



# Using High-Interest Instruction to Reach Low-Performing Secondary Students

By Kelly Freckmann

ACCORDING TO A 1999 POSITION STATEMENT FROM THE INTERNATIONAL READING ASSOCIATION, “ADOLESCENTS ENTERING THE ADULT WORLD IN THE 21ST CENTURY WILL READ AND WRITE MORE THAN AT ANY OTHER TIME IN HUMAN HISTORY... IN A COMPLEX AND SOMETIMES EVEN DANGEROUS WORLD, THEIR ABILITY TO READ WILL BE CRUCIAL. CONTINUAL INSTRUCTION BEYOND THE EARLY GRADES IS NEEDED.”

Unfortunately, many adolescent students still have difficulties with essential reading skills beyond the elementary grades. In fact, 26 percent of eighth-graders lack basic, grade-level literacy skills, according to the 2003 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). That means that when they read grade-appropriate text, these students cannot understand what they have read.

To address this reality, legislators and educational leaders who for the past decade have committed themselves to improving reading achievement for our nation’s elementary students, have now expanded their efforts to include secondary reading achievement. Likewise, researchers are focused on defining the instructional strategies that can accelerate learning for adolescents who struggle with fundamental reading skills. Chief among these is the use of high-interest learning tools, such as computer-based practice, to motivate striving readers.



Teachers Darlene Rumph (left) and Stephanie Taylor (right) work with eighth-grade students using Passport Reading Journeys II at Admiral Moorer Middle School in Eufaula, AL.



Journeys™, a targeted intervention program that accelerates reading for secondary students. Passport Reading Journeys is specifically designed to motivate and engage older students by combining multi-media components that excite them with text on subjects relevant to modern culture that speak to their interests. Each level takes students through a series of 15 “expeditions” on science and social studies topics, including Forensic Science, First Responders, Wild Things, Space, and Technology. The expeditions begin and end with action-packed DVDs hosted by teenage guides. In addition, students have the opportunity to practice different activities independently through SOLO™ (Strategic Online

### The Motivation Factor

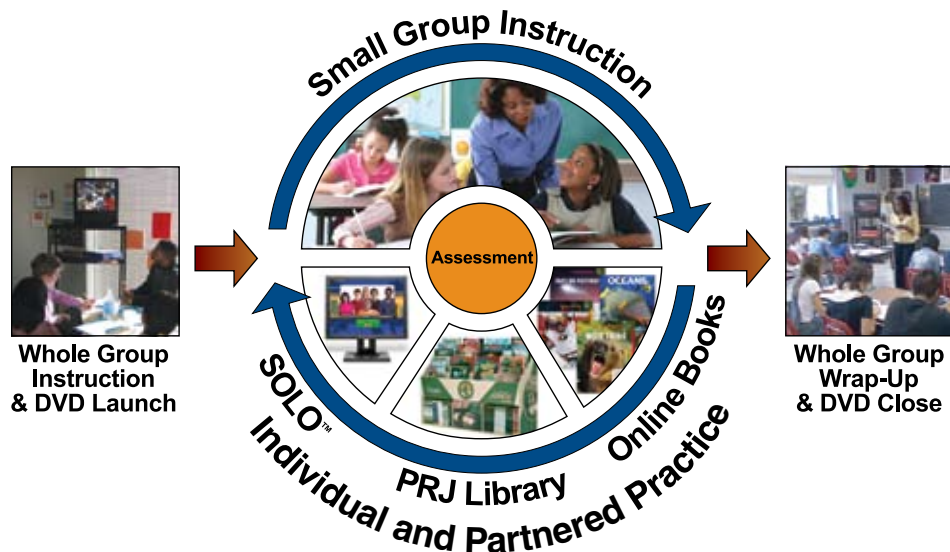
Although explicit, systematic instruction can improve literacy skills for adolescents reading significantly below grade level, studies show that motivating them to want to read is equally critical to their performance. The *Reading Next* report by the Alliance for Excellent Education, authored by five of the nation’s leading researchers, including Dr. Donald Deshler (see sidebar on page 25), lists the use of technology components and self-directed learning activities among the 15 key elements of effective literacy intervention for older students. Simply put, engagement in reading—the extent to which a child chooses to read rather than do other activities—is imperative to turning middle and high school students into strong, thriving readers.

Voyager Expanded Learning® has incorporated this scientifically based reading research into Passport Reading

### Tools to Inspire Adolescent Learners

In designing Passport Reading Journeys, the research and advisory team recognized the fact that adolescents, particularly those who struggle with reading, need to be highly motivated by the instruction to have the greatest chance of success. The program includes exciting and informative video segments on DVD; interactive, Web-based activities that let students practice core reading skills; and a comprehensive library of current books and magazines from which students can select their own reading materials. The curriculum also incorporates whole-group, small-group, and independent study times to provide added variety for students and allow teachers to differentiate instruction, as needed.

-Leslie J. Thompson



Learning Opportunities™), a Web-based program that focuses on fluency, vocabulary and comprehension strategies.

### The Beginning of Change

“Two things that really made the Voyager program so successful with our students were the interesting topics and the technology component,” says Paul D. Britt, Jr., principal of Vernon Johns Middle School in Petersburg, VA, which began implementing Passport Reading Journeys last fall with more than 200 seventh- and eighth-grade students. “The beauty of the technology component is that the students are

by Voyager, as well as by teacher recommendation.

After only one year, the inspiring, multi-media reading intervention system has already yielded positive results in Petersburg, where 50 percent of the eighth-graders at Vernon Johns Middle School passed the reading section of the state high-stakes assessment in 2006. Only 36 percent of students passed the assessment the previous year.

“Without a doubt, Voyager had a significant impact on the students’ improved scores,” says Britt, noting that the motivational components helped the program stick. He recalls a

**“WE’RE DEALING WITH THE LOWEST KIDS, AND WHEN WE SHOW THEM THEIR LEXILE SCORES AND THEIR GROWTH BETWEEN BENCHMARKS, WE GIVE THEM THE CONFIDENCE THEY WOULD NOT HAVE HAD WITHOUT PASSPORT READING JOURNEYS.”**

— CINDY KLAGES, INSTRUCTIONAL SPECIALIST,  
ADMIRAL MOORER MIDDLE SCHOOL, EUFAULA, AL

motivated by it and apply it to how they learn. The topics capture the students’ interest and pull them in,” he adds.

As part of the Petersburg City Public School System, Vernon Johns serves a student population that is 96 percent African American, with 91 percent of students eligible for free or reduced lunch. Ten percent of the students have disabilities. School administrators were looking for a program that would enhance and improve literacy achievement and capability for the large numbers of middle-schoolers who struggled with reading. Students were selected to participate in the Passport Reading Journeys program based on their previous year’s test scores, performance on a fluency test and an online Lexile® reading test provided

lesson from one of the expeditions that addressed the cost of cotton t-shirts. “It incorporated manufacturing and economics and really piqued students’ interest because it was something they could relate to but had not yet thought about,” he says. “The Journeys program really encourages cross-curriculum learning...in the way the stories are presented, and that makes a difference in how students learn.”

### Reaching Special Education Students

Administrators at Admiral Moorer Middle School in Eufaula, AL, saw similar results after implementing Passport Reading Journeys in 2005-2006 with seventh- and eighth-grade students reading well below grade

## Using Visuals to Engage Teens

Passport Reading Journeys™ teachers in Eufaula, AL, have added yet another interest-grabbing component to the multi-media intervention program by creating PowerPoint presentations from the curriculum for each Expedition. Instead of reading the script directly from the Teacher’s Edition, the teachers have retyped the text into PowerPoint, and they project the presentation onto a screen so students can follow along with the lesson by reading each slide. Using the projector also helps teachers better manage students by allowing them to lead the class through the presentation rather than read out of a book.

“Having the script in PowerPoint helps us keep our students’ attention,” says Cindy Klages, instructional specialist at Admiral Moorer Middle School in Eufaula. “It engages them and, instead of watching me teach, they are taking part in the lesson...The PowerPoint technology motivates them and holds their interest.”

-KF

### Introduction-Before Reading

- Have you ever wondered where some of the different foods you eat come from?
- Have you ever wondered how you’ve come to celebrate certain traditions or to listen to certain kinds of music in this country?
- If so, then you’ve already started thinking about **American culture** and what makes it special.

level. The classes were co-taught, and half the students were from the general education program, while half were in special education.

Says Cindy Klages, instructional specialist at Admiral Moorer, “These students need expository text and even more [importantly], it must hold their interest. The technology component, the expeditions, and the DVDs that make up the Journeys program really keep the students motivated. They are really into the program.”

Adds special education teacher Alexandra Conniff, “Students in Journeys maintain their concentration because of the high interest stories, in which technology has been incorporated.” She notes that Lexile scores improved for all students who used Passport Reading Journeys last year.

In some cases, the gains in Eufaula County were exponentially higher than what was anticipated. Secondary students

in the lowest 25 percent are expected to gain one to two Lexiles per week, according to Metametrics’ Lexile® Framework. After just 26 weeks of instruction, seventh-grade students at Admiral Moorer in Passport Reading Journeys gained 210.59 Lexiles at a rate of eight Lexiles per week, exceeding expected growth by 405 percent. Likewise, eighth-graders gained 334.48 Lexiles at a rate of 12.8 Lexiles per week, exceeding expected Lexile growth by 643 percent. What’s more, Admiral Moorer made AYP this past year, after it was designated as needing improvement in 2004-2005 because of the low reading scores among special education students.

“We’ve seen incredible results, even with our special needs students,” says instructional specialist Cindy Klages. “We’re dealing with the lowest kids, and when we show them their Lexile scores, and their growth between benchmarks, we give them the

confidence they would not have had without Passport Reading Journeys.”

### Making a Lasting Difference

According to *Reading Next*, students become increasingly ‘tuned out’ as they progress through the grades, and giving them choices during the school day can reawaken student engagement. Although competency in reading is necessary, it is not enough to improve academic performance. Providing students opportunities to select for themselves the materials they read, and choosing instructional topics that are relevant to students’ lives are effective strategies to instill and maintain motivation, the report states.

Through new intervention programs, like Passport Reading Journeys, teachers now can put these instructional recommendations into practice—and see the dramatic change that a little motivation can bring. ▽

## Dr. Donald Deshler Reviews >> Passport Reading Journeys

*In his role as a research advisor to the design team for Passport Reading Journeys, Dr. Deshler was asked to formally review the design features of Voyager’s newest reading intervention program in meeting the needs of striving readers in middle and high school. The following excerpts are from his text:*

I would predict that this curriculum will be effective in addressing the needs of adolescents who struggle at grade level...The curricular design features of this program are soundly conceptualized and effectively implemented.

The majority of curricular materials for struggling adolescent readers lack benchmarking and formative assessment frameworks—not only has one been included in this program, but it is well conceptualized and, I would predict, easy to implement for teachers and palatable for students. The assessments in this program appear to be efficient and designed to produce data that teachers can tie directly to group and individualized instruction.

The SOLO™ technology seems very promising. It is tied

directly to and reinforces key concepts taught in class and provides students with multiple opportunities to practice independent of direct teacher monitoring and supervision.

This program appears to be very teacher friendly and should be easy to implement. I am impressed with...the clarity of instructions, and the concrete suggestions and aides to assist teachers in launching and sustaining a successful implementation. This program is especially impressive because of the large amount of content that it incorporates and the myriad of pedagogical principles that it uses throughout. The developers have done a masterful job of “hiding” this complexity and making it a very engaging, attractive curriculum for all teachers.

