Our classrooms are very diverse across a range of variables: income, culture, first language background, learning styles, and more. Children enter our classrooms with different early literacy backgrounds—strengths and weaknesses in reading and writing, varied personal experiences that could be activated as prior knowledge, ranges of vocabulary knowledge, Roman or other alphabetic/graphic systems, and perspectives on print. Even with similar backgrounds, students learn to read at different rates. Nonetheless, all students have the potential to be effective readers, writers, and thinkers. They need more than basic skills instruction to reach their potential, however. They benefit from meaningful, generative activities that ask them to analyze and apply what they are learning, make connections and compare ideas, solve problems, and create new products. The call for college and career readiness standards now being instantiated in many state standards and for deeper learning (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011) demonstrate that many educators are ready to shift away from rote learning and standardized testing of facts to promote instruction that can lead students to be successful in school and beyond.

While the thought of high school graduation may be far from the average first or third grader’s mind, these thoughts should be front and center in their teachers’ minds. We want all students to start on the path to postsecondary learning and we want to give them critical tools to move forward. Unfortunately, many students from lower income or language minority families are not in classrooms that focus on challenging, creative learning (Au, 2006; Snow, Griffin & Burns, 2005; Edwards, McMillon & Turner, 2010). Sadly, research has shown that these classrooms often focus on basic skills instruction with decontextualized worksheets and memorization drills. If these students start to struggle with reading, they receive more of the same, perhaps with more intensity. This is not a winning solution.

Reach for Reading has been designed to break this cycle. It provides rich, robust instruction for all students with relevant and engaging literature that gives students satisfaction when they reach the conclusion of a story, article, or poem. Moreover, the series has connected reading instruction to the content areas—giving students tools to access the content and fostering higher-level reading skills across all subjects encountered during the school day.
Linking discussion with reading and writing strengthens all skills. Reach for Reading systematically taps all language domains for student activities. For instance, oral language practice is not just fluency work. We know that competent readers can talk about what they have read, make predictions as to what will happen next in a story, and express an opinion about a character or action. Yet to do so orally, they must have structure for their utterances.

Many students have rich oral language backgrounds, but they may not have developed the academic language proficiencies that advance literacy and content learning in schools. So students will benefit from Reach for Reading’s academic language frames. According to the purpose of their statements, students learn how to start a sentence or how to organize their thoughts effectively. Teachers can help students make statements with increasing levels of sophistication, too, so their oral language development grows. Plus, these academic language frames help with reading and writing. Structures students use orally they learn to recognize in print and employ in writing.

### Authentic literature libraries and anthology selections

While the Big Question can whet the students’ appetite for reading, good literature seals the deal. Reach for Reading includes Caldecott and Newbury winners as well as National Geographic exclusive articles and interviews with scientists and explorers. The rich multicultural selections and the assortment of genres entice the students. When they have something in front of them that they want to read, they are motivated to learn how to read well. And Reach for Reading’s leveled libraries will help ensure that students have access to high-interest fiction and nonfiction texts at their appropriate reading levels. Pre-reading supports, such as video clips from National Geographic and summaries of the selections in multiple languages, coupled with the vocabulary development work, set the stage for reading success.

If students struggle with comprehension, differentiation is available, particularly with flexible reading groups that can accommodate varied reading levels, English language proficiency, and genre preferences. Some of the supports built into Reach for Reading include specialized collections of leveled readers. One set has thematically linked books for each unit at different reading levels. Another set has content-related readers for independent reading and fluency work. Young learners can partner read with Read with Me Big Books. For students who are working on decoding, Read On Your Own decodable texts are also included.
Explicit, systematic instruction and assessment

Furthermore, the building blocks for reading, phonemic awareness and phonics, are present in the grade-level books. In the primary grades students experience daily lessons on these elements. In the upper grades for the small percentage of students who still need help decoding or for the recent immigrant students new to English, a supplementary kit, Reach into Phonics, is available. At any grade, online phonics games can supplement the regular instruction. Teachers have flexibility in choosing the amount of support to provide students based on their needs.

Explicit instruction in reading comprehension strategies, another critical piece of the reading puzzle, is also present throughout the units. With step-by-step instructions and practice with a portion of the selection to be read, students experience a consistent introduction to each strategy. These strategies are the focus of the comprehension checks while they read texts at their level and the post-reading activities that link the topics to the Big Question.

Reach for Reading offers teachers and students multiple ways of demonstrating understanding. Students respond by reading through writing activities designed for their reading and language proficiency levels. Reach for Reading’s informal assessment tools, including running records and comprehension strategy checklists, help teachers to monitor students’ progress and tailor instruction to meet their needs on a daily basis, while unit tests and projects allow teachers to gauge their learning over time.

A major concern for all teachers is what to do when children struggle. What if they can’t read well despite one’s best efforts? Before moving students to intensive interventions, we encourage teachers to try the monitoring and reteaching techniques built into Reach for Reading. Students can use online games, Comprehension Coach, and other technology resources for extended practice.

An extensive array of scaffolding features helps teachers to readjust instructional tasks so that students are challenged at the appropriate level. Cooperative learning activities anchor each lesson so that students support one another as they are learning the subject matter, and practice their oral language skills as they interact verbally. Additionally, on-the-page text supports, including Before You Move On and In Other Words, scaffold students’ vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. Writing activities are designed to guide students through the process of authoring and editing texts in print (e.g., stories, essays) and online formats (e.g., blogs, emails).

Conclusion

By 2050, demographers predict the U.S. population will be majority-minority. In many of our school districts, this trend has become a reality. We have to reach all our students with core reading instruction that will move below-level students to on-grade level and on-grade level students up to an advanced level. Our advanced readers, who may be in these classrooms as well, need to be challenged so they make progress, too. With Reach for Reading we will help all students—below-level, on-level, and above-level—become better readers, writers, and thinkers.