

Adolescent Intervention



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EDITOR'S NOTE

Adolescents who struggle with reading and literacy face significant challenges in academic and future success. This Spotlight focuses on effective interventions to address learning gaps and support literacy development. From optimizing tutoring to emphasizing the importance of reading support classes, these articles offer valuable perspectives. Discover the key components teachers need to support struggling teen readers and address foundational reading skills in older students.



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Here's What Makes Tutoring Work for Academic Recovery

By Olina Banerji

Washington, D.C. —

The news about the reading and math skills of K-12 students nationwide is dire: Academic recovery after the pandemic has stalled in the case of mathematics, and reading scores have hit a new low, as reported by the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Students in high-income districts have progressed much faster than those who come from low-income ones, widening gaps among groups of students.

Between the doom-and-gloom, though, there were a few signs of growth to celebrate, like in Louisiana, Atlanta, and Ector County, Texas. While bright spots may be few and far between swathes of students who are struggling to perform at grade level, they reveal a key connection between academic achievement and the resources spent on tutoring students either in school, after school, or during the summer.

There might be hard-nosed evidence in favor of high-impact and high-dosage tutoring, which is generally defined as regular one-on-one tutoring or tutoring in very small groups, but two specific things threaten its continuation in schools, experts said. One, pandemic-era aid has stopped; and two, public schools are staring in the face of budget cuts due to enrollment changes and shifting federal priorities.

These changes could put the future of high-dosage tutoring, along with other academic interventions, in jeopardy.

States will soon have to prioritize how they want to spend their resources, said Kunjan Narechania, chief executive officer at Watershed Advisors, an education consultancy firm that partners with states to generate and implement education reforms. She spoke on panel convened here on Feb. 12 by Accelerate, a national nonprofit that promotes evidence-based tutoring interventions.

"I hope that states are really scrutinizing where their dollars are going and making choices to redirect dollars to strategies that are evidence based," she said. "If you ask me if that's going to happen wholesale, I think we're going to see significant variation [between



states], just as we did with [pandemic-era] spending."

Successful tutoring needs a supportive ecosystem

Narechania said on the panel that for tutoring efforts to succeed, they must be part of a larger vision that a district or state has around student success. An "anchoring" vision could then help decide what kind of training teachers need, what kind of data and feedback systems need to be put in place, and what instruction will look like.

States have to decide "what they want their children to experience differently," Narechania added.

Louisiana, which ranked second among states in math recovery and first in reading in the recent NAEP results, followed such an approach. Louisiana's 4th graders are scoring higher in reading now than they were before the start of the pandemic—the only state that's made statistically significant progress in that area since 2019.

The work of aligning tutoring to students' academic needs dates back to the 2020-21 school year, when Louisiana implemented a K-3 literacy screener, said Kelly Bottger, the executive director of Louisiana Kids Matter, an advocacy group that works with the state government on education policy.

Bottger said on the panel that the literacy screener became a way to introduce high-dosage tutoring for students who were reading below grade level—a substantial 75 percent.

Over three years, that number has come down to 25 percent. "We've come a very long way in a short amount of time with kids who

were negatively impacted, because they were in 1st grade at the time of the pandemic," Bottger said.

To ensure that pandemic-relief aid went toward supporting literacy interventions, Bottger said the state's education department created a dashboard that tracked what districts were spending their funds on, and how much went to efforts like tutoring.

Added Bottger: "It was public accountability, ... the districts didn't want to look they were [only] putting in football fields. They started spending money on high-dosage tutoring interventions and literacy training."

Louisiana received \$4 billion in federal pandemic relief for K-12 schools—or roughly \$5,700 per student—which is more than the national average of \$3,700 per student, according to the Education Recovery Scorecard.

The screener, the accountability measures, and the in-school tutoring were all part of a larger "package" that aimed to bring reading scores up. Additionally, the Pelican State also gave parents \$1,000 dollars to spend on digital tutoring options, if their children needed additional support in math and reading. That amount was increased to \$1,500 in 2024.

Now, 20,000 people have enrolled in that program and double that number are on the waitlist, said Bottger.

Louisiana is now keen to introduce a K-3 math screener, alongside the one for literacy. "The thinking is that if it [the interventions] worked for literacy, it should work for math," said Bottger.

Tutoring is now more in the hands of states than ever, said Narechania. States like Louisiana, Tennessee, and Virginia have included tutoring as part of their larger vision to benefit students.

For example, Narechania said Virginia has purchased different tutoring options which are offered as part of the Multi-Tiered System of Supports in schools, or other types of interventions.

"When tutoring becomes part of the system, then you can see things sustain," she said. "But it's not the norm yet." ■

Essential Steps in Meeting the Needs of Older Readers



By Dr. Jason DeHart, Teacher, Wilkes Central High School, Wilkesboro, NC

It's crucial to support adolescent students in improving their reading skills. **Use this checklist to ensure you're guiding older learners toward growth and proficiency.**



- ☐ **1. Centralize texts.**
Ensure your instruction prioritizes reading texts above all else. While activities, games, and other engagements can be entertaining, reading should always remain the central focus.
- ☐ **2. Praise the good.**
Identify each student's strengths and build from there. Celebrate what works well in both students and texts.
- ☐ **3. Get critical with materials.**
Be selective in the readings you choose and the questions and activities you ask students to do. The question of: "Why am I doing this?" should always end in literacy development.
- ☐ **4. Write daily.**
Require students to respond to texts—no apologies! Writing reveals every student's thoughts, even the quiet ones.
- ☐ **5. Create and design.**
Enhance writing through creation and design. Digital content complements text, enriching communication. Focus areas can include web content and social media.
- ☐ **6. Centralize voice.**
Give students opportunities to share their voices. While teaching mechanics, encourage meaningful connections and provocative questions.
- ☐ **7. Make expertise visible.**
Read to students and with students and discuss what we do when we read. Model good reading habits.
- ☐ **8. Learn the processes.**
Ensure teachers understand literacy fundamentals and their complex development, demonstrating expert knowledge.
- ☐ **9. Support and challenge.**
Watch for opportunities to help those students who need specific interventions while continuing to make work appropriately challenging.
- ☐ **10. Celebrate and keep collaborating.**
Celebrate victories and collaborate—teaching thrives on connection, not isolation.



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Allison Shelley for All4Ed

A group of high school girls work together to solve an algebra problem during their precalculus class. Nearly 4 in 10 educators said the level of unfinished learning in secondary math was “severe” or “very severe,” a new survey shows.

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Learning Recovery Has Stalled. What Should Schools Do Next?

By Olina Banerji

Schools have tried a combination of moves—including in- and after-school tutoring, an emphasis on social-emotional well-being, and summer school—to get learning levels back to where they were before the pandemic. But students are still not fully caught up, educators say in a new survey.

In the nationally representative poll of 990 teachers, principals, and district leaders, conducted in December by the EdWeek Research Center, respondents indicated that the levels of unfinished learning or “learning loss” still fell largely in the “moderate” or “severe” categories. Unfinished learning refers to when students haven’t fully mastered the concepts and skills at their grade level and need help to cover the gaps in their learning to succeed in future grades.

The educators’ perception reflects academic trends of the past few years—while academic interventions did improve the learning gaps created by the pandemic, the recovery process hasn’t been as rapid as schools had hoped. Researchers have pegged this to uneven implementation of efforts like high-dosage tutoring.

“The share of students receiving summer school and the share of students attending summer school was lower than needed. The recovery efforts were not intensive enough,” said Thomas Kane, a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. “Second, districts implementing large-scale tutoring for the first time had challenges.”

Kane was a co-author of a research paper that had tracked the overall gains made by students across the country in the 2022-23 school year. The data and analysis, published by the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University and the Education Opportunity Project at Stanford University in early 2024, telegraphed that federal recovery dollars, spent on efforts like tutoring and summer school, did help catch students up on unfinished learning.

In a single year—between spring 2022 and 2023—students on average gained back one-third of their original loss in math, and one-quarter of the original loss in reading, the study found. The improvements amounted to more than what students would have learned in a regular, pre-pandemic academic year, but students were still below the level where they needed to be, the researchers noted. The gains

were also not equally distributed across student subgroups.

However, the impact of these high-intensity tutoring models, and other efforts to close learning gaps, lessened when applied to schools at scale, according to a meta-analysis of 265 randomized control trials on impact of tutoring, published in October 2024.

Also, data published by the assessment provider NWEA indicate that learning recovery hasn’t just stalled—in some grades, students are losing academic ground. NWEA analyzed data from students in grades 3-8 from schools nationwide, and compared how much students had progressed over the 2023-24 school year to the aggregate learning growth of a pre-pandemic comparison group.

Educators point to learning loss across subjects, grade levels

The educators who were polled by the EdWeek Research Center were asked their perception of how much learning remained unfinished for students across subject areas and grades.

In elementary grades, about 40 percent of educators said students were still at “moderate” levels of unfinished learning or learning loss in math and English/language arts.

Thirty-three percent of educators said the level of unfinished learning in elementary math was “severe” or “very severe,” and 31 percent said the same about unfinished learning in English/language arts.

In middle and high school, educators reported a slightly wider gap between levels of unfinished learning in math and reading. Forty-six percent of respondents said their secondary students fell in the “moderate” category when it comes to learning loss in English/language arts; 40 percent said the same about math.

Thirty-seven percent of educators said the level of unfinished learning in secondary math was “severe” or “very severe,” while 26 percent of educators said the same about unfinished learning in English/language arts.

“Even moderate learning gaps show that there’s much more ground to be covered,” said Ayesha Hashim, a senior research scientist with NWEA.

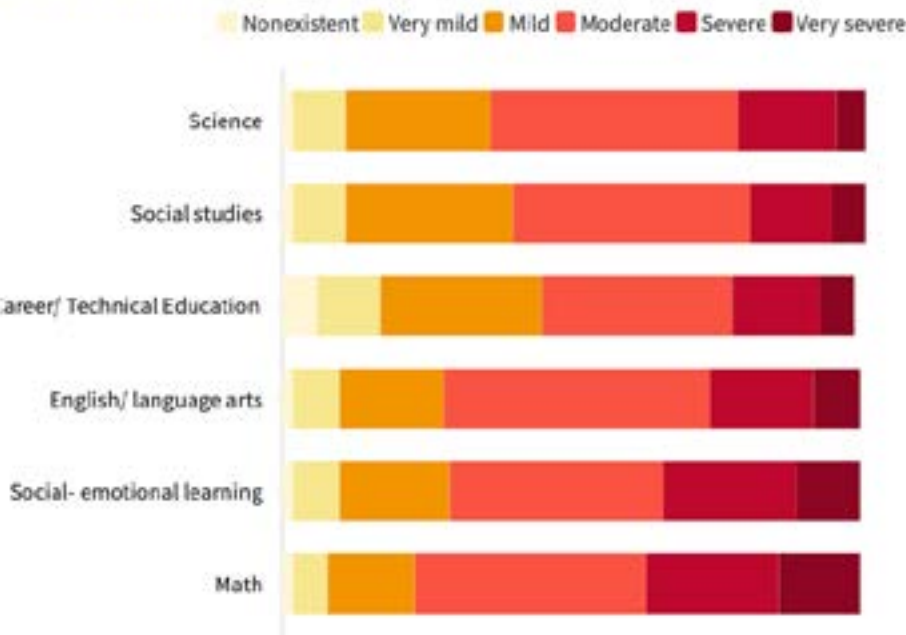
To make the most of interventions, schools have to rely on parents

Schools should continue with efforts like high-dosage tutoring and summer school, Hashim said—but they will have to face

In middle and high school, learning recovery hasn't kicked into high gear

How would you rate the level of unfinished learning or “learning loss” in the following areas for middle and/or high school students in your district/school/classroom?

Hover over bars to reveal data.



NOTE: Results show responses from teachers, school leaders, and district leaders.

DATA SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center December 2024



this challenge even as pandemic recovery dollars ebb.

“We have seen these interventions have modest impacts,” she said. “They are starting to work. But now that schools have built the capacity and willingness [to implement], the funding is gone.”

Anecdotally, Hashim said, district leaders are now focused on improving core instruction, too. Getting more effective teachers into the classroom has led to some early gains in learning, she said.

The other strategy that schools should focus on is getting parents involved by keeping them abreast of how their children are doing, said Kane.

Parents don’t have access to the kind of grade-level data that teachers do, which tells

them how students are doing now compared to before the pandemic.

“Parents don’t see that students are behind what grade they’re in, or how engaged they are in school,” he said. “It’s easy to see how they might be under the impression that that everything’s fine.”

If parents don’t see the urgency of repairing students’ grades, they might not push too hard to get their kids into summer school or make sure students are regularly attending school, Kane said.

Helping parents understand their child’s academic position, and getting their buy-in to reduce chronic absenteeism, can be a low-cost option for schools to continue on the path to academic recovery, Kane said. ■



Stephen Reiss/The Times-News via AP

Teacher Monica Villegas, an exchange teacher from Mexico, instructs students at the Twin Falls School District's migrant summer school at Oregon Trail Elementary School in Twin Falls, Idaho. A migrant summer school helps fill education gaps while keeping children out of farm fields.

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How to Get Summer School Right (Hint: It's Not Just About Academics)

By Sarah D. Sparks

When well done, summer programs can give students extra time to catch up on foundational skills and prepare for the next school year. But at a time of historically high chronic absenteeism during the school year, getting them to attend can be a struggle.

A new evaluation of Summer Boost, a summer learning recovery program used in eight cities nationwide, suggests giving equal weight to enrichment activities—from art projects to field trips—may improve student motivation to participate in summer programs and the benefits they get out of them.

“The enrichment piece of this was a very key part of it, such that I think it was a good balance between not necessarily remediating deficiencies, so to speak, but trying to really accelerate students’ learning,” said Geoffrey Borman, an education professor at Arizona State University, who conducted the evaluation. “That seemed to be borne out in results where we saw acceleration of student learning rather than just filling in the gaps.”

Borman tracked how much 35,000 participating and 160,000 demographically and academically similar students who did not participate in Boost students grew from the start of the summer program to the end, using the share who reached proficiency in the i-Ready and MAP-Growth, two commonly used benchmarking assessments in reading and math.

In a working paper released Tuesday, Borman found students who participated in the summer program gained, on average, four to five weeks more learning in math and three to four weeks more in English/language arts than students who did not participate. That worked out to closing more than 30 percent of the pandemic-related learning gap in math and more than 20 percent of the gap in reading in the grades 1-9.

“Our kids lost so much time and there’s an amazing opportunity over summer to give it back to them,” said Emily Morton, a researcher at the Center on Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research at the American Institutes for Research, who studies summer programs but was not part of the Summer Boost study. “Sometimes there

can be this message that you don’t want to take this free time away in summer,” Morton said. “But we should be thinking about it as an opportunity to give [students] something; giving them more school is giving them this opportunity to make up something that was taken from them.”

Morton said Borman’s results were promising, though she cautioned that tracking student proficiency levels may obscure the effect of the summer program on the lowest-performing students.

The Summer Boost effects were significantly larger than those found in a separate CALDER Center analysis of 400,000 students attending summer programs in eight districts in 2022. CALDER researchers including Morton found in that study that summer programs closed about 2-3 percent of the learning gap in math, and none at all in reading. The schools Morton studied provided on average 14-18 hours of academic instruction, compared to the minimum of 20 hours for the Summer Boost schools, and Morton said greater instructional time can improve the effectiveness of summer learning.

“It’s been a really tremendous impact on our young people,” said Eve Colavito, co-chief executive officer of the DREAM charter schools in New York City, which is starting its third year participating in Summer Boost. “For students who are on grade level, it keeps them there and ensures they don’t lose anything. And for students who are below grade level, we’ve actually seen students accelerate during the summer and be able to gain some of that lost ground.”

Summer programs have expanded in recent years, in part because the Biden administration highlighted them as an option to help students recover academically from school disruptions during the pandemic. About 8 in 10 school districts have spent federal COVID relief money on after-school or summer learning, according to the National Summer Learning Association.

Summer Boost was created in 2022, with support from Bloomberg Philanthropies and other nonprofits, to provide summer academic programs for students entering grades 1-9. As of 2023, the summer studied in Borman’s evaluation, it served more than 35,000 students at nearly 450 schools that received grants from Bloomberg in six states and Washington, D.C. Three-quarters of the participating students came from low-income families, and more than a quarter of whom were English learners.

The instruction also had to include

English/language arts and math for 90 minutes each per day in classes of no more than 25 students per teacher. However, schools were not required to admit only students who performed below grade level, and they typically allowed any student to attend.

Schedules varied widely; some programs interspersed academic classes with arts, sports, or other activities, while others focused the start of the week on academics and provided a field trip at the end of each week.

Colavito said the charter network has used the Summer Boost as an extension of its school year, with 80 percent of the schools' students also attending the summer program. This year DREAM plans to expand the program to serve 1,500 students in three elementary and three middle schools.

The school hires its school-year teachers for Summer Boost and aligns the summer math and reading instruction to its regular school year curriculum.

"When students hit the ground [at] the end of August when they start school, they've already gotten a primer in the summer for what's coming up," Colavito said.

Borman found schools that spend 90 minutes daily on enrichment, in addition to the 90 minutes each on reading and math instruction, showed the strongest growth for students. Students across racial and socioeconomic groups benefited, and English learners showed particular growth.

That may be, in part, because students actually showed up.

Prior research by the National Summer Learning Project found participating students' average attendance is 20 percentage points lower for summer school than class days during the regular school year.

To receive full grant funding of \$2,000 per student, Summer Boost schools had to provide at least 20 days of instruction during the summer, with students attending at least 70 percent of the time, and Borman found the 60 percent of students who attended 80 percent or more of instructional days showed the most academic growth. (Schools with lower attendance could qualify for partial funding.)

Design programs that respond to families' needs

Sunny Larson, the K-12 program director for Bloomberg Philanthropies, said school leaders should take parent needs—including transportation, timing, and meals—into account when designing and implementing summer programs. For example, many

schools offered both half- and full-day summer schedules.

"All of us with children know that having your kid go to something for two hours is just like, why even bother? That doesn't help you in your life for child care or for planning," she said.

Similarly, some New York City programs provided subway travel vouchers, both for the student and an adult, to ensure families could get younger students to the program safely. Most provided meals or snacks, using either program funds or federal summer meal support for students who qualified.

"Far too often folks have not considered [summer school] or not considered it in a comprehensive way," Larson said. "Summer school has been thought of as a punitive thing, and all about remediation.

"For us, getting kids in the classroom meant, yeah, you want to have strong academics," she said. "But also, what are the things that are going to make it exciting and fun to get kids to attend on a regular basis, to get teachers to want to participate, to sort of have an ethos of summer learning that leads to a great experience for everybody?"

Colavito said she believes ensuring continuity from the school year to the summer program has also been critical to summer engagement. "We've seen an incredible benefit from kids having consistent relationships in the summer with the people that taught them during the school year," she said. "In many ways, we think attendance is connected to showing up for the people that you know and love." ■

More Like This



Big Cities See Bright Spots On NAEP, But Worry About Keeping Up Interventions



What the Dismal Nation's Report Card Means For Reading and Math



Teaching Content And Supporting Reading Through Disciplinary Literacy

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Why Reading Support Classes Help High Schoolers Succeed

By Sarah Schwartz

Biology, literature, calculus, U.S. history—all high school courses, regardless of subject, require a strong grasp of one critical skill: reading.

By the time students are in high school, especially in advanced courses, it's taken for granted that they can learn new, complex ideas through text. However many still struggle with reading comprehension.

That's why Jennifer Norrell, the superintendent of East Aurora schools in Aurora, Ill., knew that she would have to boost students' reading abilities before she could expect them to take on college-level work.

As part of the district's push to enroll more students in Advanced Placement classes, East Aurora instituted mandatory reading classes for students who scored below a certain threshold on interim tests and end-of-year assessments.

The classes give students practice with constructing viable arguments, citing textual evidence, and notetaking.

"No one really teaches high school kids that, and they encounter some of their most difficult, challenging, technical, reading and writing in high school," Norrell said.

Education Week spoke with Norrell, a 2025 EdWeek Leaders To Learn From honoree, about how she implemented this extra reading support for students in East Aurora. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Why dedicate an entire class period to reading instruction for high school students?

We have the third largest population in the state of Illinois of [English] language learners. It's us, it's [Elgin Area School District U46], it's Chicago Public Schools, where they have 350,000 kids. We have 13,000 kids, so we're a pretty densely populated group of [English] learners.

So for me to move kids, we had to do some other things. One of the first things that we did was to really look at our literacy in the district as a whole.



Jamie Kelter Davis for Education Week

Jennifer Norrell, superintendent of East Aurora School District 131, at the Resilience Education Center in Aurora, Ill.

Were the reading classes designed specifically to support English learners, or were they designed to improve reading for everybody?

We implemented mandatory reading classes at all levels. They were designed based upon what your needs were.

We have three levels of reading classes. The first level was for kids who were struggling for whatever reason. We have programs that are in the reading classes where we could count that [as an ESL class]. ... That reading piece, for them, it looks different, but the time is still allotted.

And then for everyone else, we have general level reading, and then we even have honors reading for the kids who are scoring at the highest level to really push them—not just reading, but also, argumentative writing, rhetorical analysis.

There were levels so that every kid was really getting what they needed. It wasn't just checking a box. It was targeted toward kids' skill sets and [abilities]. And more importantly, it was targeted to how we could push them to exit this [reading class] with a whole new skill set.

How did you introduce the idea to the staff?

The first thing that I did was conversations with the leaders and the teachers, because

they needed to understand the context of why. Because oftentimes that is a hurdle, right? You go in, you put things forward, and then you get pushback and resistance.

What kind of pushback and resistance did you experience?

[Educators] reaching out to board members, emails—not happy—[critics] showing up at the board meetings.

Then one of my strongest parent leaders [supported me], the president of my Bilingual Parent Advisory Council [a district-wide group to foster relationships between parents and school staff]. She is a powerhouse. She does work all over the state of Illinois, and now she's doing work nationally. And she's a language learner herself.

What [she] said to me is, 'My son graduated from this district. ... He got to college, and because he was a good kid, he was one of the kids that made it in AP. He said when he got to college, he struggled mightily, because he really wasn't reading at that level.'

She said, 'I'm going to tell the parents to stand down and not join forces with the staff. ... I hear you. I believe you.'

I would meet with [the Advisory Council], and other large parent groups, and they could understand it, and a lot of them had seen it. By

me really forming those relationships with the parents, it enabled me to be able to get them on my side.

What effect have the reading classes had on student achievement?

It really was a game changer—to allow us to not only increase the numbers of AP [students], but also to allow us to increase the numbers that were receiving 3s, 4s, and 5s [on AP exams].

I wanted to make sure that our [AP enrollment] numbers went up, but it didn't jeopardize our percentages. I think that removing the barrier of literacy being a challenge, or tracking literacy in a greater amount of time that we had built into the schedule, was allowing us to set the groundwork for the success of kids in AP later on in their high school career.

We haven't been perfect at everything we've tried.

We certainly didn't expect the pandemic, and we certainly didn't expect our SAT scores [declining during that time] to be such a setback. We've got to rebuild all that up again. It hasn't been perfect, but the reading continues to pay off. ■



Motivating Struggling Adolescent Readers: Try Relevance & Success

By Dr. Louisa Moats

Award-Winning Literacy Expert and Author

Editor's Note: Looking to help your struggling readers in middle and high school overcome discouragement and the apathy that surrounds their inability to catch up to their peers? **Dr. Louisa Moats, literacy expert, discusses this challenge.**

Motivation, according to a textbook about adolescent literacy,* is “a feeling of interest or enthusiasm that makes a student want to complete a task or improve his or her skills.” Teachers of adolescent poor readers, however, often find their students are willing to do anything BUT read and write. Getting students to believe they can make meaningful progress—when all prior experience suggests they will not—and to work at something that has never been rewarding is a major challenge.

Adolescent struggling readers have experienced years of both intrinsic and extrinsic punishments for their inability to succeed at fundamental literacy tasks. After falling behind early, usually in kindergarten or first grade, they have endured low test scores, retention, public shame and embarrassment, and the chronic, debilitating certainty that they would never make meaning out of print the way other people do. Some act out; some withdraw; some get frustrated, depressed, or angry; some go to great lengths to cover up their inability to read.

“The keys to motivating adolescent struggling readers are relevance and success.”

Our work with middle and high school students who read very poorly has shown us that substantial progress is possible—not only on normative tests, but in the functional skills that underlie successful academic learning—and that motivating these students is not so difficult. In a nutshell, we’ve observed and demonstrated that the keys to motivating adolescent struggling readers are relevance and success.



RELEVANCE

Relevance pertains first to the psychological and social context in which learning takes place. Psychologically, adolescents are striving for autonomy, self-regulation, and self-definition. Socially, adolescents place high value on peer relationships. **To address these needs, it is important to offer the following in any secondary intervention:**

- **Choice of activity** in online word study, within clear expectations for overall unit completion
- **Allowances for an individual’s pace of learning**, so faster learners are not held back and slower learners are not punished
- **Privacy and protection from embarrassment** as students interact with the computer to relearn or review foundational skills
- **Choice of reading material** in the online library
- **Structured discussions with peers** in which students pose and respond to questions addressed to one another

Motivating Struggling Adolescent Readers

- **Structured tasks** requiring peer collaboration
- **Opportunities for nonacademic social exchanges** within and between classrooms sharing a program-specific website

These features, which are built into *LANGUAGE! Live*, respect the sensitivities of vulnerable students while meeting important psycho-social needs. In the supportive context created by the program's design, students can drop maladaptive defensive habits, lessen their anxiety, and focus on learning.

“It is important to respect the sensitivities of vulnerable students while meeting important psycho-social needs.”

Relevance also describes the most important feature of the topics, texts, and written responses that are the meat and potatoes of daily learning. If students are going to labor through several readings of a text, its themes should be engaging and compelling. Selections should prompt discussion, expression of points of view, and questioning. Readings should stand up to repeated, close examination—not just to build fluency, but because the richness of the ideas and the significance of the topics are by nature engaging.

When choosing a secondary intervention, be sure the text selections reflect themes that are somewhat edgy.

In creating *LANGUAGE! Live*, we included age-appropriate material, such as a play based on Anne Frank's diary, a speech by Nelson Mandela, and a graphic novel depicting Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, even though the students in the program are usually reading and writing at levels far below grade level. We believed students could handle text somewhat above their comfortable reading level if the process was highly scaffolded and if we emphasized meaning-making from start to finish. This approach has worked; often for the first time, our students are mentally and emotionally invested in understanding the larger themes the units address.

SUCCESS

The second major principle for motivating these poor readers—of equal importance to relevance—is success. **With any intervention program, students need and should respond to multiple sources of feedback about their performance. They should achieve a high accuracy rate on decoding, encoding, and oral reading tasks as they progress through the online program.** They must pass gateway exams to exit each unit. The structure of the program should allow for incremental learning in which students receive feedback on each item in each exercise and are able to immediately correct incorrect responses. Reinforcements such as point systems, virtual trophies, charts of timed quizzes, and concrete rewards are threaded throughout, which is what we've included in *LANGUAGE! Live*. Students always know where they stand and can see every small step of progress represented visually.

What is the result of using relevance and success to motivate adolescent

poor readers? Students who express hope, confidence, and enthusiasm they haven't felt for years, and who are making gains at an unprecedented rate. ■

Learn more about LANGUAGE! Live and other intervention programs from Voyager Sopris Learning® at voyagersopris.com



LANGUAGE! Live®

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Louisa Moats

Author of *LANGUAGE! Live*

Dr. Louisa Moats has been a teacher, psychologist, researcher, graduate school faculty member, and author of many influential scientific journal articles, books, and policy papers on the topics of reading, spelling, language, and teacher preparation.

Dr. Moats is the author of *LANGUAGE! Live*, a blended reading intervention program for grades 5-12. Dr. Moats' awards include the prestigious Samuel T. and June L. Orton award from the International Dyslexia Association® for outstanding contributions to the field; the Eminent Researcher Award from Learning Disabilities Australia; and the Benita Blachman award from The Reading League.

*Denton, C.A., Vaughn, S., Wexler, J., Bryan, D., & Reed, D. (2012). Effective instruction for middle school students with reading difficulties: The reading teacher's sourcebook. Baltimore: Brookes Publishing.



Jack Hollingsworth/Getty

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What Teachers Say They Need Most To Help Struggling Teen Readers

By Sarah Schwartz

Middle and high school teachers say they don't have enough time to support the struggling readers in their classes—and many say their school leadership isn't paying attention to the problem.

The findings, from a survey of more than 500 teachers, reading interventionists, and other educators in grades 6-12, come from the Project for Adolescent Literacy, or PAL, an educator-led group to support older students who are not reading at grade level.

The results paint a portrait of a fragmented landscape of reading intervention in secondary schools: Teachers use a wide variety of materials to try to reach struggling students and a similarly diverse collection of methods to assess progress.

They want more training on how to grow these students' reading skills and more time to put those practices into action—but more than half say their schools don't have policies to support these goals.

"Many respondents indicated that they are sounding the alarms based on their experience day in and day out in the classroom, and yearning for administrator support," said Rachel Manandhar, an education specialist and literacy interventionist at Berkeley High

“Many respondents indicated that they are sounding the alarms based on their experience day in and day out in the classroom, and yearning for administrator support.”

RACHEL MANANDHAR

Education specialist and literacy interventionist,
Berkeley High School

School in Berkeley, Calif., and a member of the PAL steering committee, in a recent webinar.

Teaching reading skills is usually the province of early elementary educators. By the time students get to middle or high school, the saying goes, they're reading to learn—not learning to read.

But as the “science of reading” movement has brought to light the gaps in many schools' early reading instruction and aimed to correct those, some upper grades teachers have said that their students are still missing foundational reading abilities.

The recent surge in state legislation on reading, aimed at aligning instruction with evidence-based best practice, almost exclusively targets grades K-5.

Still, in a separate report this year from the RAND Corporation, teachers of grades 3-8 reported that 44 percent of their students always or nearly always faced challenges reading the content in their classes. Almost 1 in 5 middle school teachers reported that they are teaching basic word-reading skills, such as phonics, three or more times a week.

Lack of resources can be a 'nightmare'

The Project for Adolescent Literacy survey was disseminated through educator networks, via PAL and its host organization, Seek Common Ground. Respondents included teachers, interventionists, and other educators from 44 states, as well as Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa—countries that are also facing lively debates about the most effective methods for teaching reading in English. Respondents' demographics were similar to the racial and gender breakdown of U.S. teachers.

Most respondents, 80 percent, said they have found teaching practices or strategies that work with struggling adolescent readers. Seventy-one percent said they teach with materials that will help these readers grow.

Exactly what those materials are, though, varied greatly. Respondents listed 124 different programs or curricula—explicit, systematic approaches to teaching reading foundations such as Orton-Gillingham, Wilson Reading System, and Voyager Sopris' Rewards topped the list—and 60 different pedagogical approaches.

To measure students' progress, educators most commonly used classroom-based assessments or anecdotal evidence: 46 percent of respondents mentioned these. Thirty-one percent said they used some form of normed assessment, such as NWEA's Measure of Academic Progress, a test given periodically

throughout the school year.

“The majority of measurements mentioned are teacher-designed,” said Kate Crist, a literacy consultant and member of PAL’s steering committee. “They’re very anecdotal, and they’re very specific to individual teachers and classrooms.”

In open-ended responses, educators explained the multifaceted challenge of working with older students who still struggle with foundational skills, such as decoding multisyllabic words.

They asked for professional learning that would explain how to differentiate in a classroom where students’ reading levels range from 3rd through 12th grade, and materials that could help students practice phonics skills that aren’t “juvenile-looking.”

“I’m using [speech to print] a lot and I was able to find a program that I’m able to go through that is working well,” wrote one teacher, in an open-ended response.

“And then alongside that, I’m creating a lot of my own things that are for everything else, because of course it’s not just about reading the word, it’s also about understanding the sentence structure, it’s about reading fluently, it’s about vocabulary. ... I’m sort of doing [a] mix of things but I tried to create everything myself last year and it was just a nightmare. I just didn’t have the time for it.”

Time was the biggest barrier cited by educators in the survey.

“There are about 40 students per grade who need serious reading intervention,” wrote one respondent. “I wish more of my day could be dedicated to 1:1 and small group reading to practice these hard skills.”

Another respondent suggested that their school implement an extra class for struggling students to get additional practice. “Currently no such class is offered,” they wrote.

Almost half of respondents—46 percent—disagreed or strongly disagreed that their school leadership was paying attention to struggling adolescent readers.

“I am teaching my literacy intervention class on what would be my lunch break,” wrote one respondent. “I approached my admin. and asked them if I could teach this class and said I would do it on my lunch break. So that’s how much support I get from my admin.” ■

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Reading Interventions for Older Students May Be Missing a Key Component

By Sarah Schwartz

It's a well-worn adage in education that students first learn to read, and then read to learn.

At some point, usually around 3rd grade, school systems assume that children have the basics down. They start requiring kids to read increasingly complex text across subject areas.

But new research shows that many older students lack critical foundational skills, limiting how far they can progress in their reading abilities as the volume and variety of text grows steeper.

The study from researchers at ETS, a testing organization, and the Advanced Education Research and Development Fund, a group that creates research programs to support Black, Latino, and low-income students, confirms the idea of a “decoding threshold”—a baseline ability to sound out words that students need in order to make good progress on other literacy skills.

Kids who don't meet this threshold see slower growth in their reading ability than their peers, the researchers found, which can lead to compounding gaps over time.

The research is a replication study of 2019 and 2020 papers on this phenomenon, but with a larger group of students. Among the students in the sample, most of whom were in a large, urban district on the East Coast, more than 20 percent of 5th, 6th, and 7th graders fell below the decoding threshold.

The results mean that for some portion of older students, the reading interventions schools use for this age group—most of which focus on reading comprehension—likely won't solve the root cause of students' struggles.

Schools have likely long had students with inadequate decoding skills without knowing, said Rebecca Sutherland, an author on the study, and the associate director of research at AERDF's Reading Reimagined, an initiative that aims to advance foundational reading skills in grades 3-8.

“We don't test students' foundational literacy skills after 3rd grade as a rule, unless they've been flagged as needing to have special attention,” she said.

Having more data on the scope of the problem is helpful, said Kate Crist, a literacy



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consultant and member of the steering committee for the Project for Adolescent Literacy, a educator-led group to support older struggling readers.

But understanding this need should lead to action, she said. “What are we going to do to intervene for those students, and provide a valuable intervention that's actually worth their time and the school district's tens of millions of dollars?”

Students below the decoding threshold see slower reading growth

Reading well requires a varied set of skills. Readers need to know the vocabulary in a text and bring their background knowledge to bear on texts to understand new topics. Then there are metacognitive processes that good readers employ, like monitoring their comprehension.

But even if students have all of these skills, they can't read well if they can't decode the words on the page.

Ensuring that children learn these phonics skills in early elementary classrooms has been a main focus of the growing “science of reading” movement. More than two dozen states have passed legislation over the last five years requiring that schools teach evidence-based methods for sounding out words, and that teachers be trained in how to

deliver this instruction.

But even as practice begins to shift, there are many older students who won't benefit from policy changes mostly targeted at grades K-5.

“Let's just be honest. We are still sending cohorts of kids to middle and high school who have been denied access to literacy in their K-5 environment,” said Crist.

The ETS and AERDF study examined the reading growth of about 17,000 students in grades 5-9 between 2011 and 2014 on an ETS assessment, Capti ReadBasix. Students who were below the decoding threshold had lower scores across reading subskills—like vocabulary and comprehension—than their peers. They also made much slower progress in those subskills over time.

For example, 5th graders who were above the decoding threshold grew 5.5 points in vocabulary knowledge each year on average. Students who were below the threshold only grew 2.3 points each year.

The researchers also looked at a key measure of decoding ability—how students tackled reading nonsense words. These are “words” that have phonetically regular spelling patterns but no meaning in English. The study analyzed word-reading data from more than 14,000 students in grades 3-12, between 2020 and 2023.

Students who were above the decoding threshold read real words quickly, and nonwords more slowly. It's likely that these students were taking more time with the nonwords because they were sounding them out—using their decoding skills, said Sutherland.

But students below the decoding threshold showed a slightly different pattern. There was less of a gap between how long it took them to read real words and nonwords.

“That suggests that they are less reliant on sound-based strategies,” Sutherland said.

Struggling students need ‘strategic, systematic’ solutions

To support these students, schools first need to figure out who they are, experts say.

“There’s not a lot of good testing instruments for kids that are normed and referenced for older students,” said Crist.

In part, this is because older students have more “heterogeneous” learning profiles, said Sutherland. Some students below the threshold might have trouble decoding even the most basic words. Others might have mastered the basics, but struggle with more complex or multisyllabic words.

Different needs require different instructional approaches, Crist said.

A 10th grader who reads at a 6th grade level, for example, might be able to get the support they require with an attentive, intentional teacher. English/language arts lessons would include lots of fluency practice, and explicit instruction in morphology, the study of word parts. Teachers would work to build up students’ background knowledge so that they can more easily understand a variety of texts.

“For those kids, you see a pretty good payoff in a classroom,” Crist said.

But when students can’t decode, and they’re more than a couple of grade levels behind, fluency practice and morphology instruction can only have a limited effect.

“Because they can’t read independently, they can’t do that work on their own,” said Crist. “Those kids really need strategic, systematic stuff.”

A surprising percentage of teachers of older students, do, in fact, spend time working with them on foundational reading skills—a quarter of middle school teachers say they engage their classes in phonics activities, according to a RAND survey from this year.

But these teachers also say they need more support and resources to do this well: Most middle and high school teachers don’t get

training on supporting foundational literacy.

“Whatever they know about supporting students’ foundational reading skills, they’ve just kind of learned on the job,” Sutherland said.

Schools can’t rely on teachers to pick up the slack alone, Crist said. Middle and high schools aren’t designed to teach basic reading skills, and the infrastructure that fosters this work in elementary schools—reading interventionists on staff, dedicated periods for reading support services—is much less common in upper grades.

“How do we begin to create an ecosystem in 6-12 for reading instruction like we have in K-2?” Crist asked.

It’s a question that has to be answered in collaboration with the teachers and administrators who exist in middle and high school systems, she said. “The field deserves, and is owed, practical advice.” ■

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OPINION

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Schools Experienced a 'Lost Decade.' How They Can Recover

By Rick Hess

The recent results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress offered a stark reminder that student achievement has been swooning for over a decade, with the biggest declines among low-income students. What will it take to turn things around? It seemed an excellent time to talk with Steven Wilson, the author of the new book *The Lost Decade: Returning to the Fight for Better Schools*. Wilson is the founder and the former CEO of Ascend Charter Schools, the architect of the National Summer School Initiative, and a senior fellow at Massachusetts's Pioneer Institute. Here's what he had to say.

—Rick

Rick: Steven, just last month, the latest National Assessment of Educational Progress results extended a decade of sagging performance, with the sharpest declines among low-achieving students. What do you make of this?

Steven: Rick, the disappointing NAEP results came as no surprise. When students returned to school after the pandemic, every analysis told us they had fallen catastrophically behind. To catch them up, schools would have needed to radically accelerate learning, especially in large urban districts where students lagged the most. That would have required a concerted drive to improve classroom instruction. Despite \$189 billion in new funds from the federal government, districts did nothing of the sort. Instead, many invested in “anti-racism” training for staff that were shot through with anti-academic and anti-achievement messages. Schools claimed to empower students when failing to educate them.

Let's go back to the start of the decade. In 2020, we were set back hard on our heels: NAEP scores showed that two decades of standards, accountability, and school choice had little to show for themselves. But that

account, I argue, obscured striking wins in school reform on which we could have built. Massachusetts rose to the top of the 50 states in student performance by adopting ambitious, knowledge-based, engaging standards and strengthening teacher preparation and licensure. Urban charter school networks, by single-mindedly focusing on the quality of classroom teaching, were closing achievement gaps at scale. But we turned away from these successes.

Rick: You've got a new book out, *The Lost Decade*. How does it tie into these concerns?

Steven: At the start of the decade, social-justice education—anti-racism work, trauma-informed teaching, critical pedagogy, and “decentering whiteness”—overtaken academic teaching in many schools. Teachers were invited to function as therapists and as proselytizers. Many formerly high-flying schools saw student discipline collapse and student outcomes plummet. Here we are at the middle of the decade. Five years from now, how will school reformers look back on the 2020s? We are losing a decade in the struggle for better schools. We can't let that happen. We must change course.

Rick: I'm struck by the suggestion in the title of your book that we need to “return” to the fight for better schools. Can you say more?

Steven: Sure. In 2019, Stanford's Macke Raymond dropped her third charter study, examining the effects of charter schools on 1.8 million students. Thousands of “gap-busting” schools, as she termed them, were closing—and reversing—gaps in student achievement based on race and class. Together, these gap-busters were adding 50,000 seats a year. That's like opening a new district the size of Boston's—but one that works! Despite intense opposition from entrenched interests, reformers were advancing in the fight for equal educational opportunity. The racial reckoning of 2020 could have spurred this transformation of urban schooling. Instead, it arrested it. In

the name of advancing social justice, educators turned away from the commitments that drove their success—safe and orderly classrooms, high expectations, and relentless attention to great teaching. I worry that if we stay the course, America's most marginalized students will be left less educated, more excluded, and more vulnerable.

Rick: What motivated you to write *The Lost Decade*?

Steven: In 2008, I opened Brooklyn Ascend Charter School in Brownsville, one of Brooklyn's most challenged communities. I made many mistakes. In 2013, we wrote an entirely new curriculum with a focus on inquiry and student discussion. We threw out our behavior system and adopted Responsive Classroom, with the goal of fostering students' sense of agency and belonging. Then it clicked. Ten years in, Ascend had 15 schools. Our students had caught up with their more privileged peers statewide—and were pulling past them. We offered a liberal arts education, a joyful culture, and attractive new buildings. I love that it “ran on regular”—on public dollars, not philanthropy. Importantly, this wasn't just happening at Ascend. Other networks in the city were, in fact, doing it better. So, I know firsthand it can be done. From Stanford's Center for Research on Education Outcomes on the right to Brookings on the left, researchers agreed: Charter networks were a once-in-a-lifetime win in school reform—in urban areas. Then, I saw it all imperiled. I was shocked. I wanted to write this book to chart this history—and offer a call to action.

Rick: In 2019, you were pushed out as CEO of Ascend because, in the blog post “The Promise of Intellectual Joy,” you lamented that “worship of the written word” had been dismissed as “damaging characteristics of white supremacy culture.” How has this shaped your thinking?

Steven: I can't speak to my departure from Ascend, but let me say this about the blog post: It was a rather anodyne call to tap into students' innate curiosity to power their learning. I wrote that anti-intellectualism, which has long pervaded America's schools, snuffs out that curiosity. We need to name that and then fight it with everything we've got. One example I gave was a 2019 mandatory training for all New York City administrators where they learned to identify “worship of the written word” as a symptom of “white supremacist

culture.” Can you imagine a more damaging message to urban teachers and their Black and brown students? Someone started an anonymous petition on Change.org, claiming my piece reflected white supremacist culture. It popped up in subscribers’ feeds; they clucked and clicked. Charter funders pressured their networks to implement anti-racism training like the city’s. I felt there were essential issues that needed to be engaged in urban schools, including my own. There were racial disparities in staff promotions. Struggling teachers could put power over purpose in their classrooms. There were real problems to be addressed. But not that way. Ideological coercion violates the most central value of a liberal education: the opportunity to grapple with diverse viewpoints.

Rick: How did that personal experience inform your book?

Steven: Well, I soon discovered I wasn’t alone. It turned out that the tract that I criticized, “The Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture” by Tema Okun, was circulating everywhere. Not only in urban charter networks like mine but also in big city school districts, nonprofits, and corporations. It purports to be racial taxonomy. But it’s really a complaint against the contemporary workplace. Okun takes issue with hierarchy, punctuality, the expectation of clear written communications, and even a “focus on results.” By the way, good luck running your organization without these expectations—tell us how it works out for you. Okun—who is a white woman—racializes her dislikes, claiming such professional standards to be “white supremacist.” Why did this document have such influence?

Rick: The backdrop for much of what you discuss is the decline of the “no excuses” charter school model. What happened? And where do things stand today?

Steven: The North Star of “no excuses” schools was student achievement. When principals faced a decision, they knew the criterion: What would best advance student achievement? Say it was November. You’re in a room that is in chaos with constant disruptions, unhappy students, and little learning. The teacher’s drowning and has become harsher. You tried coaching him. You tried resetting the room. None of that worked. You’re running out of runway to get the plane in the air and the children ready for the next grade. So, you ask the dean of students to take over

the room. Does she love that? No. But she’s committed to doing whatever it takes. She knows it’s urgent.

Now, when networks declared themselves anti-racist in 2020, the criterion for decisions changed. The question became: Which action is the most anti-racist? When researching for my book, I learned that in one top-performing charter network, some teachers objected to an award-winning writing program, The Writing Revolution, long used by the network. Their concern? Solely that its two authors are white women. The network’s longtime math program continued to generate top scores, while a new social-justice-themed math program posted weaker results in the network’s pilot. Despite this, the new program was adopted. This was the story in many formerly high-flying schools. The attention to great teaching was lost.

When culture systems, including merits and demerits, were judged racist and removed, discipline collapsed. The professional culture turned rancorous, former network executives reported. Longtime staff, newly deemed white supremacists, threw in the towel. Scores plunged, sometimes to below the district average. Fast forward to today. Many network leaders know social-justice education isn’t working, even if they can’t acknowledge it publicly. In small steps, they’re trying to restore discipline and return the focus to academics. But they’ve lost much of their top talent, and turning around a shattered school culture is brutal. Publicly, they insist academic excellence and anti-racism are compatible despite the evident contradictions.

Rick: What will it take to put an end to the lost decade?

Steven: The first step is to break the climate of fear. We must talk candidly about what is working and what is not. At mid-decade, we can still change course. We can commit to equipping all children with a rigorous and engaging liberal arts education that arouses curiosity, cultivates compassion, and upholds reason. We need to do what works: Reinvest in urban charters, tap knowledge-building curricula, and create cultures where students feel known as unique individuals. We have the financial and human resources to do it, so now it’s a matter of will. As with every daunting project, the hardest part is simply deciding to do it.

Rick: If you have one piece of advice for educators about what’s needed today, what is it?

Steven: To create a culture in your building that unabashedly prizes knowledge, curiosity, and achievement, you must model enthusiasm for these objectives in every interaction and celebrate them in your staff and students. Re-commit to doing “whatever it takes” to succeed with every child. Ditch the hiring essays where candidates must signal their ideological purity. Instead, screen for teachers who know their subjects and are infectious in their enthusiasm. And who have the drive and perseverance to become great teachers. Hire fewer teachers and pay them more! There is no harder and more important job than teaching. ■

Rick Hess is the director of Education Policy Studies at the American Enterprise Institute and the author of Education Week’s Rick Hess Straight Up opinion blog. He is the creator of the annual RHSU Edu-Scholar Rankings.

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