coordinate and guide supports for literacy in districts and schools.”

**3. Partnerships are Essential:**

Closely related to influential leadership is the value of partnerships. Alabama presenters acknowledged the need to have higher education involved in reform efforts. Initially higher education was at the table to assist with teacher preparation and development, but then a period of resistance by this important constituency ensued, and only recently has higher education resumed a seat at the table. Their participation in training personnel to drive the literacy work is critical, especially as the initiative is taken to scale and the need for teachers trained in literacy strategies increases.

The ALSDE has successfully partnered with A+ Education Partnership, a non-profit organization that advances policies, programs and initiatives in Alabama's K-12 education system and brings together people with different points of view. Together these entities are defining the work that needs to take place in districts and schools. The ALSDE also looks to partner strategically with districts, expecting them to be full partner in the reform, rather than mere recipients of resources from the DOE.

**4. Coordinating State and District Dollars:**

The approach to the ARI-PAL initiative has been characterized as a grass roots approach. The participating districts exhibit their commitment to the initiative by providing financing for a school-based literacy coach and necessary reading interventions, while the state provides regional coaches to provide support for district personnel, who in turn coach school literacy coaches. These school-level coaches are embedded at their schools, where they strive to work closely with all teachers as they develop their use of strategic teaching. This structure of professional development encourages consistent quality of results. Field trip participants were impressed with this strategy, with one commenting that “Building-level coaches delivering embedded, ongoing professional development is KEY. I need to explore funding structures to allow for this. (I don't think policy changes are needed.)” A participant from Kansas commented at the end of the trip that she'd learned that a state plan for learning can be started as a grassroots effort (with some private help).

**5. Building Capacity and Using Data:**

Participants heard from many individuals about the need to train teachers in the new expectations around literacy instruction, and to provide them with ongoing professional development. A participant from Louisiana noted that “teachers need support and training on an on-going basis in all subjects and at every level (elementary, middle, and high),” while her colleague observed that she planned on examining the various strategies AL uses to train teachers, and would then make recommendations that LA develop a strategic plan for adolescent literacy.

One of the challenges participants were alerted to has been AL's difficulty at the higher education level to keep up with the capacity necessary to sustain the literacy initiative. Initially there was not a huge demand for literacy-trained personnel, but as the initiative has grown and is being taken to scale, higher education is having a tougher time trying to provide enough trained personnel. Another challenge noted by AL was how to maintain the intensity of implementing reform at a current school, while scaling up the initiative. They also reflected that not enough attention has been paid to feeder patterns during the scaling up process, resulting in students sometimes transitioning from an ARI-PAL middle school to a high school that is not focused on literacy reform. One strategy AL has used to address some of these challenges has been to use external evaluations of the initiative, as the close examination of the data gathered has helped determine the appropriate rate of expanding the initiative to include more schools. Field trip participants thus gained an appreciation of the need to constantly collect data and to base strategic growth on these data.

#### **6. Change Culture First, then All Else Follows:**

Regional and literacy coaches, principals, and teachers noted that, before a literacy reform initiative could take hold in a school, there needed to be a culture change first. A significant percentage of the staff had to be on board with having higher expectations of all students, and expecting them to be more active participants in their learning. Teachers also had to be willing to change their practice, moving towards more collaboration among colleagues, team planning, and being willing to work closely with the literacy coach, and away from instruction predicated on individualized planning and behind-closed-doors delivery of content. The principals at the sites visited clearly articulated high expectations of all staff and students, and that tone contributed to learner success. This did not mean that the process was easy, or without naysayers, but it did underscore the important role of the school administrator as an instructional leader and agent of change. Indeed, in ARI-PAL schools, principals and assistant principals, as well as their leadership teams at the schools, are required to participate in the literacy training. Participants were challenged to think through all the personnel who needed to be involved in reform, including assistant principals – whom a few participants noted were often relegated to an exclusively disciplinary role. These observations contributed to participant overall re-evaluation of the traditional roles of all school personnel.

#### **7. Prepare Students to Become Learners for the Next Century**

Alabama presenters noted that teachers need to prepare students to become active learners, not just recipients of information. The integration of strategic thinking, an essential component of ARI-PAL, into all subjects is a framework that is moving students to becoming independent learners. However, as is often the case with initial implementation, this *strategy* is sometimes becoming the main focus of the lesson, instead of being a tool through which the content is shared and discussed. This observation was made by some students themselves. They acknowledged that the strategies, if internalized as part of their learning style, would be helpful as they transition to college and careers, as well as assisting them in their daily lives.

Trip participants reflected that "What I thought of as "reading" strategies are really "learning" strategies," and pondered "how can we incorporate this into the instructional toolkit we are developing for our revised standards?" A participant from LA noted her thoughts about the strategic teaching framework, observing that "this is what is missing in the literacy pilot schools we have implemented." She also realized that "the literacy leadership team training (5 days) is another factor to consider." A NC participant concluded, "This trip has reaffirmed my commitment to ensure a similar program emerges in

NC. I began this work in a district before coming to the state level work. The primacy of strategic literacy teaching to effective content teaching is key to school reform in general.”

**8. Re-examine the Use of Time:**

The need to conform to a system that still operates on the basis of Carnegie units was repeatedly cited as a stumbling block to reform by trip participants. Principals in Alabama also shared that thoughtful, strategic manipulation of the school’s master schedule has been an important tool in making changes to instructional delivery. Participants were impressed by the practices used in Alabama, from testing students on the front end of a course for credit, to determine the necessity of them having to take that course, to the AL State Board passing a waiver of Carnegie units so that teachers would have more flexibility to meet student needs. As a result AL educators have seen innovative changes at the high school level. A participant from WVA shared that policy changes in that state have provided greater flexibility regarding the time to be spent on core subjects, moving from a designated number of minutes to only stipulating the minimum amount of time to be spent. These discussions thus addressed the critical issue of re-examining the use of time in high schools, and focusing greater attention on individualizing instruction for greater student success.

**9. Engage Students by Embracing Technology:**

State officials, principals and coaches stressed the need to engage students, especially through incorporating technology, e.g. cell phones, into learning in the classroom. It was noted, as has increasingly been commented on in the national conversation, that students often have to “power down” when entering school, due to prohibitions on cell phone use. However, educators in AL are having the conversation regarding how best to utilize these technologies. They mentioned having students use the calculators on their cell phones, which can contribute to budgetary savings, especially in economically challenged environments where equipment might be harder to obtain. These comments elicited an acknowledgment by trip participants that they will have to engage in similar considerations in their home states, as technological advancements are here to stay, and will continue to challenge traditional ways of learning and instruction.

This trip offered participants a chance to observe Alabama’s literacy efforts on the ground, to hear about challenges and successes, to inform their thinking about similar initiatives in their home states, and to spur them to continued action in this important policy arena. A variety of opportunities to engage in discussion with policy leaders, education officials, district personnel, literacy coaches, principals, teachers, and students resulted in new learning, a renewed commitment to the policy agenda around literacy for all students, and an appreciation for this skill as a critical component of student learning and development. As one participant from Louisiana concluded:

“There are several things I learned on this trip-- a) a systemic plan of literacy teaching does improve learning, b) teachers need support and training on an on-going basis in all subjects and at every level (elementary, middle, and high), and c) literacy training is a foundation for every teacher regardless of the core subject.”

Overall, participant feedback was quite positive. Many participants remarked that the specific aspects of program design, implementation, and professional support seen in AL have helped to solidify their goals for furthering this work in their own states.