

# CRISS® on the Cutting Edge: Support from the *Reading Next* Report

By Carol M. Santa, Ph.D. & Lynn Havens

Do you need some strong ammunition for convincing your colleagues about the importance of Project CRISS®? All you need is a copy of *Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy*\*. This report, from the Carnegie Corporation of New York in conjunction with the Alliance for Excellent Education sounds like an advertisement for what we do. It fits us like a wetsuit!

The report, written by a panel of distinguished reading researchers, two of whom also authored the National Reading Panel Report (Catherine Snow and Michael Kamil), reviews the latest research on adolescent literacy and then delineates 15 essential elements for improving adolescent reading instruction.



It begins with some alarming statistics. More than eight million students in grades 4-12 are struggling readers; every school day, more than three thousand students drop out of high school; only 70 percent of high school students graduate on time with regular diplomas; 53 percent of high school graduates enroll in remedial courses in post-secondary schools. The authors conclude the heart of the problem is that most older struggling readers “can *read* words accurately, but they cannot *comprehend* what they read. Students lack the strategies necessary for comprehending what they read.”

To compound the problem, the reading demands of modern society continually accelerate. Our schools must prepare literate citizens to thrive in a global economy with the skills to continue learning well beyond high school.

The authors go on to explain that much is known about adolescent literacy. Researchers are well aware of the problems facing the struggling adolescent reader and have identified interventions and approaches to address their needs. While it is critical to continue building knowledge about adolescent literacy, the authors urge educators to act immediately on what is already known about ways to alleviate the problems. Middle and high school teachers must harness what is known about adolescent literacy and implement these effective practices in their classrooms.

The panel identified 15 promising elements of effective adolescent literacy programs, which they divided into two categories: instructional improvements and infrastructure improvements. Infrastructure elements (block scheduling, common planning periods, etc.) are features supportive of instructional improvements. The authors point out that a blend of all the elements has the potential to make the most substantial impact. The first nine elements deal with instruction and the last six focus on infrastructure components that support the instructional improvements.

The following instructional and infrastructure elements are quoted directly from the report. Do these sound familiar? The green italicized comments found after each of the elements are from us.



## Instructional Improvements

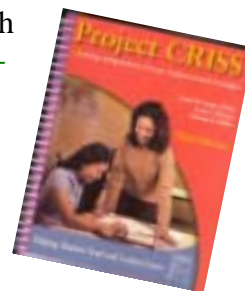
1. **Direct, explicit comprehension instruction**, which is instruction in the strategies and processes that proficient readers use to understand what they read, including summarizing, keeping track of one's own understanding, and a host of other practices. *CRISS teaches a variety of strategies using a direct instruction approach: introduction, modeling, guided practice, and independent application by the student. The CRISS principle of metacognition helps students monitor their own comprehension.*

2. **Effective instructional principles embedded in content**, including language arts teachers using content-area texts and content-area teachers providing instruction and practice in reading and writing skills specific to their subject area. *CRISS provides two chapters of reading and organizing strategies as well as two more chapters that contain great ideas for informal and formal writing in all curriculum areas.*

3. **Motivation and self-directed learning**, which includes building motivation to read and learn and providing students with the instruction and supports needed for independent learning tasks they will face after graduation. *Student ownership of strategy use and giving students an opportunity to set some of their own learning goals, as advocated by CRISS, lead to student motivation and self-directed learning.*

4. **Text-based collaborative learning**, which involves students interacting with one another around a variety of texts. *Throughout the CRISS manual, the instructional process involves students applying the various learning principles and strategies in pairs and small groups. This aids learning by scaffolding less able students and by the inclusion of instructional conversations.*

5. **Strategic tutoring**, which provides students with intense individualized reading, writing, and content instruction as needed. *The new semester class **Project CRISS® for Students** provides instruction in the CRISS<sup>SM</sup> principles and strategies directly to students. As part of the class, they develop a portfolio of how they have applied the strategies in their other classes. They also have opportunities for process conferences and for reflective writing on what works and how they can modify or change their strategy applications to improve their comprehension and learning.*



6. **Diverse texts**, which are texts at a variety of difficulty levels and on a variety of topics. *CRISS encourages teachers to provide a variety of learning materials to help meet individual student needs. How powerful it is to have language arts teachers incorporating nonfiction literature into regular instruction and to have content teachers incorporate fiction pieces! We also encourage students to both read and write children's books. This reinforces learning through transformation, illustrations, and simplification.*

7. **Intensive writing**, including instruction connected to the kinds of writing tasks students will have to perform well in high school and beyond. *CRISS offers a wide variety of writing strategies for student use, from the creative RAFT strategy to the more basic Spool Paper. Student writing with CRISS is both informal, through the use of journals and learning logs, and formal, through writing pieces such as a persuasive (Conclusion–Support) paper or a problem solving (Problem–Solution) explanation.*

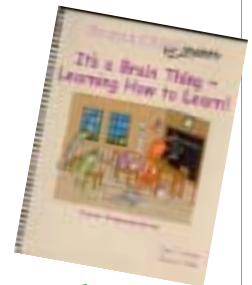
8. **A technology component**, which includes technology as a tool for and a topic of literacy instruction. *CRISS encourages teachers and students to use Inspiration® Software for organizing and transforming information from reading or for writing. The software has templates of many of the CRISS strategies (including the Venn Diagram and several vocabulary maps). Inspiration® also incorporates Power Thinking into its outline format. With Inspiration®, students may create their own organizational schemes or modify the templates. It fits well with the CRISS philosophy of student ownership.*



9. **Ongoing formative assessment of students**, which is informal, often daily assessment of how students are progressing under current instructional practices. *CRISS advocates the use of formative assessment through teacher observation and feedback, student led discussions, process conferences, and reflective writing by students. Through the use of these tools, teachers modify their teaching processes and students become aware of the learning principles and strategies that work best for them. Through an emphasis on student ownership of learning, CRISS can meet the needs of all students and help them modify and improve their individual learning processes.*

## Infrastructure Improvements

10. **Extended time for literacy**, which includes approximately two to four hours of literacy instruction and practice that takes place in language arts and content-areas classes. *CRISS recently developed Project CRISS® for Students, a semester-long class aimed at students in grades 6-9 that teaches and supports the use of CRISS principles and strategies across the curriculum.*



11. **Professional Development** that is both long term and ongoing. *CRISS emphasizes the importance of long-term and ongoing professional development by encouraging districts to develop at least a three-year plan for implementation. Within the plan, districts should train selected teachers or other qualified district personnel as Certified CRISS District Trainers. With trainers in place, schools within the district can easily train new staff and provide ongoing follow-up to trained teachers.*

12. **Ongoing summative assessment of students and programs**, which is more formal and provides data that are reported for accountability and research purposes. *CRISS provides several tools for ongoing summative assessment, including pre- and post-surveys of use for both teachers and students; a Levels of Use Matrix, which can be used by administrators or teacher partners when doing classroom observations; and a free-recall test used on both control and experimental students in a pre- and post-testing situation. CRISS encourages adopting districts to keep track of scores on state assessments to note any trends of improvement.*

13. **Teacher teams**, which are interdisciplinary teams that meet regularly to discuss students and align instruction. *Teachers find having a common language for learning provided by CRISS helps in their interdisciplinary planning. In addition, this common language assists students as they move from one content class to another.*

14. **Leadership**, which can come from principals and teachers who have a solid understanding of how to teach reading and writing to the full array of students present in schools. *CRISS Master Trainer Bonnie Valdes has developed an administrators' workshop which includes guidelines for quick (three minute) classroom walk-throughs to evaluate the implementation of CRISS reading, writing, and learning strategies as part of a school-wide literacy plan.*

15. **A comprehensive and coordinated literacy program**, which is interdisciplinary and interdepartmental and may even coordinate with out-of-school organizations and the local community. *This is what CRISS is all about! To include community members, CRISS offers a two to three hour **Project CRISS for Parents** workshop, which provides an opportunity for parents or other community members to learn and apply several CRISS strategies in a learning situation.*

Interwoven within the descriptions of the elements in the report are multiple references to the same philosophical and instructional principles that form the foundation of CRISS. The authors emphasize directly teaching comprehension monitoring and metacognitive instruction that teaches students to become aware of how they understand while reading. Comprehension strategy instruction must be explicit with the goal of teaching students how to comprehend a wide variety of texts. The report contains multiple references to CRISS instructional strategies (Reciprocal Teaching, Questioning the Author, etc.) within an instructional model of direct, explicit comprehension instruction.

Moreover, the authors advocate strategic instruction in the content subjects, where teachers provide instruction in the skills and strategies particularly effective in their areas of the curriculum. This instruction should be coordinated with the language arts teachers, literacy coaches, and subject matter teachers. In order to accomplish these philosophical and instructional goals, they call for long-term staff development so an emphasis on strategic learning becomes embedded within the culture of a school.

Even the title of this report—"A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy"—points out just how cutting edge Project CRISS still is. But, Project CRISS is far more than a vision. We have already put both the instructional and infrastructural elements into practice. The content of Project CRISS and our system of delivery with in-district certified trainers speaks directly to the recommendations offered by this panel of experts.

We know how to change the literacy lives of adolescents and how to motivate teachers to become more effective, engaged professionals. We also have the on-going assessment data to document effectiveness. The *Reading Next* vision is our reality.

\* *Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy*, is available from the Alliance for Excellent Education. To order [click here](#).

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