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Introduction

In November 2006, the State Superintendent’s High School Task Force released recommendations to ensure Wisconsin high school students continue to graduate with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in postsecondary education, in the high-skills workplace, and as citizens of our interconnected world. The High School Task Force also recommended adolescent literacy be a priority in Wisconsin so students enter high school reading at or above grade level. Additionally, the task force called for resources for literacy programming and professional development at the high school level.

Adolescent Literacy Task Force Charge

Wisconsin was privileged to be selected by the Alliance for Excellent Education as one of four states to host a national summit focused on adolescent literacy for educators, stakeholders, and policy makers. The one-day Adolescent Literacy Summit, held in Madison in May 2007, was spearheaded by State Superintendent of Public Instruction Elizabeth Burmaster, in partnership with Bob Wise, President of the Alliance, with support from Great Lakes West Comprehensive Center, Linda Miller, Director. The summit featured addresses by national leaders in the field and panel discussions related to significant components for improving reading and writing instruction for middle and high school students. The summit represented the initial meeting of the State Superintendent’s Adolescent Literacy Task Force.

The State Superintendent charged the Adolescent Literacy Task Force to:

- ◆ review state and local policies and initiatives that support adolescent literacy;
- ◆ identify research-based resources related to effective practices that promote literacy development, raise performance, and close the achievement gap; and
- ◆ develop an adolescent literacy plan for the state of Wisconsin.

Summit participants discussed and prioritized recommendations designed to improve adolescent literacy gleaned from nationally recognized policy documents. Professional development was identified as a key recommendation. Other highly valued recommendations were: developing broad support for adolescent literacy; developing comprehensive, coordinated literacy programs; and using research-based, best practices. Recommendations to ensure quality educators and to provide state guidance for adolescent literacy fell mid-range among respondents, followed by setting literacy standards, evaluating programs, and assessing performance.

The summit was followed by four day-long Adolescent Literacy Task Force meetings during 2007–2008. Highlights of the work of the task force included

Reading is the fundamental skill that separates children who succeed from those who struggle.

State Superintendent
Elizabeth Burmaster

a review of the status of adolescent literacy in Wisconsin and the nation; study of eight, evidenced-based policy documents calling for a focus on adolescent literacy; discussion of ideas and models designed to improve adolescent literacy; formulation of a definition of adolescent literacy; and development of an adolescent literacy plan.

First Lady Jessica Doyle, as a member of the task force and an educator for more than thirty years, shared her belief that a strong foundation in reading and writing is important for success for all ages.

The work of the task force was assisted by Judith Irvin, Director of the National Literacy Project, an adolescent literacy scholar who served as consultant to the task force, and by Terry Salinger, Chief Scientist for Reading Research, American Institute for Research, who shared her insight related to national perspectives on adolescent literacy.

Doug Buehl and Mary Pfeiffer, task force co-chairs, provided leadership and direction for the members and offered their expertise and guidance related to all aspects of the work of the task force. Danielle Carnahan, Senior Literacy Associate at GLWCC, shared literacy perspectives, provided national-level resources, and served as facilitator for the task force.

John Whitsett, President of the National Science Teachers Association, and Michael Yell, President-Elect for the National Council of Social Studies, provided a national perspective on adolescent literacy in the content areas.

Participants' recommendations for improving adolescent literacy align with the priorities of State Superintendent Elizabeth Burmaster's New Wisconsin Promise. These priorities include:

- ◆ Ensuring quality teachers in every classroom and strong leadership in every school;
- ◆ Improving student achievement with a focus on reading that has all students reading at or above grade level;
- ◆ Investing in early learning opportunities through the four-year-old kindergarten, Preschool to Grade 5, and SAGE class-size reduction programs;
- ◆ Sharing responsibility by increasing parental and community involvement in our schools and libraries to address teenage literacy, drop-outs, and truancy;
- ◆ Advancing career, technical, and arts education to engage students in becoming active citizens by understanding their role in the family, society, and the world of work; and
- ◆ Providing effective pupil services, special education, and prevention programs to support learning and development for all students while preventing and reducing barriers to student success.