

Grantee Spotlight

In this section, we feature interviews with some of our grantee organizations' directors and key staff members, who share their thoughts on their work and the particular fields they're involved in.

STRATEGIC LITERACY INITIATIVE: Closing the literacy gap



Struggling readers in middle school and high school face daunting and persistent challenges as they strive to comprehend increasingly complex subject area text. **Strategic Literacy Initiative (SLI)**, a long-standing Education grantee, helps students become more motivated and successful readers and writers by providing intensive training to teachers using their proven framework, Reading Apprenticeship. We talked with SLI Co-Director **Ruth Schoenbach** about the issues in adolescent literacy and SLI's accelerated efforts to grow their work nationally.

1. What are the big issues in adolescent literacy?

One of the biggest challenges is that many students of varied academic levels are disengaged from traditional academic learning—lectures and so forth. National and international studies show that even our college—going students—roughly 50% of them—are not prepared for the rigorous kinds of thinking, reading and writing that college and technical work now require. For these students as well as those who are struggling more academically, teachers need help knowing how to connect rigorous disciplinary learning to real life, to science and history in students' own lives, and to help students develop dispositions like persistence and tolerance for the effort and ambiguity of learning. When teachers who work with us start learning to "slow down to go fast"—to teach students to read more carefully, analytically, and critically—they often get pressure to prepare students for standardized tests that tend to focus on lower level skills rather than the complex literacy tasks that are needed for success in college and the 21st century workplace.

2. Reading Apprenticeship is the centerpiece of your professional development work. What are its core features?

Reading Apprenticeship (RA) is not a different curriculum. We show teachers how to help students be more active readers, thinkers and writers using routines they can practice as they read texts in their disciplines like chemistry lab directions, historical artifacts, or a Supreme Court case. So much of what we, as adults, do with reading is invisible because we have been doing it so long. We help teachers learn the kinds of questions to ask so these processes are visible, and students become more active and independent learners. When students are asked, "Why do you think that is true? What in the text makes you think that? Does anyone have a different interpretation?", they start to become more thoughtful, and they start to ask each other those kinds of questions too.

3. How do you know the Reading Apprenticeship program is improving student literacy?

Three randomized control studies have been conducted on RA professional development and how it affects how teachers are teaching, how students are reading and their motivation, and tests scores. [NOTE: Randomized control studies are considered the "gold standard" in assessment.] Results showed that reading comprehension in RA classes was significantly better. Case studies have also shown that in RA classrooms, students who were disengaged started to do their work and help peers do their work.

4. Since studies through the National Science Foundation research grant you just completed have shown such strong results, why aren't more schools and districts beating down your door for RA?

Districts have many competing mandates and priorities. They cycle through different innovative approaches. RA needs two full years of implementation to significantly improve teaching effectiveness; some districts are not willing to stay with reforms for that long to see results. Also we have a complexity problem; since we're talking about changes in the way teachers interact with students around thinking, reading and writing, we need to develop clearer language to help districts see the value of what we offer.

5. What factors led to your decision to take on the formidable work of scaling up SLI?

As Cyndy (SLI co-director Greenleaf) and I were beginning to work on a new five-year plan, I had the good fortune of meeting and getting to know Roger King, a former management consultant who has helped several nonprofits grow their work. I invited Roger to come to our upcoming Advisory Board meeting where we had a major discussion about how ambitious we should be. Roger's challenge was, "If you know the work is this good, why would you not want to scale up significantly?" Talking with WestEd's leaders, our staff and others we made the decision that even if it didn't work, the power of students' transformed learning and lives was worth trying to really scale up, and that we should make the leap.

6. What has been the most challenging aspect of your work to go to scale?

Although Reading Apprenticeship is simple in some ways—it is about focusing on thinking and conversation and putting students in the center of making meaning—it requires teachers to change the way they teach, and it is not the kind of "package" districts are used to buying. It is difficult to explain something, like RA, that isn't immediately obvious and understandable. We need to work to develop a clearer message.

7. What significant growth milestones are you striving to achieve in 2010?

In 2010, we would like to have five contracts with large districts in place to do multi-year work. We will launch a new website and blog that should stimulate more inquiries. We see a good deal of interest in the work coming out of our National Science Foundation study that documented significant gains for high school biology students in many areas, including motivation, as well as test scores. There is also the potential for significant growth in our work with community college. If much of this comes to fruition, we will need to build our capacity, but the challenge will be to develop the capacity to match the growth in demand for services in such a fluid environment.