1 OUR GREATEST CHALLENGE

If you make a student feel like a reader, he'll become a reader.
Donald Graves

Here is a fantasy of mine: it's the first day of the school year and I'm standing at my classroom door greeting my new students:

"Good morning, Maria. I understand you have read twenty-seven books this summer. Welcome to my class! Come in! Let's meet at lunch later this week so I can hear your thoughts on why Hamlet waited so long to exact his revenge.

"Michael, I'm sorry, but I have heard from your previous teachers that you are an unmotivated reader. Unfortunately, I'm not allowing any student to enroll in my classroom this year until he demonstrates he has discovered the joys and wonders of reading. Please go see your counselor for a class change. You may reenroll when you've become a lifelong learner.

"Hi, you must be Nadia. Your older sister told me you are a semi-motivated reader. I will allow you to enroll in the class, but you will remain on a probationary basis until you demonstrate ownership of your education. If you make meaningful strides toward becoming an intrinsically motivated reader, I'll allow you to stay in the class. Please have a seat."

Absurd, I know. We are not given license to stand at the threshold of our classrooms and accept only those students who have already developed a passion for reading—nor, frankly, would I want to. In reality, we know our new students will be bringing with them a wide range of reading abilities and attitudes, and it will be our task—our charge—in the next 180 school days to help them develop as readers. Therein lies one of our greatest challenges: good readers or poor, voracious or reluctant, fluent or slow, it is our responsibility to make all our students feel like readers, to make our students become readers, and to make our students remain readers long after they have left our schools. A daunting thought; but if we don't accept this challenge, who will?

As teachers, we want all our students to lead lives in which reading matters. Further, we want students to become many kinds of readers—readers of academic

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text, readers of functional or "real world" print, and readers of recreational materials. This is a lofty goal, given that many of our students enter our doors as inexperienced, aliterate, or nonexistent readers. Some arrive from homes and apartments devoid of reading materials—no books, no newspapers, no magazines, no Internet. But a lack of access to books isn't always the reason for students' not reading. Many of my students have books at home, but for one reason or another, reading hasn't assumed a prominent role in their lives. For a myriad of reasons, they come to class the first day of school not having read a single book over summer vacation. The idea of reading for pleasure, of reading when it is not assigned, is foreign to them. This is always a shock to English teachers, who treasure summer as an opportunity to catch up on all the neglected reading piled up on their nightstands.

But the problems we teachers face reach far beyond the world of recreational reading. We are increasingly seeing students who, when confronted with challenging assigned reading (a biology textbook, a state-mandated exam, or some other difficult material), often give up easily. They are unable, or unwilling, to tackle difficult text. In short, they are not in reading "shape." This raises serious questions for teachers. How do we turn around this apathy? How do we address this unwillingness to read? How do we light a reading fire under our students? How do we shelter fragile adolescent readers and help them grow into people for whom reading matters? How can we meaningfully and consistently reinforce the benefits of reading? Where do we start?

Building Readers

Occasionally I'll be at a workshop and a colleague, usually a newer teacher who has heard that I've had some success motivating my students to read, will pull me aside and ask me the million-dollar question: How do I get my reluctant teenagers to read? The teacher then stands there, awaiting my quick response, expecting some magical pearl of wisdom to spill out of me, which will thus inspire an instantaneous transformation in the reading lives of that teacher's students. The truth is that there is no single, quick answer. If there were, the problem of motivating students to read more wouldn't be as widespread.

Building reading motivation requires complex construction. There isn't a single right motivational tool. What inspires one student to read might not move another. We therefore cannot use the same approach with every student. To maximize our chances of success, we need to sell students on a wide range of reasons why they should read. These reasons—lots of them—need to be made visible to our students. They should be shared early and often, and repeated and overlapped to construct a strong foundation of reading motivation. Each reason does not stand alone; rather, they build upon each other and strengthen one another. No single reason will turn around a reluctant reader. But together, over the course of a school year, many reasons send the message that reading is rewarding. The number, strength, and diversity of the reasons presented in this book build a compelling case for reading.

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To maximize the effectiveness of these reading reasons, however, certain building blocks must be in place.

Building Block 1: Students need access to high-interest reading materials.

My first year in the classroom I was hired to teach five periods of high school remedial reading. There was one minor hitch: not a single book could be found in my assigned classroom. I am not exaggerating. There was not one book. Instead, the retiring teacher bequeathed to me three mammoth file cabinets. Inside were 180 folders, one for each day of the year, each holding a worksheet-of-the-day. And we wonder why most students never make it out of the remedial track.

Recognizing the absurdity of trying to teach adolescents to become readers without having books at my disposal, I regularly set aside class time to take students to the library. I insisted that students leave the library at the end of each visit with books in their possession. I was successful at getting students to check out many books, but I was not very successful at turning these students into readers. There is something about a teacher's mandating a library visit that reeks of coercion. Sure, students were checking out books, but many were doing so because *I* wanted them to, not because *they* were motivated to read. In short, it was just another assignment to fulfill in order to make the teacher happy or to earn the desired grade. My students' motivation was extrinsic.

Fifteen years later, my students now read many times more books than my students did during my first year. What's the key difference? What accounts for this surge in reading? Far and away the most important factor was the establishment of a classroom library. I brought interesting books to my students. I surrounded them with a variety of high-interest reading materials. I now have 2,500 books in my classroom, and I am convinced that developing this "book flood" (a phrase coined by New Zealand researcher Warwick Elley) is the single most important thing I have done in my teaching career. My classroom library is stocked with high-interest adolescent reading materials of all shapes, sizes, levels, and genres, from comic books to Shakespeare, from picture books to Sigmund Freud. (For high-interest adolescent reading titles, see Appendix B, "101 Books Every Classroom Library Should Have.") It's true that some of these books are also available in the school library, but something powerful happens when books are brought to the students, when teachers take time to talk the books up, when students are immersed daily in print. Jeff McQuillan, in *The Literacy Crisis,* makes a strong case with a simple equation:

more books = more reading = better reading

In *Teaching Reading in High School English Classes* (Ericson 2001), McQuillan writes of a book flood experiment he and other teachers developed in an urban, lower socioeconomic school. The teachers surrounded their non-reading students with high-interest reading materials for a year. The result? By

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the end of the second semester, teachers reported significant growth in students' fluency, comprehension, and—perhaps most important—enjoyment of reading. Most of the students began the year with a negative view of reading, but "by the end of the first semester almost all of the students had read several books on their own, and continued to read throughout the school year" (p. 79). McQuillan's experiment gave credence to something I've always suspected: all students like to read; they just don't all know it yet.

As you consider the motivational mini-lessons found in this book, remember the importance of surrounding your students with interesting things to read. Just as you can't golf without clubs or paint without a brush, you can't become a reader without good books (the American Library Association recommends that there be 1,500 books in every classroom—see Appendix A for the Three Commandments of Classroom Libraries). The motivation strategies in this book are most effective when students have access to interesting reading material.

Building Block 2: Students must have a time to read and a place to read.

Putting good books in the hands of a student is crucial, but will do very little good unless the student has a time and a place to read. Some of our students have time to read at home, but no place to do so; others have a place, but no time. For many students, school is the only place where the three key factors merge: having a book to read, a place to read, and time to read.

If we accept the premise that one becomes a better reader by reading, then we should be alarmed at how little time our students spend actually reading. Many studies have indicated that the amount of reading done by students peaks around the fifth grade, and by junior and senior high school the reading done by students drops off precipitously. In his research, Terrence Paul found the following:

- The average amount of time spent reading for all grades is 7.1 minutes a day in public schools around the nation.
- The peak reading years are the fourth and fifth grades. By the time students reach high school, they are spending about as much time on literature-based reading as kindergartners.
- Students in the top 5 percent of national reading scores read 144 times more than students in the bottom 5 percent.
- Students in the highest-performing states in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading study engaged in 59 percent more reading than those in states in the bottom quartile.

The evidence is compelling that our students are not doing enough reading, both inside school and out. This raises two questions: 1) In the midst of daily lectures, group work, and essay writing, am I carving out enough valuable curricular time *in class* for students to actually read? 2) When the last bell

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of the day rings and the students leave campus, am I putting too much faith in my reluctant readers to believe that actual reading practice is occurring at home?

Consider this scenario: your school hires you to be the head basketball coach and charges you with the task of producing the best basketball players possible. You would probably begin by identifying the areas of greatest need and design practices to meet those needs. To teach players the necessary skills, you would conduct thorough practices under your direct supervision. You would not leave anything to chance. It would be ludicrous, therefore, for a varsity coach to address his team as follows: "As we prepare for the big game Friday night, I will not be conducting any practices at school. Instead, I want you to go home and practice on your own for a number of hours to improve your skills. Good luck, don't cut any corners, and I'll see you at the game Friday night." This probably wouldn't present any problems for "gym rats," players who already love to play basketball, but do you think the students who dislike basketball will go home and vigorously practice alone every night? Highly doubtful. Yet isn't this the approach we often take with reluctant readers? We tell them that lots of reading is good for them and that they should go home and do lots of it. Some do, but the ones who need it the most often do not.

The most successful basketball players, like the best readers, do both, of course. They work hard under the auspices of a coach, and they motivate themselves to practice on their own. A good player doesn't rely on one or the other. (Michael Jordan spent thousands of hours practicing outside of the team's scheduled practices.) If one improves reading by reading, then it follows that time must be set aside during the school day to ensure that reading takes place, and it also follows that we have to maintain high expectations that students will do a heavy amount of reading at home. It should not be one or the other. Both expectations, reading at school and at home, are essential to building readers. (In the Anaheim Union High School District, where I work, sustained silent reading—SSR—has been implemented campuswide at every one of our eighteen schools, thus ensuring that our students have time for daily reading practice. It helps to have a superintendent who is a former English teacher.)

Time spent reading, during SSR and otherwise, also correlates strongly with higher test scores. In a study of fifth graders, Richard Anderson, Paul Wilson, and Linda Fielding found that the more students read, the higher they scored on standardized reading exams. Conversely, the less students read, the lower they scored. The correlation, as noted in the following table, was strong:

Percentile Rank	Minutes of Text Reading per Day	Estimated Number of Words Read per Year
98	90.7	4,733,000
90	40.4	2,357,000
70	21.7	1,168,000
50	12.9	601,000
20	3.1	134,000
10	1.6	51,000

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The researchers found that students who scored in the 98th percentile read on the average of ninety minutes a day, which translates to reading nearly five million words a year. If a student reads almost five million words a year, he or she is going to score well on any reading assessment. Students who read infrequently, however, scored very poorly. Though the researchers were measuring fifth graders, I have found this ratio of reading time to number of words read to be an accurate rate for my high school readers. This study argues forcefully for the importance of setting aside time and a place for students to read, especially in this age of state and national testing.

Building Block 3: Teachers must model the value of reading.

In the fall of 1993, I decided to launch a faculty book club at the high school where I taught in Anaheim. The premise of the club was simple: interested teachers would select a title, go out and read it, and meet on the last Friday of the month during lunch to informally discuss the book. I set a date for the first meeting, printed fliers and placed them in the faculty mailboxes, put messages in the faculty bulletin, purchased copies of the first selection in advance, and waited for the teachers to stampede my room for the first meeting. Only four (out of seventy-five) teachers showed up.

Why only four teachers? What was the problem? The problem was that our teachers, like all teachers, were buried under the demands of teaching. Planning lessons, grading essays, completing paperwork, conferring with students and parents, serving on committees, and attending dances, concerts, plays, and sporting events cut into reading time. The demands of teaching had created a roadblock to the library and bookstore.

This was understandable, but our lack of reading was creating a credibility problem with our students. How could we sell kids on the value of reading when we teachers were not reading? Students are quick to notice such hypocrisy. Realizing this, I had established the faculty book club in an attempt to motivate teachers (including myself) to rediscover reading. Knowing that other teachers would be reading the same book and would be counting on me to participate in a discussion encouraged me to set aside time (mostly television time) in my hectic day to read. Even though only four teachers showed up for that first meeting, we forged ahead.

Slowly but surely, word began to spread, and we started to gain more faculty members. Implementing a schoolwide SSR program helped tremendously. Today, nine years later, the Magnolia High School Faculty Book Club has a membership of thirty-three teachers across the content areas. To date we have read eighty books (see Appendix G for a full listing).

The faculty book club has changed the reading culture of Magnolia High School. It has reignited reading among teachers, fostered collegiality among faculty and staff, and allowed teacher-readers to lead students by example. Most important, it has conveyed the message to students that reading is important in our lives and books are something to get excited about. The list

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in Appendix G is posted in my classroom so that students see me as an active reader. Worksheets and computers do not instill a reading habit in our students; teachers leading by example do. (See Appendix C for monthly motivational ideas.)

Conversely, teachers who grade papers or balance their checkbooks during SSR time are also sending their students a powerful message—a message that time set aside to read isn't important. It's true that we often have to model a positive behavior ten, twenty, thirty times before we see it begin to take hold in adolescents. But it's also true that if we model a bad behavior *once,* they learn it immediately. I remind myself of this prior to every SSR period—that as a teacher I am more influential as a model than my students will ever let on. If I talk the talk, I need to walk the walk.

Building Block 4: Teachers must stop grading everything.

Picture yourself during spring break at some far-off exotic beach location. There is not a cell phone, pager, computer, or school intercom in sight. You are the only soul on the pristine beach, which is chamber-of-commerce, postcard perfect. The concept of "teenager" has faded into the deep recesses of your brain. You have worked hard for this break, a respite you richly deserve. You have brought with you something deliciously trashy to read, a guilty pleasure you have saved for this moment. You plant your beach chair in the soft, powdery sand and crack your just-for-fun book, not a worry on the horizon. As you relax and begin to get into the first chapter, you are suddenly and rudely interrupted by the appearance of a dreaded former English teacher who suddenly sneaks up behind you and says, "I love that book you're reading! Let me grade your comprehension as you read it! Since it may take you a few hours to finish, I'll return every half hour or so and drop a pop quiz on you. When you're finished with the book, I'll give you an exam to see how well you understood it. After that, you can make a diorama to illustrate your favorite scene. But, hey, for now, don't worry about it—go ahead and enjoy!"

My guess is that any enjoyment you might have had from reading that book just evaporated. The very notion that someone wants to assess your recreational reading is counterproductive to your purpose: to enjoy reading. As this example illustrates, there are times when assessment is beneficial and there are times when it is harmful. I learned some time ago that if I want to develop a love of recreational reading in my students, I have to resist the urge to grade everything they read.

Similarly, we can learn this lesson of not grading all reading assignments in the paradox we face when teaching students how to improve their writing. The writing Catch-22 goes something like this:

- Students' writing will improve only if they write a lot.
- Students' writing will improve only if they receive some meaningful feedback on their writing.
- Responding meaningfully to all the students' papers takes a lot of time.

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- If grading takes a long time, students will wait longer between writing assignments.
- If students wait longer between writing assignments, they will not be doing enough writing to improve.

The solution (more writing) creates a problem (more grading) that prevents the solution (more writing). The only way around this paradox is for me to accept the notion that my students will simply have to write more than I can grade. They will still receive meaningful feedback, though not on every assignment. I will have to utilize peer responses and read-around groups. They will not sit around waiting for me to grade everything before they write more. As a general rule of thumb, I ask my students to write four times more than I can grade. I explain to them (and their parents) that if they don't write this much, they will not get enough practice to improve their craft.

If I accept the notion that students will not develop as writers unless they write much more than I can grade, then it makes sense that they will not develop as readers unless they read a lot more than I can grade as well. I have to accept the notion that they should read much more than I can assess. Students are evaluated enough when it comes to academic reading. If I want them to become lifelong recreational readers, I need to let go of my desire to grade everything, particularly if I am trying to get them to see that reading is fun. I need to stop being the English teacher sneaking up behind my students on the beach with the pop quiz in hand.

Building Block 5: Teachers must provide structure to a reading program.

Though I don't assess much of my students' pleasure reading, I do have them keep track of everything (academic, recreational, functional) they read on both a Reading Log (see Appendix H) and a Reading Record, adapted from Nancie Atwell's *In the Middle* (see Appendix I). These forms are used to measure whether students are meeting the independent reading expectations of my school district, which are as follows:

Grade level	Number of words read in a year	Number of pages read in a month	Time spent reading in a year
Grade 7	1,000,000	200-page book a month	60 hours
Grade 8	1,000,000	200-page book a month	60 hours
Grade 9	1,250,000	250-page book a month	75 hours
Grade 10	1,500,000	300-page book a month	90 hours
Grade 11	1,750,000	350-page book a month	105 hours
Grade 12	2,000,000	400-page book a month	120 hours

The Reading Log is used to track daily independent reading assignments and total time spent reading. This log is for independent reading only. It does not apply to any teacher-assigned reading. Students fill in the form anytime

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they read independently outside the school walls. They mark the date and indicate what they read by marking "B" for book, "N" for newspaper, "M" for magazine, or "O" for other (e.g., Internet, comic books). There is a line available for a one-sentence description of what they read. They complete the log by indicating how long they read and totaling their running reading time. On Friday they take the log home for the weekend, draw a line under their week's reading with a highlighter, and have a parent sign the highlighted area. They then return the logs on Monday and we continue tracking our time. Their overall time is tracked in class using the chart found in Appendix K. To keep students honest, I reserve the right to meet with them at random and ask questions about their reading.

The Reading Record is used to keep track of all the works students have read (or abandoned). It provides a record of all kinds of reading the student might do, from academic to recreational. Periodicals are not included; the Reading Record is reserved for large works (books and plays) only. The idea is to encourage students to move beyond magazine reading, to become readers of books. Every student in my school district has a Reading Record, printed on heavy stock for durability. This record follows the student from grade to grade.

Having students track their reading on both a daily and a yearly basis serves as a reminder that they are progressing as readers. The Reading Record and Reading Log are not graded, but they are prerequisites for obtaining specific grades in the class. For example, to receive an A in the class, a student must meet three requirements: 1) he or she must earn an A average on all graded assignments; 2) he or she must read 120 hours; and 3) he or she must read twelve major works, both academic and recreational, some assigned, some free choice. Only the first criteria is graded; the other two are prerequisites. In other words, a student who earns an A on all the graded assignments will only keep that grade if he or she has met the reading requirements. Otherwise, the student earns a lower grade. This is true at each grade point; each has graduated requirements.

Establishing a high reading target is important. As the old saying goes, "No one rises to low expectations." Having students chart their reading progress enables them to recognize their advancement as readers.

Why Before How

These five building blocks—allowing more access to reading, providing a time and place, modeling the value of reading, placing less emphasis on grading, and providing structure to measure progress—work in concert with one another. They are effective only when they are applied simultaneously, when they are visited and revisited, when they overlap. Alone, each is ineffective. Together, they form the necessary foundation for building adolescent readers.

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There is, however, one element still missing—an element far too frequently overlooked when considering how to turn children on to reading: motivation.

Building Block 6: Students must want to read—they must see what's in it for them.

We spend a lot of time in education discussing *how* to get students to be better readers. We don't spend enough time, in my view, on sharing with students *why* they should become readers.

Let's say you decide one day that you'd like to be a competitive swimmer. Even if you are the most motivated student in aquatic history, it is safe to say that you will not develop without some critical factors: a pool to practice in, a coach to point you in the right direction, and lots of practice time. Similarly, you could not become an excellent tennis player unless you had a racket, an available court, coaching, and—again—lots of time to practice. Whether it's swimming or tennis, having access to the right equipment, sound coaching, and extensive practice time are nonnegotiable prerequisites.

But it takes more than that. Before anything else, you must be motivated. You can have an Olympic-size pool in your backyard, a gold-medal-winning coach, and ample practice time, but you won't develop into a competitive swimmer unless you have the *desire* to be a competitive swimmer. You have to see the value in getting in that pool every day. You have to *want* to swim. You need to be convinced that swimming every day is worthwhile, not because someone else wants you to be a great swimmer, but because you see the value in it yourself. The payoff, you feel, is worth it.

The same is true of reading. Students must want to become better readers, not because someone else wants them to, but because the rewards of reading have been made visible to them. The value of reading must become internalized. This does not happen by osmosis. Students must be led to it. I learned this during my sophomore year in high school.

As a high school student, I liked to read, but I did not care for poetry. My English teacher confessed to the class that she didn't like poetry either, but felt obligated to "expose" us to it because poetry was a required unit in the tenth-grade curriculum. Thus, I began my first foray into poetry with two strikes against me: I didn't like poetry and neither did my teacher. Not surprisingly, I graduated from high school with the notion that poetry was boring and meaningless.

A couple of years later, much to my dismay, I found myself studying poetry in a college course. Prepared to hate poetry once again, I gradually underwent an unexpected transformation. Through the enthusiasm and guidance of my professor, I began to see the beauty of poetry. I gained an appreciation of the power of rhythm, the importance of sound, the craft of economy. I learned to love the rules (iambic pentameter) and the lack of rules (free verse). I liked the playfulness and the seriousness of it. By the end of the semester, I had come to realize how wrongheaded I had been about poetry. I had undergone an intellectual makeover, if you will, and a poetry reader was born.

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What's the point of this anecdote? Today I love nothing better than to read a poem by Jimmy Santiago Baca, Charles Bukowski, or Czeslaw Milosz. I have discovered that the poetry section of the bookstore is a good place to get lost for an hour. I don't need anyone to tell me that poetry is good for me and that I should read it once in a while. I have become a poetry reader—it is now intrinsic with me. Poetry matters to me.

But this appreciation, this acquiring of a poetry habit, would never have happened had I not been shown the way by a gifted teacher. There was a transitional phase in which I was led to that appreciation. Frankly, I had to be sold on the idea of poetry, but once I was, I gained ownership of the appreciation. Had I not been sold (extrinsic) on the worth of poetry, I would never have acquired an appreciation of that worth (intrinsic). My high school teacher's inability to get me to see the pleasure and value of poetry did not give me a fighting chance to acquire a poetry habit on my own. Surrounding me with poems in high school wasn't enough. I needed a push (more like a shove) in the right direction in order for the beauty of poetry to take hold. I was convinced I did not like poetry. I was wrong.

We must prove to our nonreaders they are wrong about reading. Students are human and, being human, seek pleasure or value. Like most people, their first thought will be, "What's in it for me?" Unfortunately, many of our students see reading as just another assignment, something generated by the teacher. We must prove otherwise by demonstrating to our students that reading is worthwhile and show them that there is a world of reward in it for them. In a way, by providing these six foundational blocks we are providing reading training wheels. If we are successful, eventually the wheels will be removed and students will ride away, self-propelled readers.

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