

—Vanessa Soils/Education Week and iStock/Getty images

# Adolescent Reading

## EDITOR'S NOTE

A growing number of adolescents are falling behind in reading. This Spotlight will empower you with strategies for supporting students with better reading habits; research on the benefits of high-impact tutoring for older readers; an understanding of the gaps in older students' foundational reading skills; insights from the experts on why an increasing number of students are struggling to read; and more.

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## How to Nurture Lifelong Readers in a Digital Age

By Sarah D. Sparks

**S**uccessful readers develop not just the skill but the habit of reading. As a decline in pleasure reading coincides with a move to different modes of screen-based texts, experts worry students need more comprehensive support to become lifelong readers in the digital age.

“There’s a lot of pressure on readers today to be able to select texts that are purposeful and useful and to discard others” in academic contexts, said Kristen Turner, a professor of teacher education at Drew University and the director of the Digital Literacies Collaborative, a professional network for teachers. “Then also to find those long-form texts that might allow them an escape or to learn something or to get another perspective ... it can be overwhelming.”

That’s problematic, because developing the habit of long-form and pleasure reading is associated with significantly better academic achievement across subjects. Analyses of reading behavior and achievement data from both the National Assessment of Educational Progress and the Program for International Student Assessment show students who report reading for pleasure or that reading is one of their favorite pastimes have higher general reading achievement.

Yet the number of these students has fallen in the past decade.

“Around the world and in the U.S., people aren’t reading unless they have to; half of them are saying, ‘Don’t make me do this,’” said Naomi Susan Baron, a reading researcher and the author of the 2021 book *How We Read Now: Strategic Choices for Print, Screen, and Audio*.

Similarly, the Pew Research Center’s annual survey of reading found in 2021 that nearly 1 in 4 U.S. adults said they hadn’t read a book in any format—print, electronic, or audio—in the past 12 months. More than 30 percent of those who earn less than \$30,000 a year reported no book reading, compared with only 15 percent of those who made \$75,000 annually who had not read a book in the last year.

### Holding students’ attention

While multiple studies have found reading online can interfere with comprehension, this effect differs by age and text complexity:



—Stephanie Shaifer for Education Week

Young readers using simple, short texts have not seen a significant drop in comprehension, whether they were reading in print or online, while teenagers and adults, grappling with long-form and more complex texts, did find digital reading more challenging for comprehension and focus.

Baron and her colleagues found in studies across the United States and internationally, more than 80 percent of college-age students said they find it easier to concentrate on print rather than texts in other media, and more than 70 percent reported they find print easier to learn from and remember.

“Students tell me [in print] you’re able to lose yourself in the words and you can read forever without thinking about anything else. It’s an escape. Whereas if you’re reading digitally and if you have internet access, you cannot escape,” Baron said.

One reason why: Both college students and, in a separate study, high schoolers said they are much more likely to multitask—read multiple texts, respond to email or social media, watch videos, and so on—when reading online versus in print. An analysis of more than a decade of research finds students comprehend less when they are reading online, in part because they think they are understanding the text they read better than they actually are.

Instead of getting lost in a story, students

are more likely to get distracted, experience eyestrain, and become prone to stopping before finishing it. Over time, studies suggest that can become a habit that makes it harder to follow longer texts fluently and think deeply about what they read. NAEP data suggest students who spend more screen-based reading time perform worse in reading in both grades 4 and 8.

### New supports are needed to nurture a love of reading

Emerging research suggests children and adults alike have more difficulty reading online texts that require long focus or more than one sitting. Yet most teachers do not know how to nurture a love of reading, particularly longer texts, in students outside of traditional print, according to Turner.

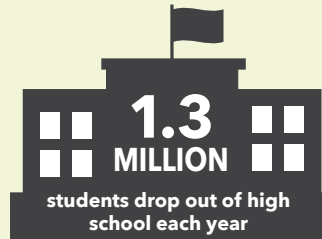
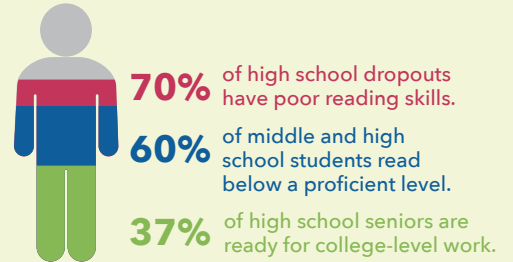
“Even the new teachers are part of a generation that was actually taught to read and write almost entirely in print. A lot of the research that’s been done [on reading long texts on different modes] has been done with college students or even older high school students who were never taught how to read on a screen or to annotate on a screen or to engage deeply with text on a screen,” said Drew University’s Turner. “It seems like a small shift, but it’s actually a huge shift in how we think about teaching reading.”

# When You Improve Adolescent Reading Skills, You Improve Life Outcomes



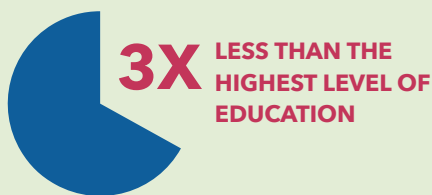
## THE CONSEQUENCES OF POOR READING SKILLS

Struggling adolescent readers are in danger of dropping out of high school, being unprepared for college, and putting their future lifetime earnings at risk.

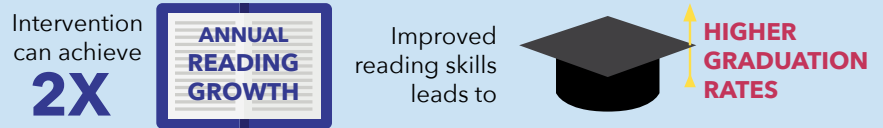


## READING ABILITY IS DIRECTLY RELATED TO EARNING POTENTIAL

Workers who have less education than a high school diploma have the lowest median weekly earnings



## AGE-APPROPRIATE LITERACY INSTRUCTION LEADS TO BETTER ACADEMIC OUTCOMES



## Close the gap in adolescent reading skills

Learn more about *LANGUAGE! Live*, the intervention program proven effective to help struggling readers in grades 5–12 with recommended time and intensity. [voyagersopris.com/languagelive](http://voyagersopris.com/languagelive)



Grades 5–12



a cambium company

To build better reading habits in new platforms, experts recommended educators focus on:

- **Streamlining:** Close other applications while reading, such as email or other websites, and encourage students to read through a text completely before going back to follow hyperlinks. Unlike print footnotes, it can be easier to get sucked into long detours from online links.
- **Noting:** Most long digital text formats include annotation and collaboration tools, which can help students engage more deeply with the work—if the tools are of high quality and students learn to use them regularly.
- **Building stamina:** Particularly in digital text, taking breaks can reduce eyestrain and improve focus. But students also should be encouraged to build up the time they read challenging text.

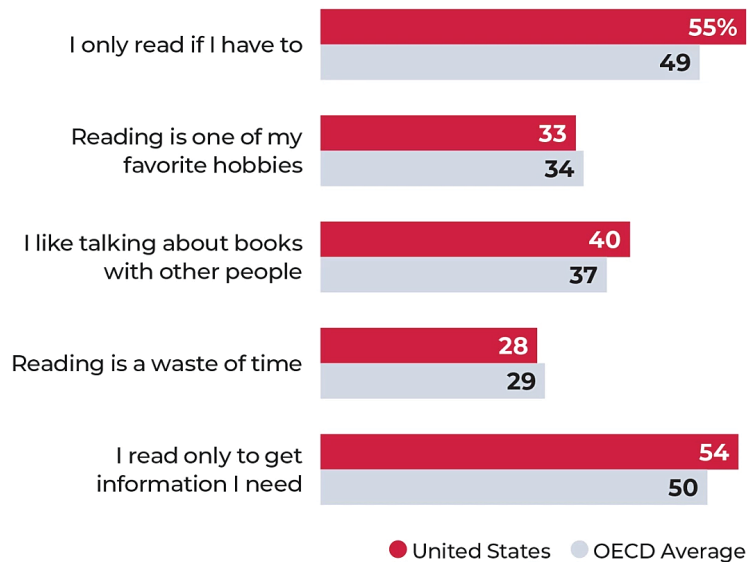
Helping students build these skills can pay off in building better reading habits in and out of school. Melissa Jacobs, the director of library services for the New York City public schools, the nation’s largest school library system, said one silver lining of the pandemic is that it has forced schools and students alike to develop more comfort in switching among print, digital, and audio books. In the last two years, she said the overall time students have spent on library titles increased with the addition of online and audio versions expanded in response to remote learning needs.

“Over the next few years, I think that students are going to be able to develop a skill set that will allow them to self-select the format as a reader,” she said. “I think what I would like to see happen is that the student is able to differentiate and decide that, ‘I want to read this book as an audio book. I want to read that book as a print book. I want to read this book as an e-book.’ “I would love the opportunity to provide as many formats as possible, as many mediums as possible, so that students have access and there’s equity and they can differentiate what really makes a difference for them as an independent reader.”

Building a sense of autonomy can help students develop a passion for reading that will carry them into adulthood, Jacobs said. “[Teachers] can’t just say, ‘You must read this and it’s going to be your pleasure-reading book.’ Adults find things that we like, and if we don’t like it, we abandon it. Abandonment should be OK to help students become readers for pleasure.” ■

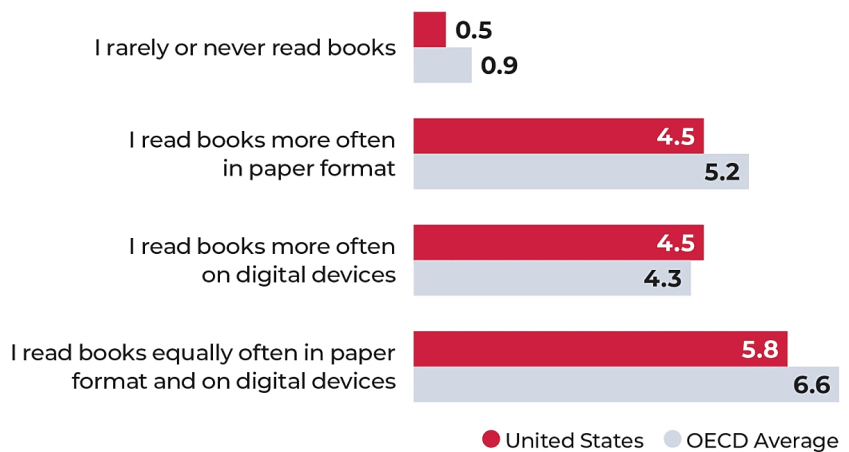
The Organization for International Cooperation and Development tracks the reading performance and habits of 15-year-olds in more than 100 countries and economies, including the United States. It finds U.S. teenagers more likely than those in other countries to read only when necessary, rather than as a hobby.

**Percent of 15-year-olds who say:**



Teenagers who equally read books in print and digital formats tended to read more hours per week than those who favored one format over another, the OECD found. But international teenagers read more often than U.S. teens did in print.

**Hours of Weekly Reading**



SOURCE: OECD, “21st-Century Readers: Developing Literacy Skills in a Digital World”

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## The Benefits of Intensive Tutoring for Older Readers

By Ileana Najarro

**W**hen considering how schools can best support middle and high schoolers struggling with either the foundational skills of reading or reading comprehension, experts point to a research-backed strategy that can help close academic gaps: high-impact tutoring.

The term refers to an intensive form of tutoring that is offered through a school, is informed by data on individual students' needs, aligns to classroom work, and can be effective in getting students to grade level faster. Yet few districts have been able to implement that kind of programming prior to the pandemic because of such challenges as cost and staff shortages. New federal relief funds are helping more districts explore the possibility.

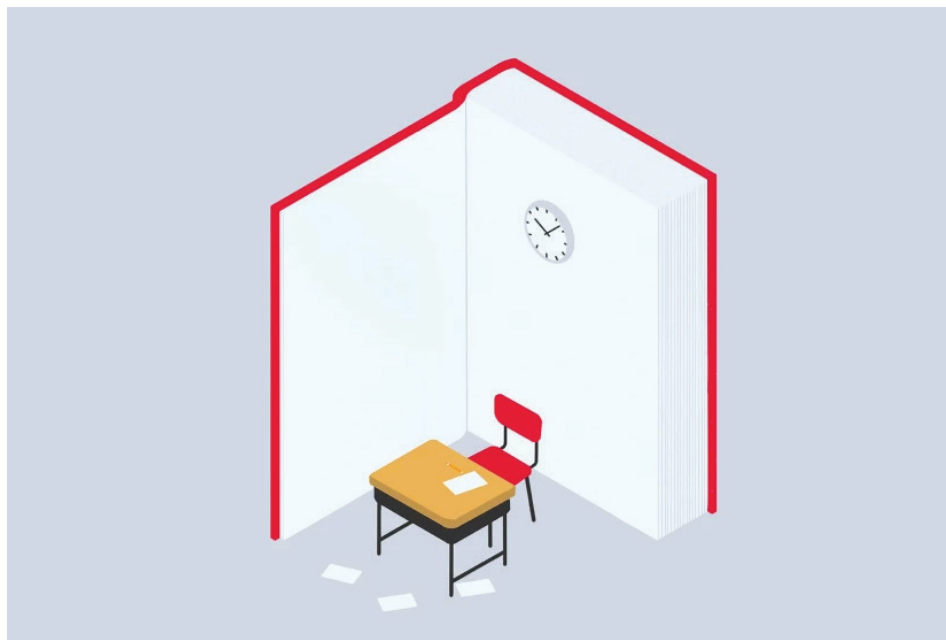
High-quality individualized tutoring has traditionally been something families have bought outside of school, said Susanna Loeb, the founder and executive director of the National Student Support Accelerator, which researches high-impact tutoring.

As researchers and school districts look to close opportunity gaps in part by ensuring students with the most need have access to high-quality tutoring regardless of their families' financials, they hope schools are able to find creative ways to invest in high-impact tutoring. That includes using federal relief funds tied to the pandemic that further exacerbated tutoring needs.

"In those instances where a student might need extra support for whatever the reason, then the school should be able to provide that," said Tanji Reed Marshall, the director of P-12 practice at the Education Trust, a non-profit advocating for students from low-income families and students of color. "It should not have to be weighted on whether a family has the resources themselves."

### How high-impact tutoring can work for older readers

The high-impact tutoring researchers point to goes well beyond after-school homework help. Sessions are often held three or more times a week in groups of three or fewer students for the whole year with the same



—Stephanie Shafer for Education Week

tutor so they really get to know each other at school or immediately before or after school, said Loeb.

Because it's tailored to individual students' needs, Loeb added, high-impact tutoring is a good match for older students who need reading support, especially since those students have less time left in K-12 education.

If a middle or high school student hasn't mastered learning how to read, a tutor can work directly with them on foundational skills, such as phonics. If a student needs help building reading comprehension in a subject like earth sciences, a tutor can focus on how that student can succeed in that specific class, reading for knowledge, as well as improving their overall reading comprehension.

Schools that are considering high-impact tutoring programs need to look at empirical evidence that shows the program is viable, and they also need to be sure they use data to identify which students need this extra support and what exact support they need, said Reed Marshall with the Education Trust. In working with older students, it's important, for instance, that tutors use grade-level material to help reduce any stigma around the need for support.

"You need to know what it is you're trying to get done so that you avoid just tutoring students who you believe need the tutoring

**“**You're not changing all of schooling to get high-impact tutoring in there, you're really getting it in there to reduce the inequalities...”

#### SUSANNA LOEB

Founder and executive director,  
National Student Support  
Accelerator

versus tutoring students who actually do,” Reed Marshall said.

Take the Metro Nashville public schools for example. In the summer of 2020, the Tennessee district piloted a tutoring program connecting recent high school graduates with more-experienced college students to help their transition in the middle of the pandemic, said Keri Randolph, the chief strategy officer for the district.

The positive experience led to the district creating a high-impact tutoring program for 1st through 3rd grade literacy and 8th and 9th grade math, which began during the current school year. Research found those areas to be most in need of extra support and where high-impact tutoring could help most, Randolph said.

The district created its own tutoring curriculum and provided training for the variety of tutors it has, including community volunteers, educator-preparation-program students, existing classroom teachers, retired educators, and more.

As of December, about 1,000 students are part of the program across 46 schools, with both academic progress and social-emotional gains measured regularly, Randolph said.

### Ensuring equitable access to quality tutoring

While the Nashville district is an outlier in terms of actually having a fleshed-out high-impact tutoring program in place, private top-notch tutoring has been a long-standing go-to for some families.

Private tutoring can add to the opportunity gap in districts where only some families can afford it and where the core curriculum doesn't properly serve all its students, Reed Marshall said.

The demand for private tutoring, as well as inequitable access to the resource, has stretched back for years. There have been efforts, namely in response to the No Child Left Behind Act, to provide tutoring through schools rather than relying on family finances, Loeb said. But much of that resulted in less-intensive programs with mixed results.

At Metro Nashville, demand for in-house high-impact tutoring exceeds capacity as schools are already seeing how the program can benefit a variety of students, including older readers, Randolph said. The intention for its inaugural year, however, was to serve the students most in need based on district academic data.

### The challenges and opportunities ahead

Hope in scaling up the tutoring program in Nashville now lies in its sustainable design, Randolph said. Building it in-house, for instance, means the district is spending about \$800 a year per student, saving thousands in what it would cost to buy a program. By spring, the district hopes to offer the program across 90 schools with about 7,000 students participating.

High price tags are a deterrent to many districts looking into high-impact tutoring, Loeb said. Really intensive programs can go for \$2,500 per year per student, though often it can come out to about \$1,000. There's also the current labor shortages across the country that make it difficult to hire and retain trained tutors.

And whether it's building a program from scratch or purchasing one, implementing high-impact tutoring across a district is a complicated process when many educators are stretched thin as it is, Loeb added.

At Cherokee Heights Elementary in St. Paul, Minn., investing in a partnership with the nonprofit Minnesota Reading Corps to offer high-impact tutoring in K-3 has paid off, said Principal Heidi Koury. The program began in 2020, and already, she's seen students get on track in terms of grade-level reading skills. She sees this early intervention as a means to help students no longer need extra support later on.

Koury and Randolph both see federal pandemic-relief funds as a resource schools and districts can turn to for investing in these programs. Nashville, for instance, used philanthropic funds to jumpstart the program but will rely on federal funds to continue with the program, budgeting for its future while knowing those funds won't last forever.

The federal funds can help districts explore whether high-impact tutoring is the right fit for their students' needs, especially as the academic effects of the pandemic and how to address them are still being deciphered, Loeb said. What's more, if implemented effectively, the tutoring could double as an equity initiative and a form of intervention.

“You're not changing all of schooling to get high-impact tutoring in there, you're really getting it in there to reduce the inequalities, to give the students who need these extra supports the extra support,” Loeb said. ■

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## How Schools Can Support Older Students Who Lag in Reading

By Sarah Schwartz

**A**t the beginning of 2020, Shelly Emann felt like her district was on the right track with reading instruction.

In the Madison public schools in New Jersey, where Emann works as a K-8 instructional coach, teachers in kindergarten and 1st grade had just started using a program that taught students the building blocks of reading in a systematic progression: how to identify the different words in sounds, how to match those sounds to letters, and how to use that knowledge to decode new words.

Emann hoped that this new system would head off some of the reading difficulties she had seen in her nearly two decades as a 4th grade teacher, working with many students who didn't know how to read through harder words with multiple syllables.

But then, COVID-19 hit. “That threw us for a loop,” Emann said.

Getting wiggly 5- and 6-year-olds to sit through phonics lessons on Zoom that spring was a losing battle. And then last school year, pandemic-adjusted schedules didn't always leave enough time for K-2 teachers to pull together small groups of students for additional support. This year, the district is expanding the new reading program to 3rd grade, too, but supply-chain issues delayed the delivery of materials for the first few months of the school year.

Madison is far from unique. Over the past two years, many students across the country spent less face-to-face time with their teachers during a critical period of their reading development: the first few years of elementary school, in which students learn how to read words.

National studies of student-test scores during the 2020-21 year found that these students weren't doing as well as their peers in years past. And now, some teachers and reading specialists say that they're seeing more 4th, 5th, and 6th graders with reading difficulties than they used to.

Still, Emann feels good about the progress Madison is making. The elementary princi-

pals have worked together to create an intervention block for all kids in grades K-5, and the district has hired additional reading interventionists.

Just as importantly, she feels like the pandemic has finally amplified the message she's tried to convey to her colleagues for years: Many older students in grades 4 and up have gaps in their foundational reading skills, too—and that limits their ability to access grade-level work.

Now, the teachers she works with want to talk more about finding and fixing foundational skills gaps, because they're trying to address learning loss, Emann said.

### The pandemic has intensified some students' reading difficulties

Older students struggling with reading is not a phenomenon new to the pandemic. In 2019, before COVID disrupted schools, scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress showed that only 66 percent of 4th graders and 73 percent of 8th graders were at or above a "basic" level of proficiency in the subject.

But the turmoil over the past two years has resurfaced questions about exactly how best to get students up to speed, and it's directed funding toward academic recovery. The pandemic also hit at a pivotal time for reading instruction: When the virus started to shut down schools in the spring of 2020, many states and districts were in the middle of a years-long push to align early-reading classes more closely to research-based practice.

Reading well is a complex process, involving lots of different skills like recognizing and understanding vocabulary or monitoring comprehension. But the building blocks of reading ability, the foundational skills, involve decoding the printed letters on the page into spoken words. If students can't read words and fluently connect them into sentences, they won't be able to understand what they're reading.

Decades of studies have shown that explicitly and systematically teaching students which sounds represent which letters—teaching them phonics—is the most effective way to get them reading words. This happens in students' first years of school, usually kindergarten through 2nd or 3rd grade. But as reporting from Education Week and other outlets has demonstrated, many elementary-teacher-preparation programs don't teach their students how to deliver that kind of instruction.

As a result, teachers say, some students move on to higher grade levels with gaps in

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Most of my students are able to decode a one-syllable word, but they have trouble with the 2nd grade material, where they have to decode multisyllable words.”

#### JENNA MADDEN

3rd grade teacher, Emann's district, New Jersey

their ability to read words. Research bears this out: Many older students who have comprehension difficulties also struggle with word-level reading.

This reality flies in the face of the maxim that students “learn to read” in K-3 and then switch to “read to learn” in older grades. In fact, as this research demonstrates, the issue is less clear-cut. Students who didn't get enough practice with word-level reading will continue to struggle as the demands of content knowledge and comprehension ramp up.

The pandemic has only compounded this issue, widening the gaps between students who can read fluently and students who can't, said Tiffany Hogan, a professor at the MGH Institute of Health Professions in Boston and the director of the institute's Speech and Language Literacy Lab.

“Teachers are having to differentiate instruction in a way that they never have before. It's a really Herculean task,” she said.

### What foundational-skills gaps look like in older readers

Foundational-skills gaps can show up differently for older students from how they do for younger ones, said Jeanne Wanzek, a professor of special education at Vanderbilt University. “Maybe they don't have gaps in phonics and word recognition that might be more common

in K-2, but they struggle with reading multisyllabic words and they don't really have a strategy for that,” she said.

That is the case for Jenna Madden's 3rd graders.

“Most of my students are able to decode a one-syllable word, but they have trouble with the 2nd grade material, where they have to decode multisyllable words,” said Madden, who teaches in Emann's district in New Jersey. “And now in 3rd grade, we're seeing not only two-syllable words but words with three or four syllables in grade-level text.”

It's also likely that students will have mastered some parts of the K-2 curriculum but not others. “There's often splintered skills,” Wanzek said. “It's just more complex, in terms of where their strengths are.” Struggles with word reading and comprehension feed into each other, she added: Students who skip a lot of words because they can't decode them will have a harder time understanding the text, applying comprehension strategies, and storing new knowledge. As students progress through the grades and must read more academic texts, they have to rely on more background knowledge and vocabulary—information they may not have, Wanzek said, if they had trouble reading related content in earlier grades.

“If you're struggling at 4th or 5th grade or higher, it's not going to be as simple as if you're in kindergarten,” Wanzek said. “Often, it's multiple components that need to be addressed, and we see in the older grades that these multicomponent interventions have higher effects.”

Older students with word-reading difficulties do need support for those skills, Wanzek said. But reviews of research on upper-grades interventions also find that explicit-vocabulary and comprehension-strategy instruction can improve students' reading ability. For example, teachers can show students how to paraphrase what they've read or draw inferences based on information in the text and prior knowledge.

Madden, the 3rd grade teacher, makes it a priority to teach students grade-level skills and content, even as she also attends to the building blocks of reading.

“Even though I have students who are reading below grade level, it's still important to expose them to grade-level text,” she said.

### How to address foundational skills without neglecting grade-level work

How schools address older students' word-reading difficulties depends on what skills children already have.

For students who have some phonics skills and can decode short words, one research-based recommendation is word study. This involves teaching students how to identify different syllables within words and how to read through multisyllabic words, but it also includes morphology: the study of the smallest units of meaning within words.

Morphology instruction teaches how to break up words like “untouchable” into parts: the prefix “un-,” the root “touch,” and the suffix “-able.” And it teaches the meaning of those parts, which research has shown can support vocabulary development.

For students who need support in reading fluency, researchers recommend having students read passages aloud, with monitoring and feedback from a teacher.

This kind of supplemental instruction can be done in a separate intervention block. But it isn’t always necessary to break out these skills from whole-class teaching, Wanzek said. “The good news is that we actually do know from previous research that you can make incredible gains in reading with older grades—as well as younger grades—by focusing on classroom instruction.”

That is the approach that Bayside Middle School in Virginia Beach, Va., is taking. The school has woven morphology and fluency instruction into whole-class lessons, said Rene Martinez, the 6th grade literacy coach at Bayside.

Students who need more support than what’s offered in core classes spend additional time working with reading specialists on a digital supplemental program that addresses foundational skills. And students who struggle with decoding one-syllable words or letter recognition get time in small groups with reading specialists and interventionists.

Many students struggled with grade-level work before the pandemic, and the shift in practice in the district isn’t a response to COVID alone, Martinez said. But the disruptions of the past few years have exacerbated students’ needs, she added.

During the 2020-21 school year, Martinez started working with the district’s high school and elementary language-arts coordinators to figure out how the school could fill in foundational-skills gaps while still keeping middle schoolers on track to tackle high-school-level work. Together, they adapted a 6th grade curriculum to maintain focus on essential grade-level skills and content, while also allowing time for core instruction in morphology and fluency. This is the first year teachers are working with the new program.

“

**Teachers are having to differentiate instruction in a way that they never have before. It’s a really Herculean task.”**

#### TIFFANY HOGAN

Director, Speech and Language Literacy Lab, MGH Institute of Health Professions, Boston

Lorraine Hajjar-Conant, who teaches 6th grade English/language arts at Bayside, didn’t think students would like much of the small-group work, with its focus on reading aloud and breaking down words into parts. But so far, kids look forward to it, asking her in the mornings whether they’ll get to do it that day. She’s seen some improvements in students’ comfort with reading aloud, too.

Even so, it’s a tricky balancing act to make time for fluency and word work while also teaching 6th grade skills, like identifying the causes and effects of events in informational texts, Hajjar-Conant said. Teachers try to integrate the two as much as possible—for example, asking questions about plot, characters, and theme while students are reading fiction for fluency practice, she said.

“I think it’s great that we’re trying something different to see if we’re going to get a positive outcome,” Hajjar-Conant said. She’s looking forward to next year, when the school will have data on whether these changes helped set students up for more success in 7th grade.

#### Experts anticipate a ‘protracted period of catch-up’

Even though these foundational gaps can underpin reading difficulties, there are barriers to addressing them in older grades.

“It was something that was completely new to all of us, because we’re not from an elementary background,” said Hajjar-Conant. The school has started work this year to address

students’ foundational-skills gaps, both in whole-group instruction and intervention.

“It was a lot of new vocabulary and a new way of learning information. It was definitely a struggle,” Hajjar-Conant said, of the learning process for her and her fellow teachers.

Teachers in older grades may have to put in more legwork to use assessments that can diagnose foundational-skills gaps and materials that can support instruction in that area, Wanzek said. Most of the screeners and diagnostic tests that can identify word-reading issues are the domain of special education teachers, and they’re not generally used in older-elementary general education, she added.

It can also be harder to find age-appropriate materials, said Hailey Love, an assistant professor of special education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. “Often when children are perceived as being behind, they’re subject to practices that are actually found to decrease motivation.”

Teachers might have students only read texts at their “level,” which would be written for younger children. It’s important that students still get to engage with grade-level material and that they have the same choice in reading materials that other kids have, Love said.

And then, there’s the shift in mindset. Middle school teachers are used to spending their time teaching to middle school standards, not how to sound out words, Hajjar-Conant said.

“The way that our administrators are trying to put it is, it’s not something additional. We need these kids to read at a 6th grade level, so if we have to go back to 3rd grade skills, that’s what we’re going to do,” she said. “We’re going to have time to address the standards, but we need to teach them how to read.”

Martinez, the literacy coach, acknowledges that change is a long process. Asking teachers to try new instructional methods poses an extra hurdle to jump in a year already fraught with COVID-related challenges.

“Schools are just humans, put together. And humans have limitations,” said Hogan of the Speech and Language Literacy Lab. Her team works with school partners, and many of their literacy initiatives were “rocked by COVID,” she said. In some of these schools, teachers are also trying to support students through the traumas they’ve experienced over the past few years, like losing parents to the virus.

For Hogan, the answer isn’t to abandon efforts but to acknowledge that they might take a more circuitous route than expected. “I think that what needs to be kept in mind,” she said, “is that there’s going to be a more protracted period of catch-up than we anticipated.” ■



# Most children can be taught to read, even adolescents. The right intervention is key.

“Programs that follow a Structured Literacy approach help students develop knowledge of language structure, which in turn supports both reading comprehension and writing. If you want a program that includes all the concepts and the research base that we have taught in LETRS, it is a natural progression to use *LANGUAGE! Live*.”

—Dr. Louisa Moats,  
author of *LANGUAGE! Live*<sup>®</sup> and  
LETRS<sup>®</sup> professional learning



*LANGUAGE! Live* is a blended literacy solution for grades 5–12 that focuses on both foundational and advanced reading skills to help adolescents become proficient readers.

# Teaching Adolescents to Read: It's Not Too Late

By Louisa C. Moats, Ed.D.

## The Adolescent Struggling Reader

Older struggling readers may need instruction in skills they missed in the early grades, but in many other ways they present unique challenges that set them apart from their younger selves. Reading and writing for these students are slow, taxing, frustrating, and unsatisfying endeavors. It is thus no surprise that, for the most part, they avoid reading and have learned maladaptive coping strategies when faced with academic assignments.

Therein lies the most challenging aspect of teaching older students: because reading is difficult for them, they do not like to read, and so they read (and write) very little. As a result, they are not familiar with the vocabulary, sentence structure, text organization, and concepts of academic “book” language. Over time, they fall further and further behind.

So what can be done? Effective, intensive instruction tailored for older students. Basic reading skills can be bolstered in a respectful, age-appropriate, and engaging manner, especially within a blended learning program. At the same time, language comprehension and navigation of challenging text can be taught. The overriding goal—to improve all aspects of language on which reading and writing depend—is attainable given time, along with specially designed and engaging instruction.

## Facing the Problem

An astonishing proportion of students score “below basic” on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2021) reading test. The long-term consequences for this level of illiteracy are well known: dropping out of school; qualifying for only the least-skilled jobs; generational poverty; chronic social dependency; unwanted early pregnancy; greater risk for ill health; and sometimes, incarceration.

Unless they learn to recognize printed words, know what they mean, and respond successfully to assignments and tests, poor readers will continue to be frustrated and overwhelmed



by grade-level assignments. The majority of middle and high school students, however, can make significant improvement in their functional reading and writing skills if intensive, appropriate instruction is provided over several years. It is not too late; we know what to do and how to do it. We can rescue these students from the adverse consequences of chronic illiteracy.

“It is not too late; we know what to do and how to do it. We can rescue these students from the adverse consequences of chronic illiteracy.”

## Reading Instruction That Works

Intensive reading intervention can enable older readers to acquire the skills they missed in the primary grades and can advance their skills significantly. Structured teaching of language at all levels—speech sounds (phonology), the print system (orthography), speech-to-print correspondences (phonics),

word meanings (semantics), sentence structure (syntax), and text organization (discourse)—is what works. Research consistently shows that instructional programs or methods for older poor readers have these characteristics:

1. They systematically, explicitly, and cumulatively teach all essential components of literacy.
2. They are intensive enough to produce significant gains in a student's relative standing.
3. They stimulate language abilities through the direct study of phonology, morphology, orthography, syntax, and text structure.
4. They respect students' social, intellectual, and emotional needs.

## All Essential Components

Comprehensive programs of instruction consistently get better results than single-component programs. Data from a pilot implementation of *LANGUAGE! Live*, a blended instructional program for the middle grades and high school, show clearly that students who work on both word study and text comprehension make more than twice the rate of progress as students who work on only one aspect of reading.

Whatever the intervention, it must match the students' level of reading development, because each stage of reading growth has unique challenges. The poorest readers, for example, often

struggle because they are unable to identify single speech sounds in spoken whole words, so they must have their phonological skills strengthened. If phonological skills improve, students are better equipped to match written symbols to sounds, to spell, and to develop and expand their vocabulary.

And, if students can decipher printed words with sufficient accuracy and speed, then educators must aggressively address vocabulary deficiencies, background information required for comprehension, interpretation of academic language, and text reading strategies. Incentives to read challenging material independently, both in and out of school, will be critical.

It is not a student's chronological age or grade level that should determine the design of remedial instruction. Rather, it is the student's level of reading skill and profile of strengths and weaknesses across the language spectrum that determines the content of lessons.

### Intensive Intervention

If remedial reading instruction occurs as a supplemental, noncredit-bearing class, a student may receive two or three brief sessions in a resource room per week. Intensive instruction, however, means more than one period daily and, often, more than one year if the goal is to move the student closer to grade level. Teaching all essential components of language, reading, and writing takes time.

**“The first rule is to treat students like young adults.”**

### Direct Teaching of Language Structure

The first rule is to treat students like young adults. Talk about linguistics and language study. Don't hesitate to use adult terminology, such as “phoneme deletion,” “consonant digraph,” “schwa,” and “morpheme.” Explain phonics and spelling within the framework of the history of English. Spice up the story with videos about Old English and Middle English pronunciation. Explain

and demonstrate how the speech-to-print correspondence system works with skits, cartoons, animation, games, and illustrations.

Multisensory engagement will hold students' attention, with simultaneous listening, speaking, moving, looking, and writing or typing of symbols.

### Reading Fluency and Word Recognition

Two critical abilities—sound-symbol decoding and automatic recognition of words—are established in good readers. Some poor readers, however, are just not wired to retrieve words from memory as quickly as others. These students may continue to be slow readers and may need many more practice opportunities before word recognition is automatic. Allowances must be made for their slower reading rate; for example, audiobooks are a helpful resource when fatigue sets in.

Older poor readers can usually increase their reading speed with practice at several levels: sound-symbol association, word reading, and phrase and sentence reading.

### Building Vocabulary and Background Knowledge

Older poor readers are at least partially familiar with more spoken words than they can read, but because they do not read well, their exposure to the words in varied contexts is limited. Many poor readers must overcome a huge vocabulary deficit before they will be able to read successfully beyond the fifth-grade level.

If vocabulary instruction is to be effective, it must occur daily and involve many opportunities to hear, say, and use new words in context. This approach recognizes that new-word learning is closely connected to learning subject-matter content and deepening background knowledge.

### Text Comprehension

Students with little reading experience often lag in their knowledge of genre, text structure, text organization, and literary devices, and also may lack the background knowledge necessary to make inferences as they read. They are unused to reading closely to grapple with the deeper meanings of a text and often do not even expect that reading should make sense.

*LANGUAGE! Live* employs three overriding principles in designing text study to engage and motivate poor

readers. First, the texts themselves must be worth reading and rereading. Lexile® levels can be adjusted, but the compelling nature of the information itself is the primary criterion for choosing a text. Several selections on the same topic are included within a unit, so that students can elaborate and deepen their own ideas about complex or controversial subject matter. Great texts such as fables, poems, oral histories, speeches, first-person historical accounts, and adapted classics stimulate students' imaginations and promote examination of self, others, and the world at large.

### Writing in Response to Reading

Written response to reading can greatly enhance comprehension, but poor readers must have their writing skills developed sequentially and cumulatively. Writing improves when students practice asking and answering specific questions, elaborating subjects and predicates, combining simple sentences, constructing clauses, and linking sentences into organized paragraphs.

### Summary: Hope for the Struggling Adolescent

Older poor readers, who include at least a third of the student population in middle school, can learn to read if three conditions are met: they are taught the foundational language skills they missed; they have ample opportunity to apply the skills in reading meaningful texts; and they work in a respectful, supportive, age-appropriate social context. All of this takes time. Intensive interventions, such as the *LANGUAGE! Live* program, can accelerate student learning and narrow the achievement gap, but “intensive” requires more than one class period daily over more than one year. Providing remediation to groups of students in an alternative, credit-bearing English course is the best vehicle for ensuring that daily, concentrated instruction occurs.

Twenty-first century workplace demands for literacy are only getting higher. Thus, the societal costs of leaving so many students “below basic” in reading are only increasing. We know that older struggling readers can be taught and that the lives of many can be improved with well-designed, intensive, faithfully implemented, language-based instruction.

***To read the original article in its entirety, including references, click [here](#).***



Published June 15, 2021

## Is the Bottom Falling Out for Readers Who Struggle the Most?

By Sarah D. Sparks

**M**ore and more American students are falling significantly behind in reading, and the widespread academic disruptions during the pandemic are likely to create a critical mass of struggling readers in the nation's schools, new analyses of federal data show.

There's been no improvement in overall reading performance at any grade level in the national tests called the Nation's Report Card for the past decade or more, with declines for lower grades happening since 2017 and for 12th graders since 2015.

That stagnation has been driven largely by a growing share of students failing to meet even the most basic level of reading proficiency, and by steadily falling scores in the National Assessment of Educational Progress for the 10 percent to 25 percent of students who struggle the most with reading.

The NAEP measures three levels of reading achievement—basic, proficient, and advanced—based on students' understanding of literature and their ability to gain information from texts. However, since 2017, the number of students who cannot meet even the basic literacy benchmark has grown in 30 states among 8th graders and 13 states for 4th grad-

ers. Nearly half of 4th graders in New Mexico, for example, cannot meet the lowest reading benchmark, according to a new analysis by Ebony Walton, a statistician for NAEP.

The decline in performance for the bottom 10 percent of readers has spanned nearly all racial and socioeconomic groups, NCES reported in a symposium on reading research last week. And the drops have been significant enough to prompt the Council of Chief State School Officers and the Institute of Education Sciences to launch initiatives focused on studying and supporting the most-struggling readers.

"This is not a Black and brown problem. It's not a problem just for poor students or students with special needs," said Peggy Carr, the associate commissioner for the National Center for Education Statistics, which administers the NAEP. "We all are represented in the bottom—perhaps disproportionately for some relative to their representation in the population, but nonetheless we're all there."

### What skills trip up struggling readers?

While the group of students who fall below basic reading performance has been growing, their educational status is largely a black hole. We still know relatively little about what these students can understand and what skills they

most need, according to Lynn Woodworth, NCES commissioner.

In an attempt to get a clearer picture, one analysis by the IES looked at NAEP oral reading data from a nationally representative group of 1,800 4th graders from 180 public schools. While the study could not determine which skills caused students' overall low reading performance, "a large body of research has established that foundational skills are the main drivers of oral reading fluency, which in turn is necessary for reading comprehension," said Sheida White, an NCES researcher and the author of the study.

White found, for example, that, among below-basic-level readers, the difference in accuracy was greater between students in higher and lower groups than it was between readers in the proficient category and those who barely missed making it into the basic reading performance category.

The lowest-performing 4th graders misread about 1 in 6 words, on average, and often didn't recognize words in print that they knew from spoken language.

Low below-basic readers had significant trouble decoding key words, and focused on reading individual words rather than phrases, sentences, or passages. In one example, demonstrated in the audio clip below, the 4th grade student only finished about a third of the text within the allotted time and read in a stilted monotone, which has been associated with poor comprehension. (The photo associated with these audio clips from IES does not depict either of the actual students speaking.)

By contrast, proficient readers like the one in this second audio excerpt, completed the passage and read with expression, pausing in the correct places and emphasizing particular parts of the text for listeners, showing understanding rather than just decoding the material.

P. David Pearson, a reading researcher and emeritus faculty member in the University of California, Berkeley, Graduate School of Education, argued educators need to avoid siloing different areas of reading instruction for different students and grades. Teaching reading comprehension should begin in the earliest grades, and teachers should continue to look for and remediate problems in decoding and other early-literacy skills among older struggling readers.

"We can fall into an either-or track, so comprehension and word recognition become a kind of a zero-sum game. And we want to discourage that," Pearson said. "Just because we're teaching them word recognition doesn't mean that we can't teach comprehension. And just because we're focusing on building knowl-

edge, doesn't mean that we have to de-emphasize strategy instruction. ... We want to think of the various instructional components and activities as complementary and integrated rather than completely separated and independent of one another."

Reading skills and deficits compound over time. While the oral fluency study did not look at 12th graders, a proficient 4th grader reads aloud more accurately than an adult with only basic literacy—159 words correct per minute versus 123 words correct per minute, based on data from the National Assessment of Adult Literacy.

And poor reading skills significantly narrow students' choices after high school. In a separate new study based on the Program for International Student Assessment, IES researchers found U.S. students' focus of study

at age 19 was strongly linked to their reading proficiency at 15. For example, while 9 percent of all 19-year-olds were still working to earn a high school diploma and 26 percent were not studying for any higher degree, among students who had performed in the lowest two reading levels on PISA at age 15, 23 percent were still working to graduate high school at 19, and another 49 percent were not in school at all. By contrast, only about 4 percent of the best readers at age 15 were not studying for a postsecondary degree by 19.

In January 2020, just before the pandemic, the Council of Chief State School Officers released a report calling for states to pass new laws and launch initiatives aimed to improve reading—and in particular, to ensure that teachers base instruction on the latest science on reading development.

But more than a year of school and community disruptions and switches from in-person to virtual learning formats and vice versa have likely slowed progress or worsened reading performance gaps, according to Carr and Scott Norton, deputy executive director of programs for CCSSO.

Low-income students and students of color, who were already disproportionately more likely to read at a below-basic literacy level, have also been significantly more likely than white and wealthier students to learn only through remote and virtual instruction during the pandemic, Carr noted. ■

#### Additional Resource

To view the charts that accompany this article, click [here](#).

Published April 21, 2022

## What the 'Science of Reading' Should Look Like For English-Learners. It's Not Settled

By Sarah Schwartz

Over the past few years, some states have spent millions of dollars and passed new laws in an attempt to shift the way that schools teach kids how to read.

These efforts take aim at commonly used ineffective literacy practices and programs, often focusing on teacher training. Many zero in on the foundations of reading, especially, with the goal of ensuring that teachers are using evidence-based methods for teaching the building blocks of literacy—like identifying letters and sounding out words.

But as more states try to tackle these persistent problems in early reading instruction, some advocates worry that these new initiatives may be introducing problems of their own.

A new coalition of researchers, educators, and advocates for English-language learners is pushing back against these policy changes, claiming that new legislation and guidance will disadvantage ELLs with a "one-size-fits-all approach" to teaching reading.

This group, the National Committee for Effective Literacy, released a policy paper earlier this year, claiming that the new approaches focus on drilling phonics skills in isolation,



Sarah Mireles kneels down to work with Abdigani Hussein, 10, left, and Muhammod Amanullah, 10, during class on at Maplewood Elementary in Greeley, Colo., on Jan. 30, 2018.

robbing English learners of the context that can support them in learning a new language and leaving teachers without enough time to work on developing students' oral language. They say that these methods ignore research on dual language development.

The paper made waves among researchers

and early reading experts, landing as it did at an inflection point in the "reading wars"—the ongoing debate over how best to teach young students to make sense of the written word.

And it's added new dimensions to conversations about equity in a literacy movement that sprung largely from attempts to better

serve students with disabilities and reading difficulties, propelling dialogue between proponents of structured literacy, English learner advocates, and educators who see themselves as part of both camps.

### Advocates want English-learners' needs prioritized

A central battle in these “reading wars” is over phonics instruction, the process of teaching students how letters match up to spoken sounds.

Decades of psychology and neuroscience research have shown that phonics is the most effective method for ensuring that students learn how to decode words. This is especially important for students with reading difficulties like dyslexia, who may need more practice with these foundational skills to become fluent readers. But as reporting from Education Week and other outlets has shown, many popular curriculum programs and instructional approaches minimize phonics instruction, or teach other, disproven strategies for word identification.

Over the past few years, a group of researchers, educators, and parents—many of whom work with kids with reading difficulties or are parents of dyslexic children—have lobbied school districts and states to adopt methods that teach phonics in a systematic, explicit way as part of an approach called structured literacy.

They've clashed with advocates of balanced literacy, the instructional philosophy that's most commonly taught in teacher preparation programs and held by the majority of early grades educators.

Proponents of balanced literacy say that it combines some explicit instruction in foundational skills with guided practice, as well as independent reading and writing. Detractors argue that the approach doesn't do enough to make sure that students master the basics of reading.

The National Committee for Effective Literacy has taken aim at instructional frameworks that place what it sees as an outsized emphasis on phonics instruction. But both its members and the paper's critics say that they want to move past the phonics versus balanced literacy debate.

For NCEL, equity is the issue at hand—its members want to make sure that the needs of English learners aren't an afterthought as the national conversation on early literacy ramps up, said Martha Hernandez, the executive director of Californians Together and an NCEL member.

Students who speak a home language other than English have often faced marginalization within the U.S. school system. And until recent-

ly, 40 percent of the nation's ELLs lived in states under English-only laws, which prohibited English learners from being taught in their home language as well as English; only one state, Arizona, still has this type of law on the books.

“There's a political, historical, ideological component to this that you just can't ignore,” said Claude Goldenberg, a professor emeritus at Stanford University who studies early literacy development in English-language learners.

Goldenberg and several co-contributors penned a response to the NCEL paper and a recent webinar from the organization, saying that the group misrepresented changes underway in state legislatures and departments of education: States aren't proposing that students spend entire literacy blocks on phonics, he said.

But, he said, it's established science that English-language learners need additional support, beyond the comprehensive literacy instruction that native English speakers need. And he agrees that new state laws mandating “evidence-based” or “science of reading” approaches will require careful interpretation—otherwise, they could be implemented in ways that don't support students.

“We saw that in Reading First,” Goldenberg said, referencing the George W. Bush-era grant program that incentivized schools to adopt methods based in “scientifically based reading research.”

“One of my concerns has been that we're repeating those mistakes.”

### How should reading—and foundational skills specifically—be taught for ELLs?

Reading First was based on findings from the National Reading Panel Report, which did not include studies that evaluated how best to teach English learners how to read. Later research would confirm that ELLs, too, benefited from the five components endorsed by the panel, but that they also needed additional, tailored instruction.

This meant that many English learners missed out on the language development and knowledge-building that would help them succeed in later grades, said Cristina Sanchez-Lopez, an NCEL member and an associate with Paridad, an educational consulting agency that works on ELL and equity issues. National evaluations of Reading First found that it had positive effects on students' phonics skills overall, but not on comprehension.

Now that states are using legislation as a lever to improve reading instruction, the English learner community wants to make sure that

“

If I don't understand the letters in front of me, the letters and sounds, then I have a problem, no matter the language.”

#### ELSA CÁRDENAS-HAGAN

President of Valley Speech Language and Learning Center in Brownsville, Texas

teachers are equipped to teach all kids, said Elsa Cárdenas-Hagan, the president of Valley Speech Language and Learning Center in Brownsville, Texas, and an associate research professor at the University of Houston. Cárdenas-Hagan contributed to Goldenberg's response to NCEL.

The message from ELL advocates, she said, is: “I don't want to get the crumbs from your table. I want to be at the table.”

Chief among NCEL's concerns is that much of early reading practice has been “developed around monolingual students,” said Laurie Olsen, an NCEL member and the board president of Californians Together.

This is a problem, Olsen said, because ELLs are different from students who only speak one language. Kids who are learning to speak and read a new language at the same time need some different supports, and bring some different strengths, than kids who are only doing the latter.

Research is clear on this point. Students learning English still need instruction in foundational skills, vocabulary, and comprehension, just like native English speakers. But they also need more practice developing their spoken language, given that they're learning to speak and read English at the same time.

NCEL members worry that because some states haven't explicitly set aside time for oral language development in their guidelines, it may fall by the wayside as teachers feel increased pressure to cover what is listed.

Olsen and Kathy Escamilla, a professor at the University of Colorado at Boulder and an NCEL member, raised concerns about what they see as a narrow focus on phonics instruction, specifically.

“I don't disagree with people who say, ‘[Phonics instruction has] been kind of scat-

tered, and maybe it isn't as linear as it should be.' But I haven't heard that kind of a qualitative discussion," Escamilla said. "What I'm hearing is, 'Let's do more of it,' but not, 'Let's do it better.'"

Structured literacy advocates dispute NCEL's claim that states are telling schools to focus on phonics instruction to the exclusion of all else. But Olsen also said that schools often teach phonics "out of context" for ELLs.

In foundational skills instruction, students are regularly asked to manipulate sounds and syllables. But it's harder for English learners to make the connection that those sounds are part of words if they don't understand what the words mean, Olsen said. Ideally, "there's a connection between the content and the language being used," she said.

NCEL is advocating for states and school systems to bolster dual language programs and put more resources toward helping students develop biliteracy.

This is a good goal, said Cárdenas-Hagan. But teachers don't have to be in bilingual settings to draw on students' knowledge of their home language, she said.

Teachers can use cognates, or words in two different languages that are related in origin, to help students understand word meanings. They can also start letter-sound instruction with letters that make similar sounds in English and the student's home language.

There are lots of ways to adapt foundational skills instruction for ELLs, Cárdenas-Hagan said. But she emphasized that it still needs to be explicit and systematic.

While phonemic awareness and phonics are only "one piece of the puzzle" when it comes to literacy, she said, "if I don't understand the letters in front of me, the letters and sounds, then I have a problem, no matter the language."

### A collaboration to support ELLs in Illinois

In one state, Illinois, ELL advocates and structured literacy proponents are trying to figure out how to negotiate priorities through legislation.

There, literacy advocates were pushing for the state legislature to pass the Right to Read Act this session, a proposal that would have led to three big changes in early reading instruction in the state: requiring teachers to pass a foundations of reading exam for certification, establishing a grant program that districts could use to adopt evidence-based curricula, and mandating

that the state board of education offer professional development for educators.

"It's fundamentally an equity issue here," said Jessica Handy, the policy director at Stand for Children Illinois. The group is part of the Illinois Early Literacy Coalition, which worked on the bill. Both bill sponsors are members of the Black Caucus, and the issue of early literacy was discussed in negotiations for the caucus' education agenda last session.

The Latino Policy Forum saw literacy as an equity issue, too. The group, which advocates for Latino issues in the state, hadn't been involved in drafting the original bill. But after NCEL released its position paper, the forum reached out to the Illinois Early Literacy Coalition.

Members of the forum raised concerns that implementation of "science of reading" laws elsewhere had harmed English learners and pushed for changes in the bill language. "Part of the issue was the narrow definition of what literacy was within the legislation," said Erika Méndez, the associate director of education for the Latino Policy Forum. "The concern was that it would narrow the set of practices that teachers would have in their toolbox."

The bill's sponsors pressed pause on the legislation this session. Now, the state board of education plans to convene stakeholders, including both the Latino Policy Forum and the Illinois Early Literacy Coalition, to work on literacy guidance this summer. Handy hopes that another version of the bill will be ready to propose during the veto session in November.

The challenge, said Handy, is developing a comprehensive plan that's inclusive, but not so broad as to be "a bunch of fluff." Still, she's hopeful.

"We don't want to enact a bill that's going to be harmful to a major population of our students," she said. "We in the coalition believe, first and foremost, that we've got to get it right." ■



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## EdWeek Update

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Published January 4, 2022

## Staffing Shortages Are Hurting Students Who Need Extra Reading Support

By Mark Lieberman

**K**attie Hogan spends two 56-minute periods each day helping small groups of 6th and 7th graders at a suburban middle school in Detroit with reading, writing, speaking, and listening. She's having more trouble than ever this year keeping students engaged and on task.

Six staffers at the school, including teachers and a social worker, have left since the start of the school year. Hogan has had to serve as a substitute for some of those openings and for teachers who are out sick or in quarantine at home. Those duties eat up much of the time Hogan, the part-time reading intervention teacher, would spend planning lessons.

Some days, she has to shift her students into another class of 25 to 30 students.

"It's challenging at best because you're trying to take what somebody else has done, your plans for the day, and try to combine them in this weird mishmash," Hogan said. "We're going to attempt writing, but you're teaching social studies, so we're going to do writing about social studies. I hope everyone gets something."

Hogan is hardly alone in her experience. As schools try to provide support this year to older students who need extra help getting their language arts skills on track, they're bumping up against the limitations of pandemic-era schooling. The ongoing spread of the disease, coupled with nationwide shortages of qualified employees willing or able to work in

schools under the current conditions, have observers worried about providing enough reading support to students who need it.

“One person in a class of 25, they can only do so much,” said Kesa Summers, a reading specialist who teaches English at Eastern Middle School in Silver Spring, Md. “Even with the planning time, you can’t ask a person to be three different people.”

Students need extra attention and reassurance, but they aren’t always getting it.

Experts on reading instruction say students struggling with reading in upper grades need reading teachers who integrate supplemental reading exercises around comprehension and decoding into their regular whole-class lessons. Some also need supplemental intervention in a classroom environment separate from their regular courses.

Skills they should be practicing regularly in those environments include summarizing and discussing texts, systematically studying new words, and showing students how to find the main idea, said Jade Wexler, an associate professor of special education at the University of Maryland. Students may need a lot of help and support navigating those tasks, particularly if they’re also struggling with motivation.

“They need coaches—that’s the first thing that gets cut,” Wexler said. “They need instructional leaders, people who are supporting them. There need to be more bodies.”

Many schools use standardized assessments like NWEA’s Measure of Academic Progress, or MAP test, to determine whether students need extra reading support. In theory, those could cut down on the amount of work that’s necessary for a teacher or specialist to do. But it doesn’t always work that way.

The test result “kind of breaks it down for you, but maybe they’re not a good test-taker, maybe they didn’t feel well that day. You read with them and you think, ‘Hmm, that doesn’t really match up with your test,’” said Stephanie Northway, who teaches high school English at My Virtual Academy, an online provider that serves students across Michigan.

She’s seen students with low scores in reading proficiency immediately become more confident when she helps them sound out confusing words in biology test questions. “The challenge is to really find out where they’re at”—and that takes more intensive involvement from staff.

Older students need reassurance that they’re capable of doing the work that interventionists are asking of them, said Tricia Proffitt, a dual-language teacher at Belvidere Central Middle School in Illinois. Proffitt

## TACKLING STAFF SHORTAGES: WHAT SCHOOLS CAN DO

- **Raise wages and benefits to attract workers.** The labor market is competitive right now as workers seek better conditions and more robust compensation for their efforts. Many schools are finding value in offering more money to acknowledge the challenges teachers and instructional aides face on a daily basis.
- **Get creative with federal money.** Districts that received substantial allocations from three rounds of federal emergency aid since March 2020 can use some of that money to create new positions, transform part-time positions into full-time ones, and purchase new curriculum materials and instructional software.
- **Plan for multiple contingencies.** Some schools are worried about having to cut investments they’ve made with federal dollars once the money runs out in three years. Developing a long-term plan for alternate sources of funding for popular or effective investments—including raising taxes, securing grants, or lobbying for more state support—can help ensure that what’s working doesn’t fall victim to the whims of funding.
- **Get students reading.** Teachers who think regularly about supporting students who need extra help with reading told Education Week they believe the priority should always be on giving students more opportunities to practice essential skills. The easiest way to offer practice opportunities is simply to get students reading, even in classwork that isn’t specifically centered around language arts instruction.

served for seven years as a full-time reading interventionist until 2018.

“Just because they’re in an intervention, it doesn’t mean they’re incapable. They can do it,” Proffitt said. “But sometimes, they just need someone to believe in them.”

Providing that assurance in a meaningful way is even trickier this year than usual because students had such varied experiences with learning during the pandemic, Northway said. Some students have been learning in person since September 2020, while others only broke away from remote learning this fall. Some students are struggling mightily with the mental-health strain the pandemic has brought on, while others aren’t feeling it as acutely. Instructors can’t approach these challenges with easy one-size-fits-all solutions, but they also sometimes lack the time and resources to differentiate instruction.

### Taking advantage of a rare opportunity for more resources

Some schools are taking advantage of federal COVID-relief funds to put more resources

toward robust reading instruction for older students.

At Torrington High School in Wyoming’s Goshen district, administrators are using federal money to pay for an interventionist whose only job is to help students improve their reading ability, said Chase Christensen, the school’s principal.

For the last few years, the school has offered a “Stay in School” English class designed to support students who need more help with reading than they’re getting in their regular classes. That course didn’t have an assigned teacher, however, and sometimes was covered by a substitute or a staff member who typically teaches something unrelated.

Now, the course is covered by someone who specializes in reading instruction. And not a moment too soon—more so than before the pandemic, Christensen said, students in reading-intervention courses are struggling with motivation.

“Sometimes, we’ve got students that aren’t feeling the necessity of school,” he said. “It’s carried forward last year and into this year with real attendance battles.”



Some students got full-time jobs during the pandemic to help their families out. Others simply “lost the value that they saw in school,” Christensen said.

Rebuilding those relationships will take time. But time isn’t on the school’s side. Funding for the reading-interventionist position will run out in 2024. With the district’s enrollment and state-level budgets on a downward slope, finding another source of cash to keep the interventionist likely won’t be possible.

Instead, the district hopes to use the interventionist’s current efforts to plant seeds at the elementary level for some of that work to continue among existing employees once the high school interventionist’s role drops off.

“After two years, we may have less of a need, because we’ve got that instruction from the bottom up,” Christensen said.

Others are less optimistic about the future. Summers, the District of Columbia teacher, said she and colleagues feel overburdened by expectations of teaching students at grade level even if they come in struggling to read proficiently.

“It makes differentiation harder when the classes are bigger and you don’t have as many resources,” she said. At times, co-teachers haven’t been in her classrooms when they’re needed the most because they’ve been covering for other people who are absent.

These challenges aren’t likely to recede immediately. Slightly more than half of principals and district leaders who responded to a recent EdWeek Research Center survey said their staffing-shortage challenges have become more severe since the start of the school year—the opposite of what usually happens

when hiring is slow or positions aren’t filled in August or September.

Summers believes students benefit most from instruction that’s centered around giving them ample time to experience reading. She prefers to think of students as possessing different literacy-based skills depending on their background and experiences, rather than adopting a “deficit mindset.”

Shifting that thinking won’t be possible, though, without overcoming the challenges around staffing.

“Ideally, you would be giving as much access to the students where they are as possible, but you’re supporting them with scaffolds and modifications in order to access the higher-level standards that they’re wanting to reach,” Summers said. “But that takes a lot of planning and a lot of time and a lot of energy.” ■

## OPINION

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# No, Fewer Books, Less Writing Won’t Add Up to Media Literacy

By Mike Schmoker

**I**ndulge me and say the following out loud: Students should read fewer books and write less expository prose.

Did that feel right? I doubt it. But that’s the message the National Council of Teachers of English is sending its members. Its recent position statement on “Media Education in English Language Arts” demands that educators “decenter” the reading of books and the writing of essays. It instructs teachers to shift their focus from print media to digital media—including GIFs, memes, podcasts, and videos.

**The statement makes some legitimate points.** It rightly calls for greater relevance and engagement in the classroom, for redoubled attention to the core literacy skills of speaking and listening. It insists that students learn to assess the veracity and quality of online sources, along the lines of the good work being done by Stanford University’s Sam Wineburg and associates.

But the statement’s call to “move beyond” print is profoundly misguided. The late, great media critic Neil Postman first pointed out that the ability to analyze multimedia flows directly from a strong foundation of reading



—Vanessa Solis/Education Week and iStock/Getty Images

centered decades ago. When I ask audiences what two activities we are least apt to observe in an average school, it takes them about four seconds to respond, almost chorally: reading and writing. Many students don’t even read the scant number of titles they are assigned. An alarming proportion arrive at college as “book virgins”: They’ve never read an entire book.

NCTE could have an immense, positive influence by reminding teachers that books enlarge our lives and experience, nourish imagination, and immerse students in the thought-worlds of people in various cultures, times, and places. Practicing teacher and literacy expert Kelly Gallagher advocates for students to become “voracious” readers. He is appalled by the increasing encroachment of pseudo-literary activities, which he has long-dubbed “readicide”—the murder of reading.

Like so many of us, he knows that novels and nonfiction books open the world to young readers, offering them new modes of seeing and doing. They allow us to figure out who we are at a critical time of life.

Books also uniquely expand our general knowledge. As cognitive scientist Daniel Willingham points out, “Books expose children to more facts and to a broader vocabulary (a form of knowledge) than any other activity.”

and writing. Technology can only benefit education where text literacy is given primacy.

Literacy expert Richard Vacca writes that, as adults, today’s students will be required to “read and write more than at any other time in human history.” Political commentator Thomas Friedman likewise reminds us that the primary skill set for success in the 21st century is advanced proficiency at “plain old reading and writing.” And yes, speaking. It distresses Friedman that students already spend about seven hours a day absorbed in digital entertainment media.

**The central irony of NCTE’s call to “decenter” text is this:** Reading and writing were de-

And writing? In classroom tours, my companions and I observe writing and writing instruction less than any other activity—even less than reading. I saw the results of this when I taught writing to college freshmen. The majority struggled mightily to organize their thoughts into a clear, coherent document. This explains why many students hit an academic wall in a variety of subjects when they reach college.

I would love to see the council take the lead on educating its members on writing's unrivaled capacity to enable students to generate, analyze, synthesize, and retain knowledge. Writing is almost miraculous in the way it enables us to think more deeply, logically, and precisely. The eminent education reformer Ted Sizer regarded writing as "the litmus paper of thought," which should therefore "occupy the very center of schooling." Numerous scholars celebrate writing's capacity to help us to express our best thinking in its best form.

The NCTE statement raises other concerns: It strikes me as being more ideological than humanistic—and overly enamored with what students find familiar and fun. And I also believe that it needs further clarification. For instance: What actual proportion of the curriculum would the council reserve, perhaps grudgingly, for what they term "traditional" reading and writing competencies?

**The ELA community should absolutely acknowledge the digital era—but not at the expense of books and expository writing.** If the council truly desires for record proportions of students to become literate, articulate, and successful, it should first:

—*Renounce* the ubiquitous practices that are the primary destroyers of literacy, for example, skills exercises (think "find the main idea"); the excessive employment of worksheets, full-length movies, and aimless group work; the arts and crafts projects that masquerade as literacy activities—which are rife right up through high school.

—*Recenter*, after years of decline, an intensive focus on reading, writing, and (thank you, NCTE) speaking and listening. Restoring these to their rightful place represents the most propitious opportunity for swift, dramatic improvements in all of K-12 education.

With so much at stake, we dare not lurch, impulsively, to satisfy contemporary but specious preferences for how we educate our children. ■

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## OPINION

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# How a Bathroom Log Helped One Middle School Understand Its Literacy Issues

By Seth Feldman

**R**eading isn't just a set of skills. The most important factor in helping middle schoolers overcome literacy issues is creating strong relationships with students and families. As an administrator, I'm always using assistive technology to help guide curricular decisions and working to build structure so that students can access their education, but my best educators are the ones who stay laser-focused on developing meaningful relationships.

### How to Support Struggling Readers in Middle School

*The embarrassment of having a hard time reading can lead to evasive behavior and hopelessness. Here's how my school steps in.*

At the age of 13, around 65 percent of students who play competitive sports quit that sport and try a new sport. It's because they stop winning or adopt some notion that they aren't good enough. The same

goes for reading. At Bay Area Technology School, we've found that 7th and 8th grades are the most crucial years in terms of making sure that kids don't feel hopeless about their reading ability.

If we can identify struggling readers and keep them motivated, we can turn them around in life-changing ways. They might not be reading Faulkner or Shakespeare, but they can read their high school textbooks and graduate from high school. The challenge for our educators is that, by 7th grade, students might be hiding their challenges behind coping mechanisms that keep them from being discovered. Here's how we find and help our middle schoolers who have trouble with reading.

### Replacing Remediation with Advancement

As a former reading teacher, I know that language matters. For example, I want to strike the term "remediation" from the dictionary of education. No student is remediated. They are not sick or broken. What we are looking to do is to advance all learners. Our middle schoolers don't want to be

called out as being unintelligent or incapable, so when they hear that they're in remediation class, they are more likely to lose hope and become withdrawn.

When I was teaching ELL students, a huge part of my job was to help kids fend off that feeling of hopelessness and stay motivated. So now as a superintendent, I ask my teachers not to talk about remediation, but instead to talk about advancing everyone toward excellence. That's something students can buy into, and if an educator commits to that cause, they can turn around struggling readers. First, though, they have to identify them.

### Starting With Smart Assessments

The first and most objective question we ask is, "How well is this student doing with assignments or group projects?" For one of our main reading assessments, we use Lexplore, which has an AI eye-tracking feature that helps educators identify students' reading patterns to see if they might have dyslexia or another learning disability. It's not a diagnosis, but positive data from Lexplore is a good enough reason to recommend further academic testing to a parent.

Our most recent round of testing was in mid-February, when we found that 15 percent of participating 6th through 8th graders were reading at a low level, with 41 percent below average and 44 percent average. Rather than reflecting a COVID slide, these figures were an improvement over the results we saw in fall of 2020, when 20 percent of students were reading at a low level, and only 40 percent were at average level.

Whenever we test, if an educator notices the red flags and has reason to believe their student is struggling with reading alone, they know they can help their student in a couple of different ways, such as using devices that measure phonemic awareness or comprehension.

### What the Bathroom Log Really Means

Another way that educators can identify and help struggling readers is simply keeping a bathroom log. Last year, there was a 6th grade boy at my school who was always going to the bathroom, every single period. We noticed it right away and we also noticed that when he took his diagnostic examination for reading and math, he scored at a 2nd grade level.

We didn't call him out on it, but we did some heavy intervention in reading using assistive technology. As he grew from 2nd

grade to 4th grade level, his bathroom visits decreased. By the end of the year, he was up to a 6th grade level and he wasn't on the bathroom logs at all, except at lunch.

Another student went to the bathroom every single day, 12 minutes into every class. That was when teachers were finished with explicit instruction and transitioning to group work. I got to know this boy, and at some point I just asked him, "Can you read?"

And he said, "No, not really. It's kind of why I go to the bathroom all the time." He absolutely, positively owned up to it, and we got him some help. He's in a special reading-advancement class of only 10 kids this year. Even though it's online, we have seen two grade levels of improvement, which is a big deal.

When we called home to tell his mother how proud we were that he grew in reading, she cried. This was the first time from kindergarten through 8th grade that anyone ever called her to say that he could read, even just a little bit.

### What We Learn From Interactive Reading

Educators can find out a lot by simply listening to a student read and then talking with them about what they've read after a page or two. When I was a teacher, I would sit with a student, ask them to close the book, then say, "You've made great progress. Can you help me recall three facts from that paragraph we just read?" That will tell you if a kid knows only how to make "reading noises" or if they also know how to recall, retain, and process the information they've read.

Our school starts each morning with 20 minutes of interactive reading. Educators need to find time to listen to how their students read and then ask them to share what they've read afterward. A student might be able to make the noises necessary to read, but are they also able to comprehend what the text is telling them?

One schoolwide strategy we teach is called the "inside, outside, outside" method. We tell students to first look inside the word, at the prefix and suffix. Then they look outside the word, at the sentence before and the sentence afterward. If they still can't figure out what that word means, they look further outside using a thesaurus—not using a dictionary, because the thesaurus will help students learn other academic terms along the way and allow them to make academic connections to the new word they just learned.

This method isn't just for middle schoolers. I recently had a former student call me

and say that, after months of studying, she was taking her MCAT and didn't recognize a word. "I started to sweat," she said, "I even started to cry a little bit. But then I looked inside the word, and I recognized one of the roots. I looked at the sentence before and the sentence after, and I knew the answer was C and that I was going to pass this test and become a doctor."

These methods not only give students a way to get unstuck, but they create the sort of bond where a student will call a teacher 10 years later.

### A Laser Focus on Relationships

If you have a relationship with a student, you also build a level of trust, and that student will be less reluctant to read in front of you. No matter what subject you teach, you can act as a reading coach.

Reading isn't just a set of skills. The most important factor in helping middle schoolers overcome literacy issues is creating strong relationships with students and families. As an administrator, I'm always using assistive technology to help guide curricular decisions and working to build structure so that students can access their education, but my best educators are the ones who stay laser-focused on developing meaningful relationships. ■

*Seth Feldman is the superintendent of the Bay Area Technology School in Oakland, Calif.*

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