WALCH EDUCATION

extending and enhancing learning

Improving Educational Performance with the
Academic Support Program (ASP) for English Language Arts

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Background

Walch Education develops and publishes texts and supplements in a variety of subject areas for middle and high school students. Walch has supported teachers and students for more than 80 years, adapting to new reforms and standards, and responding quickly to the demands on today's educators.

The Academic Support Program (ASP) for English Language Arts is a complete, turnkey solution for improving educational performance. Topics are built around accessible core English Language Arts curriculum, ensuring that the *ASP* is useful for striving students and diverse classrooms. This program recognizes that many struggling students aren't reached by traditional "skill and drill" or strict test-prep approaches. The *ASP* includes components that review, instruct as needed, provide practice, and assess students' skills. Instructional tools and strategies are embedded throughout. The scope and sequence addresses the needs of students who require additional support in meeting many IRA/NCTE (and state) standards.

Much of the *ASP* content was derived from Walch Education's *Power Basics* series. The primary author of *Power Basics*, Robert Taggart, Ph.D., developed the content specifically to address the needs of students not well served by traditional strategies and texts. Dr. Taggart is the founder and president of the nonprofit Remediation and Training Institute in Alexandria, Virginia, and a former research professor at Howard University, where he headed the Howard University Opportunity Institute.

With support from the Ford Foundation, Dr. Taggart developed the nationally recognized Comprehensive Competencies Program (CCP), a low-cost, public-use system for delivering individualized, self-paced, competency-based instruction covering K–12 academics and all functional skills. Nearly 1,000 CCP-based learning centers have been established in regular and alternative schools, job-training programs, corrections and welfare agencies, and community-based organizations.

Dr. Taggart's work was extended and enhanced by Walch Education's in-house education experts: Susan Graham, Director of Education, and Jill Rosenblum, Director of Standards and Assessment. Ms. Graham spearheaded the development of the *English Language Arts ASP* as the project manager and secondary author.

Susan Graham has written and edited curriculum for 15 years with an emphasis on English Language Arts best practices. A former classroom teacher in Washington, DC and London, England, with over 15 years authoring curriculum, she has developed content and products for SmarterKids.com, the Classwell Learning Group (a Houghton Mifflin company), and Kaplan K12 Learning Services, among others. Ms. Graham earned a Bachelor of Science Degree in Education at New York University and a Masters in Education from Harvard University's Graduate School in Education.

Jill Rosenblum, Director of Standards and Assessment, taught in public school classrooms for 10 years before accepting a position in Vermont's Department of Education, where she coordinated statewide professional development in mathematics and assessment. Prior to working at Walch,

Ms. Rosenblum was a senior program director in Assessment and Evaluation for the Maine Mathematics and Science Alliance. She earned a Bachelor of Science Degree in English and Education at Dartmouth College, and completed course work at the University of Southern Maine's Muskie School of Public Policy.

The *Academic Support Program (ASP) for English Language Arts*

The *Academic Support Program (ASP) for English Language Arts* is a reproducible teacher's binder containing both student and teacher components. Strategies for direct instruction, modeling, group work, and independent practice focus on skills within vocabulary, reading, and writing content areas.

For each of the lessons included in the binder, the *ASP* gives instructional options, including differentiated strategies, extensions, and ongoing assessments to be used to ensure proficiency beyond the unit session. In addition to content-area skills, the *ASP* provides instruction and practice of test-taking strategies. Most versions of the *ASP* include pacing guides designed for after-school, tutoring, summer school, and other extended learning programs. Its components can also be used in any sequence to target specific instructional needs.

The *Academic Support Program for English Language Arts* is available in a number of formats:
- *Academic Support Program for English Language Arts* (IRA/NCTE)
- *Massachusetts Academic Support Program for English Language Arts*
- *Florida Academic Support Program for English Language Arts*
- *Maryland Academic Support Program for English II*
- *Maryland Academic Support Program for English II HSA Mastery*

Best Practice in Adolescent Literacy

Challenges in adolescent literacy reach deeper than a student's inability to read literature. A student's ability to comprehend text impacts his or her English Language Arts skills, as well as the capacity to read, understand, and learn concepts in other subject areas. This rationale gives teachers a resource that not only provides students with direct, explicit comprehension instruction, but also provides materials for students to transfer strategies to other content areas.

The *ASP* was created under the guiding principal established by a combination of recommendations set forth by the National Reading Panel and the Alliance for Excellent Education. The *ASP* offers a combination of direct instruction, providing support for independent learning, and diversifying strategies for all kinds of learners, all of which can improve high school literacy.

In 2000, the National Reading Panel (NRP) published a report, *Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications*

for reading instruction. On the heels of this research, five nationally known educational researchers met in the spring of 2004 with representatives from the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Alliance for Excellent Education to draw up recommendations for how to meet the needs of struggling readers. The result of their work is an explicit recommendation for educators, *The Fifteen Elements of Effective Adolescent Literacy Programs.*

The Fifteen Elements of Effective Adolescent Literacy Programs

1. Direct, explicit comprehension instruction
2. Effective instructional principles embedded in content
3. Motivation and self-directed learning
4. Text-based collaborative learning
5. Strategic tutoring
6. Diverse texts
7. Intensive writing
8. A technology component
9. Ongoing formative assessment of students
10. Extended time for literacy
11. Professional development
12. Ongoing summative assessment of students and programs
13. Teacher teams
14. Leadership
15. A comprehensive and coordinated literacy program

Research from both groups emphasizes the need to teach students how to be "strategic readers"—readers who know how to employ a variety of comprehension strategies with materials they encounter across content areas, before, during, and after they read. Instruction of comprehension strategies should be explicit. The NRP found a strong evidence base for seven comprehension strategies in particular, such as question generation, summarizing, and so forth.

Other factors contribute to improved comprehension: vocabulary development, linking reading and writing, experiential background, providing reading time and engaging materials. The NPR and Alliance for Excellent Education agree on the necessity of comprehension strategies instruction.

The *ASP* recognizes that effective instruction in adolescent literacy does not rely on one strategy alone.

Structure of *ASP* Units

Nearly all of the units within the *ASP* have seven components incorporating multiple strategies. (In some writing units, however, the post-assessment component is left up to the instructor to decide, by asking students to complete a writing assignment.)

1. The Goal Statement

Each unit begins with a brief objective of what students should know, understand, or be able do at the end of the unit. Students are more likely to be better focused in their learning if the goal of instruction is stated up front. Students understand what is expected of them, which aids in motivation (Reiser and Dick, 1996).

2. Words to Know

Vocabulary terms are provided as background information for instruction or to review key concepts that are addressed in the unit. The importance of systematic vocabulary instruction is well established (Marzano, 2001). When new vocabulary is directly defined, students are more likely to learn the terms than when new words are simply pointed out. Moreover, students' comprehension of new words is enhanced by pre-teaching (Marzano, 1998). New words are highlighted consistently throughout instruction, to cue students that a new word is being introduced.

3. Direct Instruction

Research shows that direct instruction is valuable but, especially for middle and high students, is best used in combination with other methods—it is not an "either/or," as debates have tended to frame the issue. Direct instruction can provide an explicit, systematic methodology for solidifying basic skills and developing fluency.

Written for the teacher, this section is a guide for 15 to 45 minutes of teacher-led activity to review and/or instruct students on a skill or topic. Instructional strategies include lecture, modeling, discussion, group facilitation, and more. The activities often include the use of one or more of the graphic organizers found in the Teacher's Guide.

Some topics may be a review for students. Other topics may be completely new to them. No background knowledge is assumed, leveling the playing field for all students in the differentiated classroom. Students who may not have prior knowledge of a topic will not need to spend time catching up to other students. In addition, the *ASP* excludes any irrelevant information. "Another way to allow important content to dominate is to limit details that are unrelated to central concepts. Details should be meaningful; they should support main ideas." (Tyree and Fiore, 1994). Consequently, students are not forced to evaluate what is and is not relevant in the lesson. They quickly learn that if it is stated in the lesson, it is important.

4. Differentiated Strategies

Following the Direct Instruction, this section suggests alternative approaches for stimulating student interest and motivating them to participate. These alternative approaches address the need to support students who are struggling in a particular area or who have limited language proficiency.

Popularized in the late 1990s by Carol Ann Tomlinson (University of Virginia), who wrote what many view as the "bible" of differentiation or the "inclusive" classroom, differentiation involves

a blend of strategies that research shows are highly effective—cooperative grouping; attention to student interests, motivation, and learning style preferences; assessment of student readiness and other formative assessment practices. Student achievement benefits from teacher attention to students' learning patterns.

5. Student Activity Sheets

Each unit includes three or more lesson tasks and activities to support students' achievement of learning objectives. These sheets are written for a student. They can be used in any combination of teacher-led instruction, cooperative learning, or independent application of knowledge.

These practice activities are frequent, and help reinforce what students have just been taught through direct instruction. The brief activities are less overwhelming than long practice activities often found in traditional textbooks. Repeated opportunities for application and practice allow students to better retain what they have learned. As Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock found, "Learning new content, then, does not happen quickly. It requires practice spread out over time" (2001).

6. Ongoing Assessment, Additional Activities, and Post-Assessments

Each unit contains a section called *Ongoing Assessment and Additional Activities.* This component provides a collection of activities that allow the teacher to check student understanding beyond the post-unit assessments, as well as extend the learning as students demonstrate interest and proficiency.

After the unit is completed, a brief assessment is given in which students demonstrate their level of achievement with regard to the learning objectives. Assessments take on a variety of formats: multiple choice, matching, fill-ins, short answer, and essay.

The assessments in the *ASP* allow teachers to conduct ongoing formative assessment. Formative assessment is at the heart of effective teaching and can help close the achievement gap between low and high performers. Phi Delta Kappa International published a study by Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam, "Inside the Black Box: Raising Standards through Classroom Assessment," which reviews the evidence supporting these claims. The study illustrates that formative assessment yielded larger performance gains than most other types of interventions.

Black and Wiliam also cite a study concluding that formative assessment helps both low-achieving students and students with learning disabilities progress. The *ASP* also helps students improve academic skills and learning in the content areas, and hence, become better prepared for academic tests by using the item types and formats which are most commonly encountered. A study conducted by Chicago Public Schools (Perlman, 2000) concluded that "standardized tests require students to apply critical thinking skills, and that if students become accustomed to answering those types of questions on a regular basis in class, they are likely to do better on the tests." Moreover, Ross and Driscoll (2006) demonstrated that test practice can help students reduce anxiety and improve their skills. In turn, this allows a student's knowledge to be more accurately reflected in test results.

Reading Level and Text Passages included in the *ASP*

The *ASP* is rich in content. It includes informational texts and literary texts. Many reading formulas have been designed to evaluate the reading level of text. However, most of these instruments are based on a combination of sentence length and the number of multisyllablic words in the text. They do not take into account other aspects of text, such as the way the text is organized (Armbruster, Osborn, & Davison, 1985). It is certainly true that a text with many multisyllablic words and long sentences is likely to be more challenging than a text with short sentences and simple words. At the same time, a text made up primarily of short, choppy sentences with insufficient transitions also poses substantial comprehension challenges (Armbruster, et al., 1985).

To ensure access for diverse learners, the *ASP* uses a combination of controlled reading level and text organization to facilitate understanding. Sentences use simple structures and the active voice. Ideas follow logically from one sentence to the next, and linking words are used to show relationships among ideas.

Standards Alignment

It is important to connect instruction to state and national standards. States are working hard to ensure that measures of educational performance and efficacy are conducted in the context of their content standards, and research shows that students perform better on assessments when they have had the opportunity to learn the relevant subject matter. John Smithson, of the Wisconsin Center for Education Research, notes that this is well supported by research and is, of course, common sense. "Misaligned curriculum, instruction, and assessment is one factor that leads to poor student achievement." Correlations of the *ASP* to national and state standards are available, and ensure that teaching can be aligned to and conducted in the context of the relevant standards.

Academic Support Program **Success Stories**

When schools incorporate the *Academic Support Program* into their curriculum, they can be assured that the content and instructional strategies are based not only upon best practice research, but also from piloting and revising the program through Walch Education's work with key school districts in the nation.

Walch Education's Partnership with Boston Public Schools

Established in 1647, Boston Public Schools (BPS) is the oldest public school system in the United States. Winner of the Broad Prize for Urban Education in 2006, BPS continues to set the standard in urban public education. Walch Education was honored to work with the district in the summer of 2006 to design and pilot the *Massachusetts Academic Support Program for English Language Arts*. The successful partnership led to the refinement of the current product that was

used in the district as part of its SES offering, as well as the continued implementation in summer school 2007.

Among BPS's challenges for a summer school curriculum was to compress 180 days of instruction into a 24-day course. Another challenge was not knowing how many students would attend (in 2006, roughly 4,600 students were pre-registered, and 950 enrolled). The final challenge—a limited budget. BPS was not interested in the traditional approach of basal textbooks.

Walch Education partnered with the Senior Program Director for English Language Arts and nearly a dozen teachers to create targeted materials for 9th- and 10th-grade students. Walch provided pretests for placement, on-level curriculum, lots of practice exercises, and assessments—all at a grade 4–5 reading level. Pacing guides, graphic organizers, and a correlations guide (showing how the materials align with Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks) were all included. To account for the unknown enrollment, BPS asked that the material be modular and reproducible. In short, the final product is a highly flexible tool, from which the classroom teacher can pull out just what's appropriate to fit the needs of each student to address BPS objectives as well as those of all Massachusetts high school students.

Walch Education's Partnership with Baltimore City Public Schools

With a student population exceeding 100,000, Baltimore City Public Schools (BCPS) is the 4th largest school district in Maryland. In March 2007, Walch Education met with Baltimore City Public School's Director of High School Curriculum, who had been handed a new mandate for summer school. Part of the directive was to provide a 45-hour, 5-week program for approximately 550 students who had not passed the English II course. The course is especially significant since students in grade 10 complete the course and then take the state's English II High School Assessment, an end-of-course test required for graduation.

Walch Education worked hand-in-hand with BCPS's Curriculum Specialists in the spring of 2007 to define the scope and sequence of the course. Weekly phone calls and e-mails between BCPS and Walch ensured that the *Maryland Academic Support Program for English II* (*MD-ASP for English II*) included a pedagogical approach consistent with the district's instructional beliefs, content that addressed Maryland's Core Learning Goals and Assessment Limits, and easy-to-implement materials that met the needs of a diverse student population. As a result, the *MD-ASP for English II* was implemented in the summer of 2007. The success of the program prompted BCPS to continue the partnership with confidence.

Walch Education is delivering the *MD-ASP for English II HSA Mastery* to additional teachers and students throughout the district in the spring and summer of 2008.

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