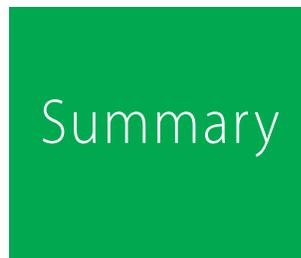




# Using strategy instruction to help struggling high schoolers understand what they read



Institute of Education Sciences  
U.S. Department of Education



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Summary

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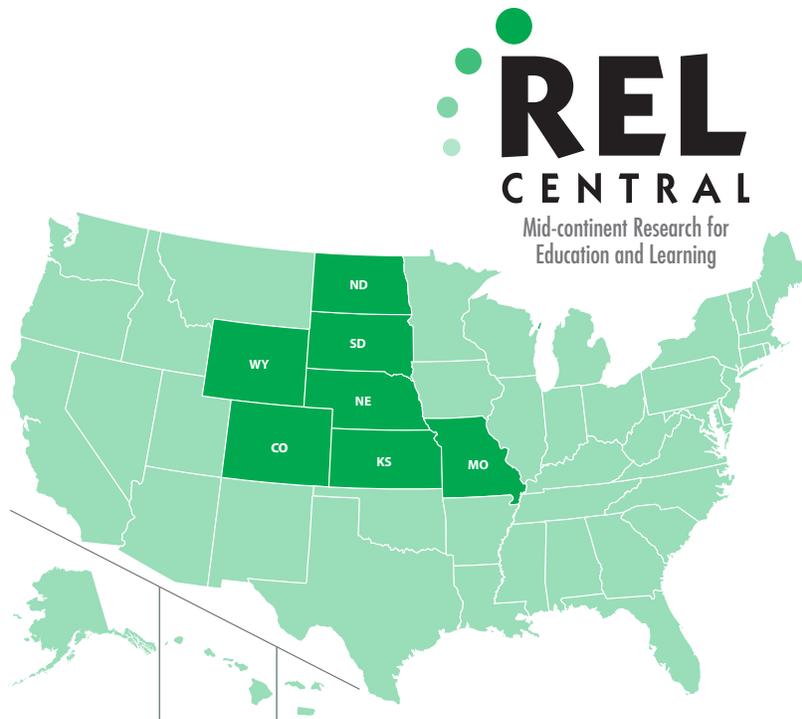
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This report is available on the regional educational laboratory web site at <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs>.

## Summary

# Using strategy instruction to help struggling high schoolers understand what they read

**The evidence indicates that peer-assisted learning can have a substantively important positive effect on struggling high school students' reading comprehension. But reservations remain about attributing improved comprehension to peer-assisted learning because the students were not randomly assigned to the intervention in the one study that met evidence standards.**

This review sought to locate and summarize findings from rigorous, scientifically based studies of the effectiveness of strategy instruction—teaching students to use and articulate strategies that foster active, competent, self-regulated, and intentional learning—for helping struggling high school students improve their reading comprehension. The goal was to address information needs in the Central Region by identifying evidence-based practices intended to help high school teachers teach struggling readers.

Extensive searches were conducted for relevant studies, which were then screened against rigorous evidence standards. To identify the least biased estimates of the effect of strategy instruction, the evidence screens required that only exposure to strategy instruction distinguish the intervention and comparison

groups. By establishing this single difference, outcomes can with some confidence be attributed to strategy instruction. One study, on peer-assisted learning strategies, passed the relevance and rigorous evidence screens.

Fuchs, Fuchs, and Kazdan (1999) studied the effects of peer-assisted learning strategies on struggling high school readers' reading comprehension. Using a quasi-experimental design, the study passed each What Works Clearinghouse evidence screen, meeting evidence standards with reservations. The improvement index, a measure that helps in attributing practical significance to study findings, was 13 percentile points—meaning that the student at the midpoint in the control group distribution would have gained at least 13 percentile points in achievement if exposed to the intervention.

The study showed that peer-assisted learning improved performance in reading comprehension when the struggling readers in the sample engaged in three key collaborative activities: reading passages aloud with a partner modeling and coaching, formulating a general understanding of what they read by asking and answering questions about each paragraph (with their partners), and predicting and confirming or disconfirming predictions

of what would be learned next (again, with their partners).

The evidence indicates that peer-assisted learning can have a substantively important positive effect on struggling high school students' reading comprehension. But reservations remain about attributing improved comprehension to peer-assisted learning because the students were not randomly assigned to the intervention.

In addition, the extent of evidence was very small: 102 students, primarily students with disabilities in 10 high schools in only the southeastern United States. Comprehension was measured using only researcher-developed assessments and only one type of text: folktales with grade 2.5 readability. With only these assessments, instructional settings, and students in the evidence base the finding of positive effects for peer-assisted learning has limited applicability. Further research is needed to strengthen the evidence base. A first

step would be to randomly assign students to the intervention.

Better and broader outcome measures are also needed to assess the effect of peer-assisted learning. Outcome measures in future studies could include passages with grade 7 or higher readability. A state high school reading assessment could also be included to evaluate whether benefits might accrue for high-stakes indicators of achievement. To accommodate struggling readers' difficulties and reduce barriers to reading, studying the effects of peer-assisted learning on listening comprehension would also be valuable.

The findings in this report are limited by the scope of the searches and the research available. Findings and conclusions about the effectiveness of strategy instruction for struggling high school readers may change as additional research is identified or completed.

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