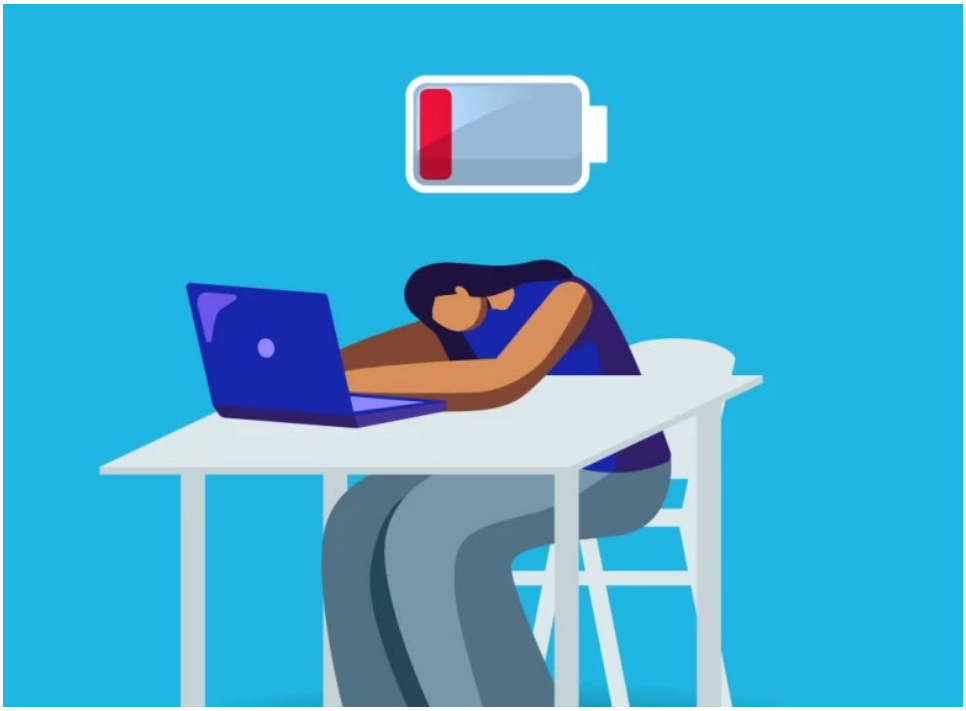
EducationWeek® | SPOTLIGHT 2026

From Teacher Overload To Literacy Impact



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EDITOR'S NOTE

This Spotlight examines the evolving realities of teaching and learning, highlighting the **instructional practices, policies, and supports shaping today's classrooms**. The articles explore how teachers are **adapting literacy instruction** in response to early-reading laws and the science of reading movement, why many educators supplement core curricula, and what new research reveals about **kindergarten instruction** and **supporting English learners**. They also address the growing challenges of **teacher burnout and morale**, emphasizing the importance of **flexibility, collaboration, and practical classroom** strategies that help educators feel effective and supported. Together, these stories offer a nuanced look at how schools can strengthen instruction while meeting the diverse academic and emotional needs of both students and teachers.



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Published April 25, 2025

Are Early-Reading Laws Changing Teaching Practices?

By Sarah D. Sparks

What should a young reader do when they come to a word they don't know?

It's the most basic hurdle in reading, and the strategies a teacher gives can make the difference in a student's literacy development.

A new study by the research group RAND Corp. suggests primary teachers in states with comprehensive early literacy laws—those that include pre- and in-service teacher training and curriculum requirements for teaching foundational reading skills—are more likely to give students evidence-based strategies for tackling text than those in states with laxer laws.

But in many cases, K-2 teachers continued to use some classroom materials that did not meet standards for teaching foundational reading skills in phonics, phonemic awareness, and fluency—though many of them mixed them with materials that did address those topics.

In all, the findings paints a mixed picture of the implementation of "science of reading" laws—or at the very least, an incomplete shift in teachers' practice.

"Teachers in a lot of states might be getting a piece of the puzzle, but not the whole puzzle" for teaching foundational reading skills, said Anna Shapiro, a co-author of the study and an associate policy researcher at RAND.

The findings also mirror a 2022 special reporting project from Education Week, which also found gaps in how schools and teachers were responding to the push for evidence-based reading practices.

Behind states' new reading laws

In reading, foundational skills typically refer to students' learning how to "crack the code" of recognizing the sounds in English and how they're mapped onto letters. But skilled reading includes more than just these word recognition elements—students must also learn the structures of written English, to read with increasing fluency, and to draw on their background knowledge and expanding vocabulary to understand what they read.

Mississippi was the first state to adopt a comprehensive law based on the science of reading, in 2013. Education leaders have credited Mississippi's rapid improvement on the National Assessment of Educational Progress since then to the state's overhaul of reading curriculum, pre- and in-service teacher training, and interventions focused on decoding and word recognition, vocabulary, and fluency in early grades.

More than 40 states—23 in the last two years alone—have followed suit with laws in a similar vein. But their early reading policies vary significantly; some focus on PD, some on curriculum, and some address multiple areas. Not all the laws included funding to implement the changes.

"Some of these states have essentially unfunded mandates. They said, 'you need to do this,' and then didn't provide any funding for the school districts to buy new materials," Shapiro said.

"And then other states like Mississippi have put a ton of money into not just requiring these things, but actually providing school districts with the resources to implement them," she said. "Those two different approaches are pretty important for how these things actually get implemented."

Mississippi's rising test scores suggest the influx of resources coupled with its new approach appear to be increasing achievement, she said.

An ongoing Education Week tracker shows that while 40 states have passed new laws about the science of reading, they have different emphases. Far more include that include professional development on reading than on preservice teacher preparation.

For the study, RAND researchers analyzed a nationally representative sample of more than 1,800 K-5 elementary teachers in spring 2024, asking them about their background, the techniques for teaching reading they use, and their use of curriculum materials. The findings suggests those laws have reshaped teaching—but only in fits and starts.

On the one hand, teachers with fewer than five years' experience were more likely than those with more experience to say they'd had preservice preparation aligned with the science of reading, suggesting some preservice training has begun to change with regard to foundational reading skills. These less experienced teachers also were more likely than teachers with more experience to use evidence-based classroom materials.

But only a dozen states and the District of Columbia have passed more comprehensive reading laws that require teachers to use new curricular materials—in addition to pre- and in-service training.

Shapiro and her colleagues found that nearly 75 percent of K–2 teachers and 66 percent of teachers of grades 3-5 received professional training on how to teach foundational reading skills in the 2023–24 school year.

"I think that highlights that kind of discontinuity in the policy," Shapiro said. "If you have a preservice requirement, but you don't have any sort of curriculum requirement, you might be teaching the teachers new useful information in professional learning, but then

WHAT IS THE 'SCIENCE OF READING'?

In a science of reading framework, **teachers start by teaching beginning readers the foundations of language in a structured progression**—like how individual letters represent sounds and how those sounds combine to make words.

At the same time, **teachers are helping students build their vocabulary and their knowledge about the world through read-alouds and conversations.** Eventually, teachers help students weave these skills together like strands in a rope, allowing them to read more and more complex texts.

Most teachers in the United States weren't trained in this framework. Instead, the majority say that they practice balanced literacy, a less structured approach that relies heavily on teacher choice and professional judgment. While the majority of students in balanced literacy classrooms receive some phonics instruction, it may not be taught in the explicit, systematic way that researchers have found to be most effective for developing foundational reading skills.

Students are generally "reading" short books of their choice very early on, even if they can't sound out all the words. Teachers encourage kids to use multiple sources of information—including pictures and context clues—to guess at what the text might say.

they're going back and using a material that is telling them to use 'three cueing'—and that in and of itself is not compatible. It illustrates that these policy pieces do kind of need to work together in order for teachers to get something that is consistent and actionable."

Instructional material use varies

The findings do suggest that three-cueing—an approach relying on context clues to word-reading that, in practice, tends to subordinate phonics—has diminished as an instructional practice.

Teachers in states that required professional development, RAND found, tended to take a different approach to helping their students read unfamiliar words than teachers in other states. For example, they were 8 percentage points more likely to point students to suffixes, prefixes, and recognizable pieces—or morphemes—to understand an unfamiliar word.

Teachers also differed by grade level. Shapiro found that 69 percent of K-2 and 45 percent of 3-5 teachers direct students to sound out letter sounds in an unfamiliar word. About 25 percent of K-2 teachers and 42 percent in higher grades would advise students to look for morphemes. Both of these strategies are considered backed by reading science.

About 4 percent of early-grades teachers and 10 percent of upper elementary teachers said they would tell students to first look for contextual clues in surrounding words or pictures, a feature of three-cueing associated with less fluent reading development.

Though many states have updated the curricula used to teach reading, RAND researchers found this did not always translate to teachers using materials that support effective practices.

About a third to a quarter of teachers across grades K-2 didn't use any materials that supported effective instruction in phonics, phonemic awareness, or fluency. (The ratings of materials were pulled from those issued by the separate nonprofit EdReports. The majority of teachers in each grade used materials that met standards in at least one of those components, however.

"K-12 teachers tend to be generally positive about the materials they use—but then you'll also see that they're reporting that they're kind of mixing and matching materials that they're modifying," Shapiro said. "It's sort of a disconnect ... [as if] they're thinking to themselves, 'they're good after I made all those changes.'"

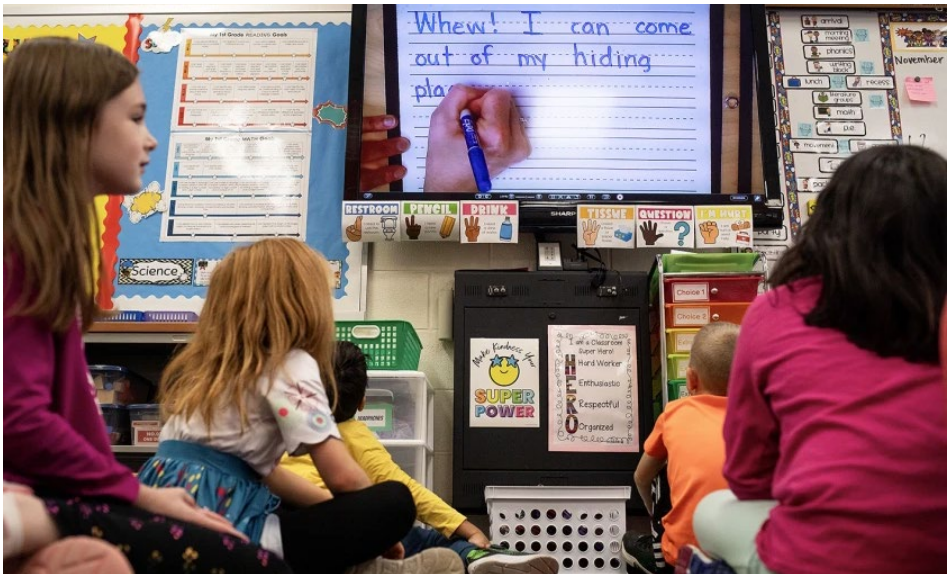
Later this year, the group plans to release a follow-up study analyzing how English/language arts instructional materials have changed over the last five years. ■

Additional Resource
View this article's charts

Published August 08, 2025

The Many Reasons Teachers Supplement Their Core Curricula—and Why it Matters

By Sarah Schwartz



Emily Elconin for Education Week

First grade students listen as their teacher Megan Goes helps them craft alternate endings for stories they wrote together at Moorsbridge Elementary School in Portage, Mich. In reading classrooms nationwide, teachers tend to mix core and supplemental materials—whether out of necessity or by design.

At New Lisbon Elementary School in Wisconsin, it used to be difficult for principal Stephanie Moore to keep track of what students in each grade were learning from one year to the next.

The school used a core reading curriculum, but teachers made a lot of their own adjustments, supplementing with other materials of their choosing. That meant that at the end of the year, Moore said, students' reading abilities were all over the map, with different patterns of strengths and weaknesses depending on which teacher they'd had.

"When you've got three different teachers teaching the same grade level, and they're pulling different resources, students are getting different things," Moore said.

That's one of the core challenges of mixing and matching reading programs and other materials in the classroom—a practice that data show is more common now than it was before the COVID pandemic.

Two new reports both come to the same conclusion: Teachers and school leaders are piecing together multiple resources. A recent survey from the RAND corporation found that the average teacher uses five supplemental resources, up from about four in the 2018-19 school year. In a separate survey, from the Center for Education Market Dynamics, almost half of school district leaders said that teachers used two or more programs in English/language arts classes.

The patterns raise new questions about how instruction is designed. Many researchers and education consultants warn against supplementing core programs in this way, arguing that it can water down the rigor of the curriculum for students and is logistically complicated for teachers.

But in surveys, teachers say they need the flexibility to make complex material more accessible for their students, who can come into the classroom at a wide range of different ability levels. And not all of the core programs districts choose are of the highest quality—some teachers say they need the option to bring in evidence-based resources when their schools don't provide them.

The debate over whether to supplement a core program, and under what conditions, implicates central tensions in the teaching profession: How much autonomy should individual teachers and principals have? And how can educators balance the goal of holding all students to grade-level standards, while also offering multiple entry points into challenging lessons?

"We're really aiming at the consistency between classrooms," said Moore. At New Lisbon Elementary, teachers still use pieces from several different programs, but now under a unified plan from school leadership.

"Nothing's perfect," said John Humphries, the district's pupil services director. "There's good pieces of the puzzle in different places."

The tension between preserving teacher 'individuality' and instructional coherence

Teachers have long augmented the curricula provided by their schools—adding in extra practice opportunities for students, putting their own spin on lessons, or even quietly setting aside the officially sanctioned resources in favor of ones they prefer.

Over the last two decades, the rise of online lesson-sharing sites, such as Teachers Pay Teachers, and open educational resources, freely available materials that teachers can augment and remix, have made it easier than ever to source supplemental materials.

The reasons teachers seek them out are manifold. In a 2022 survey, teachers said that the materials their schools wanted them to use weren't engaging enough, didn't differentiate lessons for students at different levels, and didn't have enough support for students with disabilities—even when outside rating organizations had deemed these resources high quality.

And for years, some educators have argued that requiring classroom teachers to follow anything too tightly controlled, a "scripted" curriculum, robs them of their ability to exercise professional judgment.

One Connecticut teacher described her district's move to a scripted curriculum as

"heartbreaking" in a 2022 interview with Education Week.

"We kind of lost our individuality," she said at the time. "I relish making up a lesson. I relish doing some research, trying to make it fun. ... Districts are focusing too much on the science [of teaching] with data and test scores, ... and we have really lost sight of the fact that it's [also] an art."

But there are trade-offs to relying on teachers to create or search for lessons, said David Steiner, the executive director of the Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy and professor of education at Johns Hopkins University.

"Most of the stuff on Pinterest and Teachers Pay Teachers is chaotic and wildly unorganized," he said.

Steiner is an advocate for what are often referred to as "high-quality instructional materials"—core curricula that have been given high marks by external reviewers. These programs can require students to take on demanding work, and several states and districts that have pushed their use have seen student gains.

Some students will likely need extra support as an "entry point" into grade-level work, Steiner said. But that should be targeted to the most important prerequisite skills, not comprise a general review of below-grade-level content. Many of the free resources circulating online don't make that kind of distinction, he said.

There are some research-tested tools made for this purpose, designed to be used in tandem with a core curriculum. Steiner referenced Zearn, a math learning platform that maps lessons to the Common Core State Standards, as an example.

Targeted use of a supplemental program like Zearn could make sense in a classroom where many students are below grade level, he said.

This distinction is one that resonates with Taryn Rawson, the principal of Goldrick Elementary School in Denver.

There, teachers supplement the core curriculum in 4th and 5th grades with additional work on decoding multisyllabic words and studying morphology, the structure and meaning of word parts. The practice helps students decode the more complex, subject-specific words they encounter in these upper elementary grades, Rawson said, but those routines aren't included in the core curriculum.

She sees this schoolwide strategy as different from telling teachers to pick and choose whatever materials they think would work best.

"If I walked into a classroom in a literacy block and a teacher was supposed to be in the middle of a [core lesson], and I saw some word searches with a Teachers Pay Teachers logo on them, that would be a conversation," Rawson said.

Why some districts say they need multiple programs

Getting teachers to adhere to a core curriculum, of course, relies on leaders providing high-quality materials to begin with. In many schools, that's not the reality.

As the "science of reading" movement has spread across the country, more schools have adopted English/language arts programs for early elementary school students that align with the evidence base behind how children learn to read.

But as of 2022, at least a quarter of teachers said their schools still used programs that incorporated practices that reading researchers have said could make it harder for children to learn to decode words, according to an EdWeek Research Center survey.

In some districts, leaders have chosen to add a supplement in foundational skills—such as phonics and phonemic awareness—to curricula that don't offer systematic, explicit instruction in those areas. Sometimes that's done explicitly to "patch" weaker materials.

Leaders in the New Lisbon, Wis., district wanted to adopt an evidence-based approach to foundational skills, but their existing core program, a basal-style reading curriculum that aimed to build reading skills through short text excerpts wasn't strong in this area, said Moore, the elementary principal.

Buying an entirely new comprehensive program would have been "very, very expensive," she said.

Wisconsin has promised districts partial reimbursement for choosing one of its state-approved curricula, but that money isn't available yet. So last school year, New Lisbon adopted a phonics and phonemic awareness supplement, switching it into the district's reading curriculum in lieu of that program's foundational skills lessons.

Even when districts have purchased new curricula rated "high quality," leaders' decisions about what makes the cut don't always line up with teachers' perceptions about what will best serve their students.

In New York City, for example, where elementary schools are required to adopt one of three reading curricula that the city says are aligned to the science of reading, some teachers have criticized their schools' choices, Chalkbeat has reported.

Soliciting teacher feedback early in the curriculum-selection process can prevent educators from feeling the need to augment the program later on, said Mackenzie Sheahan, the director of K-8 curriculum and professional development in the Portage schools outside of Kalamazoo, Mich.

Three years ago, when the district started looking for a new reading curriculum, leaders were hoping to find one that met their criteria across the board, Sheahan said. But they couldn't find one that had both a strong foundational-skills program and approached comprehension instruction the way they wanted—focusing on building students' knowledge and incorporating diverse texts.

So they went with two different programs: one knowledge-building ELA curriculum, and one foundational skills supplement.

"We got more teacher buy-in by finding the right tools for the job," Sheahan said, "rather than getting a one size fits all and forcing them into it." ■

Published March 28, 2025

Teacher Burnout Is Real. What's to Blame—And How to Keep It at Bay

By Elizabeth Heubeck

Teacher burnout. By this time of the school year, the phrase has been bandied about so frequently—behind closed classroom doors, in the aisles of grocery stores, by the media—that it threatens to become diluted, or dismissed altogether. That would only make the problem worse, as burnout is a serious issue that's bad for students, schools, and of course, teachers themselves.

Despite teacher burnout being an oft-repeated phrase, there's no consensus on what causes it—and how to solve it. Some researchers have suggested that certain personality traits, including low levels of emotional stability and high levels of conscientiousness, make teachers susceptible to burnout. But current and former educators tell a different story.

As they see it, burnout stems mainly from circumstances beyond their control. What's more, many educators believe the best chance of keeping burnout at bay involves making intentional decisions that are within their control, like choosing to set parameters around if and when to work beyond school hours.

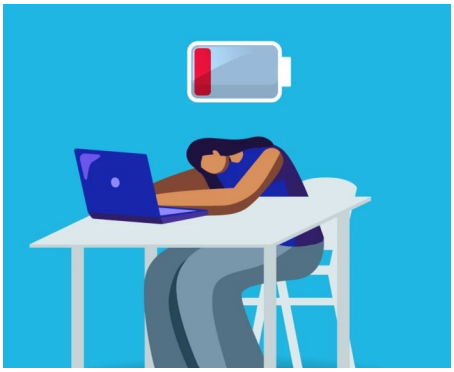
What teachers say causes burnout

Why are teachers burned out? One primary culprit, according to recent survey data and anecdotes from educators, stems from the trickle-down effect of staffing shortages at schools.

More staff to support teachers and students topped a list of 10 key components of teachers' working conditions (other than a pay raise) that could improve teacher satisfaction, according to results of the EdWeek Research Center's nationally representative survey of teachers conducted in the fall of 2024 as part of the annual State of Teaching project.

Elizabeth Suto, a former teacher who hosts Teacher Career Coach, a podcast whose guests include teachers transitioning out of the profession, said she's heard similar complaints from teachers.

"The lack of staff is really leading teachers to burn out more quickly. With the shortage, staff positions aren't being used for their intended purposes," said Suto, manager of operations at Aspireship, a company that offers skills-based training to job seekers. "The ramifications of staffing shortages run deep."



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Several educators have shared examples with Suto of how staffing shortages affect their day-to-day school lives—an insufficient number of aides to fulfill the requirements in a special education class forces counselors to be pulled in to substitute as an aide, for instance, or a principal who's bilingual has to sub for the bilingual classroom and is not able to coach new teachers.

Suto's revelations align with teacher advocates who insist that teacher burnout should be considered in a different light.

"Burned-out teachers aren't 'significantly less socially and emotionally competent.' They're handicapped by lousy school systems, ignorant officials, or out-of-touch administrators," wrote Alexandra Robbins, author of The Teachers: A Year Inside America's Most Vulnerable, Important Profession, in a 2023 EdWeek opinion piece.

Robbins suggests that society shift the focus away from the fact that teachers have higher-than-average burnout levels to the underlying culprit: school systems' failure to provide necessary supports and resources for their employees.

School staffing shortages are improving but still persist, especially in high-need areas like special education. In the meantime, some teachers may find themselves at the brink of quitting, or creating their own coping mechanisms in attempt to stave off burnout.

How are teachers coping?

Aspireship's Suto, who left the teaching profession during the pandemic, hears often from former teachers who describe their final days in teaching.

"A lot of teachers would wake up in the morning just dreading the day. They couldn't imagine going to work. They were crying every day, and they were seeking out mental health services," she said.

Many of the teachers told Suto that they came to the conclusion, often with the support of therapy, that teaching was no longer a sustainable career for them.

But some teachers have found ways to avoid or minimize burnout. Education Week sought to find out how.

In a March social media poll, we asked: Teachers, how do you avoid burnout? The LinkedIn poll received over 1,300 responses, and there were 100-plus comments on both LinkedIn and Facebook. Notably, the majority of responses indicated that teachers are leaning into self-reliance by controlling aspects of the job that they can, which often includes setting boundaries between work and personal life.

Here's a sample of comments made by EdWeek's social media followers, edited lightly for clarity:

"I'm big on avoiding taking work home. They stop paying me at 6 whether I'm working or not. I'm doing lesson plans on the clock only. ... This means having max productivity during the day. I also ensure I decompress afterwards. Being a mom and a teacher means kids all day. If I have to hide on the toilet for 10 minutes, I'm taking my 10."

—Delycia C.

"Set boundaries. I used to answer emails at all hours, and it drained me. Now, I have set 'off' times. The world doesn't end—and I show up more refreshed the next day! Rest and take holidays. Self-care is so important."

—Amelie H.

"Realize that you are not to blame for society's problems, regardless of how systemic education tries to push that, and accept that you

cannot fix said problems. Focus on educating the whole child instead of constantly pressing academic progress only."

—*Crystal S.*

"Lead an after school club that you enjoy. Connecting with the kids and engaging them in something that excites you helps give perspective beyond classroom walls that translates into critical class time connections."

—*Nadia I.*

"32nd year. I'm still making a difference. My students' growth motivates me. Good at compartmentalization."

—*Tammy A.* ■

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Published April 16, 2026

Flexibility and Teamwork Are Key to Rebuilding Teacher Confidence, Morale

By Sarah D. Sparks

San Antonio—

When it comes to improving teacher morale, consistent teamwork—and a little bit of grace—matters more than performative support.

Education Week's 2026 State of Teaching survey found that teacher morale nationwide had fallen slightly since the previous year. Practitioners at an Education Week symposium on teacher morale here on Tuesday said leaders who want to keep happy teachers need to address work-life balance and classroom climate.

"Teachers are telling us that their job is unmanageable; they have been saying that for the last few years," said Shawn Bird, the deputy superintendent of the San Antonio Independent school district.

A 2025 study by the Rand Corp. think tank concluded that the education profession has become less flexible, and teachers face more job intrusions into their personal lives, than do similarly educated workers in other professions.

Younger teachers, particularly those with children of their own, "have just got to a point in their life where they need more flexibility," Bird said, "and we have to respond to that, because I think the days of the 30-year career educator are gone."

Teachers today experience a lot more "role creep," being asked to do additional, often unpaid, jobs that take time away from planning and instruction and eat up free time, too, according to Hallie Gelabert, a teacher and instructional facilitator at the CAST Teach High School in the Northside Independent school district in Leon Valley, Texas.

"Now more than ever, teachers and administrators rely on each other to run our campus," Gelabert said. "Creating that partnership where we can help each other is the most positive thing that you can do."

Small courtesies and flexibilities go a long way to making the workload easier for teachers to bear, the teachers here said. A principal who covers a teacher's class for an hour so that the teacher can get to a medical appointment without taking a half-day of leave, for example, is more likely to have a teacher willing to tutor on a Saturday, Gelabert noted.



Kaylee Domzalski/Education Week

Attendees share stories during Education Week's State of Teaching event in San Antonio. Many said that helping make the job more flexible for teachers could go some ways to making the job feel more sustainable.

"It's those really tangible deposits that an administrator can make so that teachers would be willing to make those back," she said.

Ongoing professional support

Teachers and leaders alike agreed that novice educators need more ongoing professional development than basic mentoring programs.

Bird said he's seen two compounding challenges: more students who have experienced academic, social, and developmental disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic, who are now taught bynew teachers entering through alternative-preparation programs with less student-teaching practice.

Both teacher mental health stresses and student-behavior problems have been exacerbated by teachers "coming into the classroom without the skills to handle the students they have," he said.

Teachers and students alike seem less confident, Gelabert said. "Teachers, we're told to make really engaging lessons, and sometimes [doing so] an feel like an act," she said.

Teachers and leaders at the symposium said they see more students with shorter attention spans and less stamina for long or self-directed assignments, which puts pressure on teachers to structure tasks for every minute of the day.

"Maybe teachers are second-guessing themselves—and you know, [students] can smell fear," said Elizabeth Sanchez, an executive master teacher at the Somerset Independent school district southwest of San Antonio. Sanchez, who co-teaches in 3rd and 4th grades, said more collaborative instruction can ease stress, particularly for new teachers. "Wherever the need is, our structure of support allows our positions to be flexible and to go help," Sanchez said.

She urged stressed teachers to fight the itch to micromanage and encourage more student ownership of learning.

"We have to push to the students: 'OK, here's your task, you're the leader. Go,'" she said. "That way we prevent the exhaustion from the teachers happening, because I don't have to keep going 100% of the time. I just have to know what I'm doing and monitor."

School leaders can also help teachers regain ownership of their instruction, in the face of changing curricula or standardized testing, said Joaquin Hernandez, the principal of MacArthur High School in the city's North East Independent school district .

"Some of the creativity that happens in classrooms has really been squashed so that we can reach that rating that we are all pressured to get," Hernandez said. "That is a big thing that a lot of people don't really say out loud, but we've really given it a floor at my school, to understand what is it we need to do so we can be successful." ■

RETURN TO PAGE 1



Kevin Mohatt for Education Week

A kindergarten sign is displayed at a school in Colorado Springs, Colo., as classrooms nationwide shift toward more academic instruction and less play.

Published April 03, 2026

What One Researcher Saw Inside 29 Kindergarten Classrooms

By Elizabeth Heubeck

Kindergarten is a big deal for little kids. It remains the de facto entry into formal schooling, even as pre-K becomes more accessible in pockets of the nation. And many signs suggest that this first year of school looks a lot different from what it once did.

Kindergartners once spent only a half day in school, and classrooms emphasized play-based learning, with time devoted to exploring in "centers" that featured blocks, dress-ups, and paint. Today, the spotlight on kindergarten—as well as its expectations—has grown brighter and, some might argue, harsher.

Districts now emphasize kindergarten readiness. As such, many districts publicize a laundry list of skills—such as early literacy, numeracy, self-control, and independence—that they expect incoming kindergartners to possess to some degree. The day is longer, too. Most kindergartners today attend school for a full day. And the focus of most kindergarten classes has shifted from play and exploration to reading readiness.

These changes beg the question: What's it like inside a kindergarten classroom today?

Susan Engel sought to answer that and related questions, including: What can or should we expect during this first year of school? How are children learning in their kindergarten classrooms? Engel, a developmental psychologist who directs the teaching program at Williams College and has written several books about children and education, traveled for two years to 29 kindergarten classrooms across 14 states seeking answers to these questions. She turned her observations into the book American Kindergarten: Dispatches from the First Year of School.

Engel recently spoke to EdWeek about her findings. She shared features common to all kindergarten classrooms and unveiled some stark distinctions and surprises. Her observations lend eye-opening insights into how kindergarten shapes the educational trajectory of today's K-12 students.

The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Why did you embark on this project?

I had begun to think to myself: All my life, I've been studying this stuff. Maybe I don't really know what [public K-12] schools are like. If you look at popular media, you would think that schools everywhere are a total disaster. And then there was Waiting for Superman [a documentary critical of the U.S. public education system]. I did not like that everybody all over the country was watching that movie and thinking: Oh, it's horrible. Teachers are horrible. Kids are languishing in the rubber room.

Schools have their problems. But if you've had kids in schools, you know that some of them are really nice, some are great. And even if they're not great, they're good. And actually, the data show that most parents are pretty happy with their kids' schools. And I really wanted to see for myself.

Did you have a particular audience in mind for the book?

I wanted the book to be for a general audience. I always want to reach not just parents of kindergartners but policymakers and people who pay taxes and have opinions. I think most people in this country have opinions about education without really knowing what's happening in their local school.

How did you approach the project?

I tried very hard to keep an open mind. I used that, rather than a checklist of behaviors to check off. I went to the schools and I just sat there and wrote down every single thing I saw. I went to all kinds of schools: urban, rural, poor, rich, homogeneous, heterogeneous. I really got to see a lot of schools and talk to a lot of teachers and principals.

Did you go into this project with a preconceived set of notions or hypotheses?

I didn't go in with any hypotheses. I did go in with preconceived notions because I'm 66 and I've spent 46 years or more years in schools; I taught in a high school and in college. I've spent so long working in schools and thinking about developmental psychology that I have my ideas. But I tried really hard to push those aside.

What about your observations of kindergarten classrooms caught you off guard?

A couple of things. For one thing, the polarized view of kindergarten classrooms as either friendly, lively chaos or strict, repressive order—that is not true. Every teacher wants or-

der. Every teacher I saw thinks that part of kindergarten is helping kids learn routines and learn to wait their turn. That is everywhere.

What did you notice about how teachers attempted to instill order?

What differs from one classroom to the next is whether students are learning order or are developing a sense of internal self-control. In classrooms that are overly restrictive, the students are just obeying, and they're getting conditioned to do that.

What we know about child development is that it's not a quick jump from the wild solipsism of infancy to wanting to be part of a group, and to be thoughtful, and to wait our turn. That's a painful struggle we all go through. So classrooms that made more room for that slow crawl [toward learning internal self-control] looked different than the classrooms where order was an absolute requirement at every minute. But it's not as if some classrooms didn't care about order. Everywhere I went, they cared about it.

What else was a priority in the kindergarten classes you observed?

Every teacher cared about reading. There's no question it's a top priority.

What did that look like? What were the expectations around reading?

I think the expectation that has shifted again in the last few years is between mastering certain specific [literacy] skills versus becoming more of a reader. There are classrooms now where there's just this determination that the students are going to get good at certain measurable skills. And in those classrooms, teachers are not looking to see if those kids like reading any better. They're looking to see if students did OK at the skills they taught them.

You observed that, in some classrooms, the literacy curriculum focused as much on meaning as it did on the mechanics of letter-sound connections. Could you elaborate on that?

Yes. One teacher I observed was the master of doing both. She taught the students phonics, but she was so intent on also getting them to want to know things, to think about books, and to sort of relish words. Words and what they mean seemed to matter to this teacher, and she wanted them to matter to the kids. She played like 10 games throughout the day, where they talked about things. She would ask her students things like: What do you do when you're afraid? How can you tell if this is a puddle or an ocean? It was all about making the world of things and the meaning of things interesting and sticky to the kids, so that there was a connection between understanding the world, which kids are very motivated to do, and understanding that words and sentences give them access to that world.

You wrote that 4 of the 29 schools you visited put the promise of thinking 'front and center.' Did this seem like the individual teacher's choice or something promoted by the schools where they taught?

In some schools, this philosophy seemed more widespread. For example, in a school in Baltimore, it was very clearly a point of view shared throughout the school that thinking is important and that the students in the school were entitled to be thought of and treated as thinkers. Whereas in some of the other schools, it was less pervasive throughout. But teachers have ideas about what should go on in the classroom, and they have ideas about children, and the ideas they have are really powerful at determining what they do. And when teachers have an idea that goes against the system, their idea wins out.

The teachers who have the idea that kids can be thinkers and should be thinkers make sure there's time in the day to bring that out of the kids: to ask them questions, to take them seriously, to invite their opinions or their plan for their play, to ask them what they're doing. And that doesn't take much curricular material, but it's so powerful. For the teachers who don't have that idea, that's easy to see, too.

Do you think that students' ideas about what school is and their place in it are formed by the end of kindergarten?

I think kids leave kindergarten not only with an idea and an expectation of school, but an expectation of themselves in school, like: I'm gonna like this. I'm gonna be good at this. Or not. Certainly, intellectually or in terms of yourself as a learner, your idea about school is kind of set by the end of kindergarten. It's the rare child who can break out of that idea later on.

What stood out to you in the classrooms that impressed you?

In the four really strong classrooms I saw, those teachers were confident in their ideas about children and what should happen in the classroom. The other teachers, either by virtue of their personality or by the support and training they received, did not have that same sense of agency as teachers, and they did not have a well-articulated idea about what kindergarten is for.

What most surprised you in your observations?

I was worried going into this project that I would find the same old thing I had thought and heard forever, which is that poor, minority communities have bad schools and that well-off, privileged-race communities have good schools. And I didn't see that.

Did your observations reinforce any prior beliefs you had about kindergartners?

One vivid thought that I came away with is that you just cannot ask 5-year-olds to sit still. Kids need to move around. In one school that was quite restrictive, when the students got out onto the playground, they were just wild with all this pent-up energy. And it's not just physical energy, it's mental energy—needing to be in charge of your own movements and your own thoughts and your own games and your own ideas.

What was missing from classrooms?

Male teachers and Black and brown teachers. I saw one male teacher. I saw very few Black and brown teachers, and yet I saw many classrooms with many Black or brown children in them.

Based on your observations, what worries you about schools today?

In every school I visited, I asked teachers: What do you hope will happen by the end of kindergarten? And teachers were so surprised by that question. They said that nobody had ever asked them that, or they said, 'Well, let me think about that.' It's not that they didn't like the question. They just hadn't been invited very often to think of that and then use that as a guide in their classroom. So I guess that's what worries me most: that we don't think of teaching as a profession where it's our collective responsibility to help new teachers develop a strong idea and then, of course, make it work with the system. Another worry that

goes along with this: the sort of regimentation of school, treating school like a factory. It's just dreadful.

What about today's kindergarten classrooms gives you hope?

Five-year-olds are just so fantastic. They're so eager. I know there are kids with problems, and some of them have intractable problems; I saw at least one kid like that in every classroom. So don't get me wrong, it's a hard task to be the teacher of these groups of kids. But in every classroom, the vast majority of kids are eager, curious, and friendly. They're just kind of great.

And the second thing that gives me hope is that most [of the] teachers I met were really nice and well-intentioned. I saw a few that probably shouldn't be teachers, or were ready to retire, but plenty that were good. Some teachers laughed with their students. They cracked up, and sometimes, they laughed about them, because kids are funny, right? If you don't get how funny kids are, you probably shouldn't be teaching kindergarten. And then I saw plenty of other teachers who sort of wanted to giggle because they, too, really like kids and are really sort of fascinated by them. I saw those teachers kind of stifle a giggle. That tells me that those teachers are not having enough of a chance to have fun doing what they're doing. And it's really hard to be a good teacher, especially if you're not at least enjoying it. ■



Tamika Moore for Education Week

A graduation cap and gown sit in an ESL teacher's classroom in Russellville, Ala. New research suggests some negative outcomes from grouping English learners together in high school, such as a lower likelihood of graduating on time.

Published January 30, 2026

What New Research Reveals About Grouping English Learners Together

By Ileana Najarro

When school districts decide how English learners will receive language support and access to grade-level content, the default is often to group these students together during the school day.

But new research suggests that approach may not work for all students.

Studies from researchers at New York University found that grouping English learners in separate classrooms for most of the school day at best offers few benefits overall—and in some cases may hinder some students' ability to graduate from high school on time and later enroll in college.

The studies, published last October and funded by the federal Institute of Education Sciences, address where English learners are placed throughout the school day and whether that affects academic outcomes.

The findings challenge the idea that there is one "best" way to group English learners, said Rebecca Bergey, a principal researcher at the American Institutes for Research, who did not work on the NYU studies.

The studies help make the case for district leaders to regularly evaluate which English learners they are serving, their unique needs, and schools' staffing capacity in determining how best to place students into classrooms, she said.

"When we think about English learners, we're often focused on what curriculum or what instructional practices work for them. But this is a good, really strong reminder that we need to take a step up and look at, what are the system-level levers of change?" Bergey said.

No single grouping model works for every English learner

The first NYU study, led by Kristin Black, a research scientist at the university's Institute for Human Development and Social Change, focused on high school English learners, analyzing New York City public school data for more than 31,000 English learners enrolled as 9th graders in 2013, 2014, and 2015.

The study, part of a broader research and development center project focused on the academic tracking of English learners, looked at two key groups of English learners: those who are long-term, meaning they've been in the district for years but still haven't met proficiency and are often academically marginalized as a result; and those who are newcomer immigrants and have varied experiences with the English language and the U.S. school system, Black said.

Black found that when long-term English learners were more concentrated together in classrooms, they were less likely to graduate within four or six years, less likely to immediately enroll in college after graduation, and less likely to enroll in college about 2 and a half years after graduation.

Newcomer English learners also experienced these negative outcomes associated with being grouped together, but to a lesser degree.

"They may very well need opportunities to have really good, targeted English language instruction in a more sheltered environment," Black said. "But they also need and deserve opportunities to be fully integrated with non-English learners in their regular academic coursework."

In the second study, Michael Kieffer, professor of literacy education at NYU, led an experiment with schools in a large urban district in the Northeast.

Fourth and 5th grade teachers used a specific curriculum focused on language and literacy designed with English learners in mind. Each teacher taught two different groups: homogenous groups of only English learners and heterogeneous groups of English learners and non-English learners.

Kieffer found no average benefit of homogenous grouping.

Instead, if English learners had higher English proficiency before the experiment, they benefited more from heterogeneous groups on language and reading outcomes. If they had lower English proficiency beforehand, they benefited more from homogenous groups.

"We feel like it calls into question this notion that we should group students homogenously as a default," Kieffer said.

Districts can review and adjust how English learners are grouped

Taken together, the NYU studies shed light on why it matters for districts to understand the English learners they serve, their needs, and how well-equipped teachers are to meet these needs before defaulting to grouping English learners together, Kieffer and Black said.

In his experiment, Kieffer found that while teachers in both groups stuck to the same curriculum, there were some key dif-

ferences in how they perceived and reacted to students' abilities.

With the heterogeneous groups of English learners and non-English learners, teachers did things like ask more open-ended questions and seemed to expect a little more of English learners in terms of what they could do with language. With the homogenous groups, teachers did a little more scaffolding, such as explaining vocabulary and setting up more structured ways for students to practice speaking.

As more districts catch on to research that shows the benefits of all teachers taking responsibility for English learners' academic achievement, not just specialized English-learner teachers, Kieffer said it's important to ensure that more general education teachers learn scaffolding techniques for the English learners in their classrooms, and that more English-learner teachers set high expectations in homogenous settings.

When making districtwide decisions on where to place English learners, and what trainings to offer teachers, Bergey from AIR recommends leaders regularly analyze data they collect on their English learners and adapt as needed.

In some years, a district may have more staffing capacity to get English-learner teachers and general education teachers to work more closely in the same classroom as co-teachers. In other years, there may be a sudden influx of newcomer students with greater language needs that would necessitate more homogenous groupings.

"It really comes to understanding what your context is, and who your students are, and having to make continuous decisions about what that looks like," Bergey said. ■

Published November 24, 2025

How One District Is Getting Secondary Teachers Up to Speed On Reading Support

By Caitlynn Peetz Stephens

Reading intervention isn't just about K-3. It's a collective responsibility.

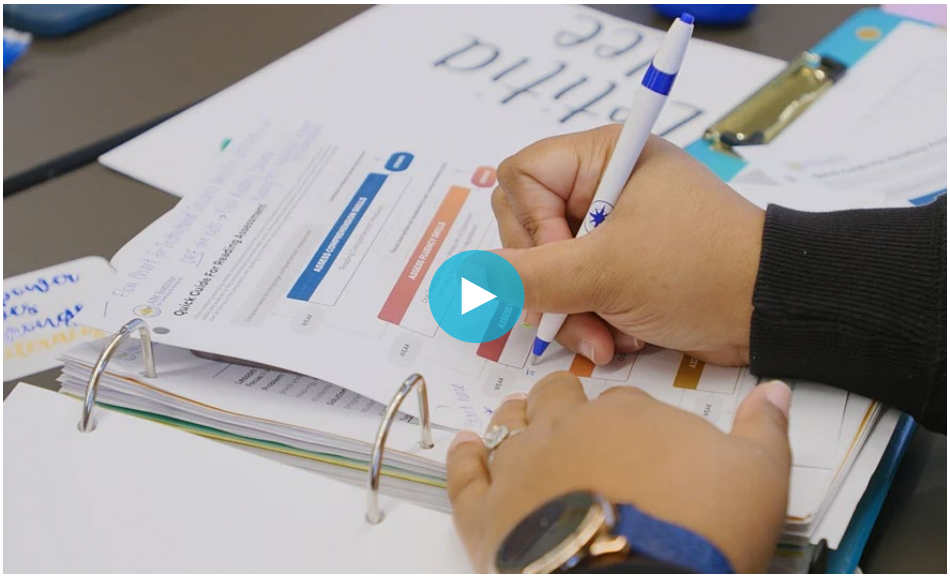
That's the commitment from Georgia's Marietta school district, which is now looking beyond the early elementary grades as it works to improve reading achievement.

Nationwide, much of the focus of the "science of reading" movement has focused on foundational skills usually taught in the earliest grades. But older readers who haven't mastered those foundations are at risk of falling further behind as they attend classes that increasingly rely on complex texts to build their knowledge base.

That's where the Marietta district's training comes in. It's partnering with a PD provider to supply middle and high school educators to learn how to teach basic reading concepts in middle and high school classrooms in age-appropriate ways.

"As educators a key phrase you'll hear is differentiation—you want every kid to get what they need, and I think that's what this training provided," said Amber Morgan, a reading specialist in Marietta. "It wasn't only practicing. It was then, how does each one of us who does something different take that and make it super meaningful and purposeful in the practice that we do every day?"

View the video to see the district's approach in depth. ■



Jason Drakeford for Education Week

VIDEO: A district invests in improving secondary teachers' knowledge to help students needing reading support.



Sonia Pulido for Education Week

OPINION

Published April 09, 2026

What the 'Science of Reading' Movement Has Meant for English Learners

By Larry Ferlazzo

The "science of reading" has received a tremendous amount of public attention over the past few years.

How has that public discourse impacted the classroom?

Today's post will focus on its impact on English learners.

Must Be 'Linguistically Inclusive'

Altagracia (Grace) Delgado is the director of Texas initiatives for the English Learners Success Forum. With over 30 years of experience in education, she has served as a teacher, instructional coach, and both campus and central-office administrator across Texas:

The growing attention to the "science of reading" has had a profound impact on the field of education, particularly in how literacy is approached in early and elementary classrooms. Rooted in decades of cognitive science and reading research, this movement emphasizes explicit, systematic instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. As an educator and advocate for multilingual learners, I recognize the value this body of research brings in clarifying what students need to become proficient readers.

However, I also believe it is essential to apply these principles through an equity- and language-conscious lens, which also acknowledges the linguistic assets multilingual learners bring to the classroom.

One of the most significant shifts I've seen is the increased emphasis on structured literacy instruction, particularly in foundational skills. This has brought a welcome sense of clarity and consistency in phonics instruction, which is critical for early reading development, especially for students who are decoding English for the first time. For multilingual learners, however, it is not enough to simply apply a one-size-fits-all model.

We must consider how students' home languages interact with English phonology, orthography, and syntax. For example, a Spanish-speaking student may transfer knowledge of syllabic structures or cognates, while a Vietnamese-speaking student might need support with distinguishing between tonal patterns in their home language and the stress patterns of English. The science of reading must be adapted with these linguistic realities in mind.

In addition, the focus on oral language development, vocabulary, and comprehension is especially relevant for multilingual learners. However, these areas can be unintentionally underemphasized in the science of reading conversations when the emphasis is placed too heavily on decoding alone. For students acquiring English as an additional language, oral language serves as a foundation for literacy. Intentional opportunities to develop language through conversation, academic discourse, and content-rich texts are essential.

Teachers must be prepared not only to teach phonics but also to scaffold language structures and vocabulary in ways that are culturally responsive and developmentally appropriate. I've found that incorporating students' home languages and background knowledge into lessons, such as previewing texts in their first language or exploring concepts through bilingual resources, enhances comprehension and engagement.

What gives me hope is that the national dialogue around the science of reading is beginning to evolve. More educators, researchers, and policymakers are recognizing that multilingual learners require a tailored approach that integrates the evidence-based practices of reading science with research on second-language acquisition and biliteracy development.

This integrated lens is crucial to ensure multilingual learners are not misdiagnosed as struggling readers when in fact they are developing proficiency in more than one language. Programs that incorporate biliteracy or dual-language development, for instance, provide strong evidence that students can learn to read in two languages simultaneously, with both reinforcing one another.

Ultimately, I believe the science of reading offers valuable guidance, but it must be implemented in ways that are linguistically inclusive and culturally affirming. It's not just about how students learn to read, but how we honor who they are as readers, learners, and language users. For multilingual students, literacy development is a dynamic and multilingual process, and our instructional approaches must reflect and respect that complexity.

Don't 'Treat Literacy as a Checklist'

Angel Martinez Sanchez has been a teacher at the Norwich public schools in Connecticut:

The attention to the science of reading has been both validating and invigorating—but also raises important questions. As someone who teaches multilingual learners, I welcome

the emphasis on explicit, systematic phonics and the understanding that reading is not "natural"—especially for those developing literacy in a new language.

However, I also worry that some implementations reduce the science to rigid scripts, overlooking the rich linguistic assets of our learners. Effective reading instruction must be grounded in evidence and responsive to language development. For MLLs, decoding matters, yes—but so do oral language, background knowledge, and culturally sustaining texts.

I've adapted by weaving foundational skills with language objectives—using decodable readers in tandem with visuals, realia, and targeted vocabulary. I'm excited by the momentum, but I also advocate nuance: The science is a compass, not a cage. And we must never forget that reading is both a cognitive and linguistic journey.

To ensure this work truly benefits multilingual learners, we must go beyond simply teaching them to read—we must help them read in ways that affirm who they are. The science of reading must live alongside the science of language acquisition and the science of belonging.

Students need phonics, yes—but they also need stories that reflect their experiences, scaffolded conversations that deepen comprehension, and instruction that builds not just skills but identity. We can't afford to treat literacy as a checklist. For multilingual learners, it must be a bridge—between languages, between cultures, and between who they are and who they're becoming as readers.

Biliteracy Instruction

Emelia Ahmed, who has an M.S. in reading, is a biliteracy consultant with 30 years of experience in education:

The recent attention to the science of reading has had a positive impact on biliteracy instruction because it has provided an opportunity to build our teachers' capacity in emergent biliteracy instruction while ensuring our students are literate.

The science of reading refers to the research that explains how we learn to read and how to teach reading. We often use Philip Gough and William Tunmer's Simple View of Reading to explain the science of reading. The simple view of reading defines reading as decoding X language comprehension = reading comprehension.

In addition, it calls for systematic instruction that is planned from simple to complex skills and explicit instruction that provides for the gradual release of responsibility. In the biliteracy classrooms where I coach, the science of reading and simple view of reading have contributed to focusing our attention on understanding the similarities and differences between Spanish and English literacy instruction.

Spanish is a transparent language that is easy to systematically and explicitly teach; hence, the science of reading research was not a huge challenge to implement in Spanish literacy instruction. In Spanish, we teach the five vowels followed by nonvariable consonants, those that have only one sound, then we add the variable consonants such as c which makes the /k/ and /s/ sounds. All along, we have been making simple open syllables (cv) and reading. For example, if we have taught the five vowel sounds (a, e, i, o, u) and then the mm /m/ sound, we can now make the syllables ma-me-mi-mo-mu and read a sentence such as, Mi mamá mima a Memo. Except for the variable consonants, Spanish has a one-to -one sound-symbol correspondence that facilitates and accelerates literacy learning in Spanish.

With the focus on the science of reading, we have become more knowledgeable about teaching cross-linguistic connections in biliteracy classrooms. Cross-linguistic connections from Spanish to English ensure that students understand that what they know in Spanish transfers to English. For example, the letter M has the /m/ sound in both Spanish and English. We must explicitly teach this connection to accelerate biliteracy development.

The simple view of reading language comprehension side focuses on oral language and vocabulary development, which are key features and skills when teaching emergent bilingual students to learn the English language and to read in English. What is a little challenging to implement and systematically design are the skills that must be explicitly taught in English because there is zero transfer or a negative transfer between languages.

For example, there is a negative transfer of the letter h from Spanish to English because in Spanish, the letter h makes no sound; but in English, it does make a /h/ sound, which is the sound /j/ in Spanish. An example of zero transfer would be the long vowels in English, which do not exist in Spanish. That is why it is important to have literacy-based systematic English-language-development time in the daily schedule.

In my experience, the science of reading has provided us with an opportunity to develop our understanding of how to systematically and explicitly teach Spanish literacy while making cross-linguistic connections to skills that have a positive transfer to English while also ensuring that we teach our emergent bilingual students the skills that have zero transfer from Spanish to English and English to Spanish. Our students have the right to read in order to succeed in our school systems and in our society.

Thanks to Grace, Angel, and Emelia for contributing their thoughts! ■

Larry Ferlazzo is a former award-winning high school English and social studies teacher of more than two decades. He is currently a volunteer tutor to English-learner newcomers at a local school and to youth in juvenile hall.



Luca D'Urbino for Education Week

OPINION

Published March 10, 2026

What Policymakers Get Wrong About 'High-Quality' Curriculum

England can teach the U.S. about strong curricula

By Rick Hess

Education is swamped with talk of "high-quality" curriculum and the "science of reading." But what does it take for those things to deliver? On this pressing question, I recently checked in with the inimitable Doug Lemov, founder of Teach Like a Champion, an organization focused on curriculum development, professional development, and instructional practice (he is also, not so coincidentally, author of the hugely influential book Teach Like a Champion). We discussed the current state of curriculum and instruction, where they're falling short, why he sees big lessons in what Great Britain is doing, why he views its success as more than another passing fad, and what it takes to drive curricular change. Here's what he had to say.

—Rick

Rick: Doug, we've seen a surge of popular interest in reading instruction and "high-quality" instructional materials. What do you make of this?

Doug: Generally, it's a very good thing. It's hard to improve how you teach unless you improve what you teach. Great teaching needs great curriculum, and great curriculum needs great teaching. That said, I still think many people struggle to see the difference between curriculum (what gets taught) and standards (goals we set for student learning). I also think reading assessments are poorly designed. It's also very hard to align them with curriculum due to the decentralization of curriculum decisions. And—I say this as a small developer of what we hope is the highest quality reading curriculum possible—there are real barriers to entry for small entrepreneurial and nonprofit providers of high-quality instructional materials. So, I'm glad to see curriculum getting its moment. But I think there are significant challenges to making sure that the best materials are being taught well to more students.

Rick: Academic achievement is down over the past decade or more. What have you seen instructionally over that time?

Doug: The last 10 years in American education have been nothing short of devastating. Steven Wilson tells a big part of this story in his book The Lost Decade. In the schools that we count on to create opportunity for young people not born to privilege, too many educators equated the exercise of authority—something that is necessary to highly functioning institutions—with authoritarianism. We traded the long-term, life-changing freedoms created by learning and achievement for a cheap knock-off version of "freedom" that mostly boiled down to not having to do as asked in school. And we told our students, and ourselves, that this was liberation. That was, of course, a lie. At the same time, we gave up more broadly on meritocracy and rigor across every type of school. The costs will be borne for decades by a nation less prepared to compete with international rivals and by the erosion of the opportunity pathway that good and demanding schools create. I wish I could be more positive. Your pal Paul Banksley would be.

Rick: You've spent a lot of time with educators in Great Britain, where they've posted some eye-opening gains over the past decade or two. What have you been up to over there and what have you seen?

Doug: Education officials in every state should read the former Minister of State for Education Sir Nick Gibb's book Reforming Lessons. It outlines how, over the last 15 years or so, England reinvigorated its schools and achieved tremendous improvement on international assessments. From 2009 to 2021, English schoolchildren climbed from 19th to 6th in the world in reading, making them the best readers in the Western world. They also went from 26th to 11th in math. There were some critical policy levers. For example, Gibb was driven to make sure that rigorous curriculum was in place in every school. But that curriculum is also assessed at a much higher and broader level. In England, students get into university by taking the highly rigorous GCSE exams in subjects like chemistry, biology, history, literature, and the arts. The content of what determines admission to higher education is determined by an exam board that considers the national interest. Compare that with the United States, where the SAT is used by only some universities in the admissions process and where even that test includes only basic math and "verbal" batteries. The SAT test-makers decide what gets assessed, mostly in response to market forces. Recently, they decided to eliminate multiparagraph reading passages. Compare that with England, where the GCSE exam in English literature asks students to discuss a play by Shakespeare and a 19th-century novel.

Rick: We've seen previous instances where seemingly miraculous gains later proved ephemeral. Given that, what lessons do you take from the British experience?

Doug: One concerns teacher knowledge and preparation. One British school head said to me, "You almost can't find an NQT [newly qualified teacher] any more who doesn't understand the basics of human cognition such as the limitations of working memory and the key role of knowledge in critical thinking." Teachers in England have a much better understanding of effective instructional techniques, whereas many American teachers still subscribe to the debunked concept of "learning styles." I also think teachers in England have a different relationship to the institutions they work for. If a school in England decides it is going to ask students to write brief distillations of what they've learned in each lesson, a teacher in England thinks: Right, I'll give it a go. Even if they aren't sure they agree.

I've seen this myself. I recently spent 16 months working with a group of primary schools in the West Midlands—one of the most economically deprived areas of England—doing workshops and then visiting the schools to provide feedback. And it was just stunning how quickly they got better. We'd talk about the power of writing-intensive classrooms, and suddenly, all of the teachers were trying out the methods we'd suggested and adapting them in sensible ways. I remember walking out of a school in West Bromwich with a few colleagues and everyone thinking, "That would never happen in the U.S." Many teachers in the United States think it's their right to defy the institutional endeavor if they disagree with it. And it's very difficult to execute any idea when that's the case, which makes it hard to learn what works and what doesn't.

Rick: For skeptics who remember the "Finnish miracle" and other celebrated education reforms that ultimately disappointed, what gives you confidence that what you're seeing in Britain has staying power?

Doug: That's a great question. I'm not an expert on Finland, but many experts were skeptical from the outset. For example, Tim Oates called their decline years before it happened. I think he'd say that what the data showed was actually the legacy of a much more traditional model the Finns were already dismantling when their results spiked. But from what I've read, I think there were also two other reasons for its temporary rise, too. One would be the status of the teaching profession there. Teaching is by all reports a prestigious and respected job in Finland. And there's a culture of rigor in their schools. People take learning seriously. Those two things can paper over a lot of flaws. But when the Finns had initial success, they doubled down on a lot of the things that were not in fact drivers of their success. From the outset they were at odds with much of the cognitive science, for example. They went hard and early on ed tech. And they really ignored the importance of measurement. My sense is that even with the endemic strengths, once they went doubly progressive, it fell apart very quickly.

I'm more confident that England's success will be durable because there are so many measures of clear change dating to the same point of action—the test scores and the cultural changes and the GCSE results. And because England is serious about measurement. And maybe because what we see is an intentional design of multiple systems aligned to what research and cognitive science work. But so many things can be undone quickly, and changes are already afoot in England. So sadly, the risk is real.

Rick: Now, you've been working to develop a new curriculum. Can you talk a bit about that?

Doug: Yes! Though I sometimes joke that we wrote a curriculum by accident. We were training teachers in research-backed reading instruction when we realized they really couldn't make those changes unless they had better curriculum. They needed daily lessons that were rich in knowledge, writing intensive, and based on complete books of the highest quality. Creating that is a different skill set from teaching and takes a lot more time than most teachers have. So, we decided to make it ourselves. Six or so years later, we have a middle school and soon-to-be high school curriculum called Reading Reconsidered. But it's a very hard market to enter due to the incentives. What's available is often determined by commercial factors more than educational factors. We're trying to battle that—to bring to market something that's educationally optimal and uncompromising about quality. Suffice it to say, that's very hard.

Rick: Why is another curriculum needed?

Doug: In our new book, *The Teach Like a Champion Guide to the Science of Reading*, Colleen Driggs, Erica Woolway, and I argue that once students master phonics, they need to read whole books, and excellent ones, for sustained periods of time. We need to curate the experience of reading so that it rebuilds students' fractured attentional skills. But they also need to read those books in a knowledge-rich environment. A major misconception in American reading instruction is the belief in "transferable skills," such as teaching students to make inferences in a single lesson and then assuming they can do so with any text. In reality, we make inferences—not to mention learn more, comprehend more, remember more, and come to value books more—when we have background knowledge on what we're reading.

Take the line, "Lemov walked the #9 hitter on four pitches, and Hess signaled to the bullpen without leaving the dugout. Lemov stalked by him to the showers." If you know baseball, you immediately infer tension: Lemov walked the weakest hitter on the team, and Hess is mad. He doesn't give him the respect of walking to the mound to pull him. If you don't know anything about baseball, you wouldn't even know that Hess was the manager. This is why students must read in knowledge-rich environments. In our Number the Stars unit, for example, students read short nonfiction passages about World War II Denmark—about resistance movements, sabotage efforts and their risks, and Sweden's neutrality—to build the understanding that makes deep reading possible.

Rick: That sounds like a heavy lift. But what are some of the challenges of curriculum development that might not be visible to those of us on the outside?

Doug: Well, you have to write it first before you can sell it. For a small nonprofit like us, this is time-consuming and risky. You have to fund thousands of hours of development before you get a dime back. Then, to be viable in most states, you need to get on state approval lists, which requires a lot of expertise in government relations. Big publishing houses have dozens of people whose only job is overseeing the approvals process, while we have 20 people total on our team. The approval processes involve massive checklists, incentivizing publishers to put everything under the sun in a curriculum so it ticks every imaginable box. But then you have something that's sprawling and unusable to teachers. The incentive is to design for the regulatory process, not for the classroom. And then, when schools and districts choose curriculum, they are not always guided by science. They want appealing. They

want technology. You have to create something that looks, to quote a colleague, like a clown exploded on every page, rather than something that harvests attention and focuses it deeply on text, which is what students actually need to be successful.

Rick: If you've one piece of advice for educators frustrated by the materials at their disposal, what is it?

Doug: Um, hold fast to high standards. And call me: I have a curriculum for you.

This conversation has been edited for length and clarity. ■

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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A Principal's Guide to Reducing Overload and Accelerating Literacy

The Leadership Reality

Principals are navigating unprecedented instructional challenges: widening learning gaps, rising student needs, and teachers who are stretched thinner than ever. Your role is to create the conditions where teachers can focus on high-quality instruction—not constant triage. To do that, teachers need:

- Instructional tools that reduce planning time
- Real-time data without more testing
- Professional learning that is practical, aligned, and immediately usable

Lexia® delivers a unified ecosystem that supports teachers while strengthening literacy outcomes.

1 Instructional Tools That Lighten Teacher Workload

Lexia CORE5 READING

Core5 provides adaptive, science of reading-based instruction that personalizes learning for every student. Teachers receive ready-to-use lessons for small groups or individual support, reducing planning time and ensuring instructional consistency across classrooms.

Principal Impact:

Core5 helps your teachers deliver targeted intervention without creating additional prep work—and gives you reliable data to monitor progress schoolwide.

Lexia POWERUP LITERACY

PowerUp accelerates literacy growth for older students reading below grade level. Proven to be up to five times more effective than typical middle school interventions, it gives teachers actionable data to address foundational gaps while maintaining grade-level rigor.

Principal Impact:

Secondary teachers gain a clear path to supporting struggling readers without sacrificing content instruction.

Lexia ENGLISH LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

Lexia English supports multilingual learners through structured academic conversations. Lessons follow a gradual release model and include language frames that help students participate confidently.

Principal Impact:

Your multilingual learners receive consistent, high-quality language development across classrooms, reducing variability in instruction.

Explore Lexia's instructional programs and see how they streamline intervention and strengthen Tier 1 instruction.

2 Professional Learning That Actually Changes Classroom Practice

High-quality materials only work when teachers feel confident using them. Lexia's professional learning solutions ensure teachers understand the science of reading and can apply it immediately.

Lexia ASPIRE™ PROFESSIONAL LEARNING (Upper Elementary—High School)

Aspire offers flexible, self-paced modules that fit teachers' schedules. Each module includes practical strategies and bridge-to-application resources that support real classroom implementation.

Principal Impact:

Aspire builds instructional alignment across content areas—without pulling teachers from classrooms or adding to their workload.

Lexia LETRS® (Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling)

LETRS provides deep, comprehensive training in the science of reading. Developed by Dr. Louisa Moats, it equips educators with expertise in phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and writing.

Principal Impact:

LETRS creates a shared literacy foundation across your staff, strengthening Tier 1 instruction and improving early literacy outcomes.

Learn how LETRS and Aspire build teacher expertise and elevate literacy instruction across your school.

3 Giving Teachers Back the Time They Need

Teachers don't need more assessments or more meetings—they need more time with students. Lexia's ecosystem is designed to reduce administrative burden and maximize instructional minutes.

Assessment Without Testing®

This patented technology—built into Core5, PowerUp, and Lexia English—provides real-time, actionable data without requiring separate assessments.

Principal Impact:

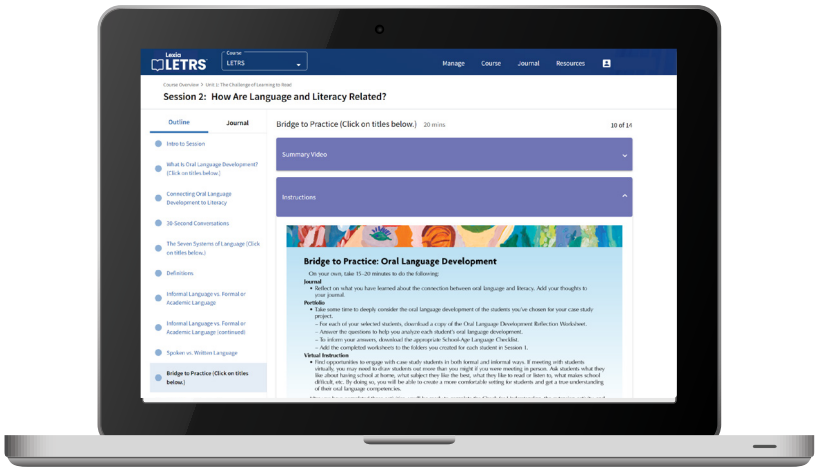
You gain reliable data for schoolwide decision-making while preserving instructional time.

Flexible, Teacher-Friendly Professional Learning

Aspire's self-paced model allows teachers to learn during planning periods or designated PL time. "Just-in-time" modules support immediate instructional needs.

Principal Impact:

Professional learning becomes sustainable, relevant, and aligned with your school's goals.



4 A Unified Approach That Strengthens Your Entire School

When teachers receive the right support—high-quality materials, aligned professional learning, and real-time data—they feel more confident, more effective, and more valued. That translates into stronger instruction and better student outcomes.

Lexia helps schools turn the science of reading into daily classroom practice by:

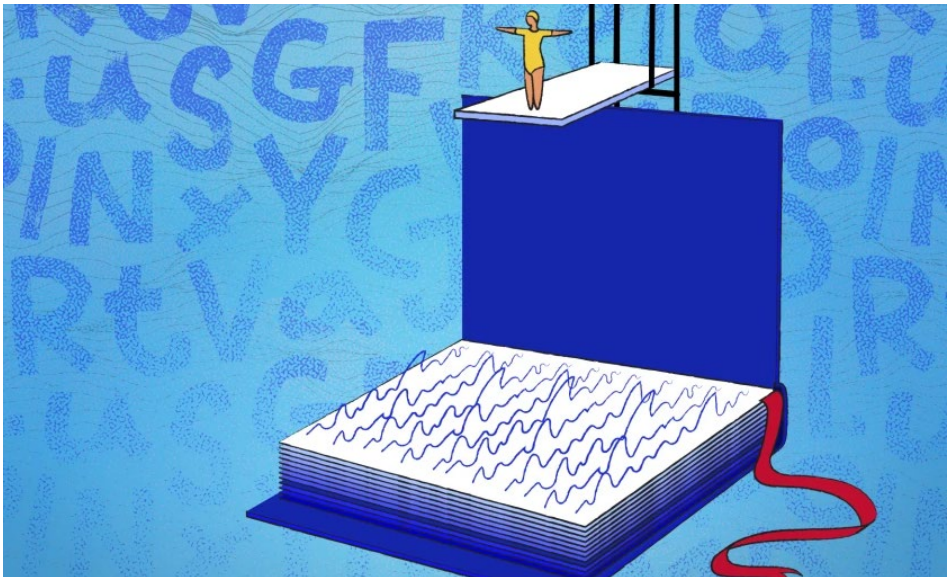
- Reducing teacher overload
- Strengthening instructional consistency
- Accelerating literacy growth for all students
- Building a sustainable, science of reading-aligned culture

What This Means for Your School

- Teachers gain time to focus on students.
- Students receive targeted, effective instruction.
- You gain visibility into progress across classrooms.
- Your school builds capacity for long-term literacy success.

Visit **lexialearning.com** to explore how Lexia can support your teachers and elevate literacy outcomes across your school.





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OPINION

Published March 25, 2025

If Literacy Is a Priority, Why Do We Cling to the Wrong Practices?

Reading, writing, and discussing are at the heart of effective reading instruction

By Mike Schmoker

There were two huge developments in the literacy world early this year. First, the emergence of a phonics program that could impact outcomes "dramatically." Gains for 1st graders from the foundational skills curriculum created by researchers at the University of Florida Literacy Institute were found to be equivalent to an extra year and a half of instruction. If widely and well implemented, UFLI Foundations and programs like it could be game-changers.

The second development is bleak. We've recently learned that reading levels have plunged to historically low levels: 40 percent of our students scored at the "below basic" level in reading on the 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress, and the gap between low and high readers is wider than ever. This should scare the hell out of educators. Poor readers are more likely to drop out of high school and endure a cascade of negative life consequences.

These developments should wake us up to a gargantuan opportunity. They will certainly test our resolve: Is the ability to read, write, and speak effectively truly a K-12 priority?

Because we've known how to ensure record levels of literacy for some time now. We know, for instance, that students who read ample amounts of grade-level, knowledge-rich text will—inexorably—develop powerful vocabularies and become fluent, competent readers. We already know how to increase reading time and reading stamina. Common sense protocols are available to any teacher who wants to expand daily reading volume (and writing and discussion) threefold or more. One key practice is acquainting students with vocabulary they will need before reading begins. Another is directing students to read and reading to them in manageable and increasingly longer increments, punctuated by peer interaction and writing. These practices will never fail us.

We've also learned that some of the most pervasive literacy practices are counterproductive. We know that teaching multiple ability-based groups while most students work at unsupervised "centers" is likely ineffective. We know that an excessive reliance on worksheets, group work, skills instruction, and screen time supplant core literacy activities—the purposeful reading, writing, and discussion that should pervade the disciplines but don't. We know that off-grade learning materials waste hundreds of hours of school time every year.

Our two-hour literacy blocks represent an especially ripe opportunity for improvement: The dominance of the small-group model greatly reduces time with the teacher. One-hundred and twenty minutes divided by four to five groups (with transitions) means students only receive 20 to 30 minutes of actual instruction. And the literacy centers—on which this model often depends—continue to be rife with the kinds of cut, color, and paste activities that I've observed for decades.

There's nothing new or exotic in these do's and don'ts of highly effective literacy instruction. Students thrive where they are given their due.

But decades on, we have yet to get our literacy house in order. Our priorities lie elsewhere—with confusing, overloaded literacy standards, with ill-conceived programs, or with wholly unproven, often tech-based innovations that seduce us with their newness. Once-trusted literacy organizations are now telling us to "decenter" book reading and essay writing. After all, we're now in the age of "digital literacy."

These infatuations only divert us from the less sexy but guaranteed necessities of literacy acquisition. As Doug Lemov tells us, "Low tech, high text. ... Read and read and read. Write and write and write." I would add: Have students discuss and discuss and discuss what they read and write about. That's how schools like View Park Prep in California, Brockton High School in Massachusetts, La Cima Middle School in Arizona, and others were able to achieve dramatic increases in student literacy in as little as a school year.

Lives are at stake. We can continue to dither while students and teachers wait. Or we can use these two developments as a launching pad for profound improvements in authentic literacy.

How can we seize this moment and turn it to good? For one thing, our practice-oriented education books and journals can more prominently feature frank critiques of common but ineffective practices and routines. For another, they can encourage submissions on how successful schools benefit from practices like the above—accompanied by evidence of measurable student outcomes.

To stay on track, educators should examine every aspect of literacy instruction in the

bright light of evidence—and jettison the least effective practices. Moreover, every faculty, district office, and school board meeting should include concrete discussions and celebrations of how best practices are being monitored, adjusted, and improved by teacher teams. This means scrutinizing standardized test scores but more importantly (in my view), local, short-term, written assessments—for single literacy lessons and units.

Why haven't we done this yet? Perhaps grade inflation has sapped the urgency needed to make fundamental improvements to literacy practice—to classroom practice overall. We would do well to remind ourselves, too, that in the areas of both curriculum and instruction, most schools have yet to implement many practices with the greatest scientific backing.

If we act boldly in response to these developments, outcomes will improve apace, perhaps spectacularly. And that 40 percent of below basic readers will shrink precipitously. ■

Mike Schmoker, a former teacher and administrator, is an author, speaker, and consultant. His most recent books are Results NOW 2.0: Untapped Opportunities *for Swift,* Dramatic Gains in Achievement *(ASCD, 2023) and* Focus, 2nd edition *(ASCD, 2018).*

OPINION

Published September 09, 2025

Simple Teacher Moves to Improve The Classroom

By Larry Ferlazzo

Avoid 'Cognitive Overload'

Melanie Battles, Ph.D., founding consultant of Scholars for the Soul: An Educational Solutions Firm, has over a decade of experience working in education as a K-12 literacy educator, college adjunct faculty member, instructional coach, and educational consultant:

As teachers, we are pressured to teach everything that is on our pacing guide and to check items off the list so that we can get them done before the school year is over. The unfortunate result is that in reality, many of us are not actually teaching the content but standing before students and talking about it. We may even give a few assignments, but it is hard to actually pinpoint if a student has actually learned the content that was "taught." So the lessons are taught really fast, typically overloading students with too much information, resulting in cognitive overload.

A small teaching move for teachers that should be more common is to actually stop, release the pressure to perform and check off the list, and incorporate movement throughout every lesson. Students should have an opportunity to transition, move, or rotate the space every 10-15 minutes based on their attention span.

Allowing for movement throughout the lesson breaks up the stagnation of a lesson and keeps students engaged. When incorporating movement, the transitions can lead to different groups with different tasks, or students can move around to various parts of the room, engage in flexible seating, and even walk around the room to answer questions posted in various spaces of the classroom.

Movement is a simple way to engage students within a review. You can take questions from a worksheet or textbook, put them on separate sheets of paper, and post them around various parts of the classroom. Students can find the questions around the room and answer them together or independently, but they are not in their seats sitting still for prolonged periods of time.

A simple move in how students engage with information by simply incorporating movement is a small but substantial move that will ensure students are engaged and you are responsive to how the brain processes information with movement as an anchor and culturally responsive strategy that keeps the mind and body connected.

'QSSSA'

Isabel Becerra is the multilingual consultant for the Region10 Education Service Center in Richardson, Texas. She was born in Bolivia and has been an educator since 1992:

A small teaching move refers to a strategy that educators use in their daily instruction to enhance student learning. These moves are often simple yet impactful actions that can significantly improve teaching effectiveness and student engagement. Small teaching moves are often easy to implement and require minimal preparation. They can be integrated into daily lessons without disrupting the flow of instruction.

Small teaching moves allow educators to cater to diverse learning needs and styles. They can adjust their approach based on students' responses and adapt instruction to better meet individual or group needs. Engaging students actively in learning through varied activities and methods keeps them interested and motivated. This fosters a positive learning environment where students are more likely to participate and contribute.

One of my favorites "small teaching move" is the Question, Signal, Sentence Stem, Share and Assess, or QSSSA, strategy. Created by John Seidlitz and Bill Perryman, this is a strategy teachers can use effectively across content areas and grade levels.

This strategy is especially effective with emergent bilingual students as it engages them to constantly practice talking about their learning. Engaging all students in a variety of academic conversations effectively enhances comprehension, fosters academic language proficiency, promotes literacy, reduces misbehavior, and develops a sense of community in the classroom. These conversations help create a more interactive, supportive, and inclusive learning environment for our emergent bilingual students. Research has shown that regularly using QSSSA results in enhanced participation and enthusiasm from students (Seidlitz et al., 2024).

This is how you use the QSSSA strategy:

Question - Provide a question for students to ponder on. This can be an open-ended question that can be answered in multiple ways and that will require students to expand on it rather than a yes or no response. An example would be: What do you think was the most important issue in the Boston Tea Party Act?

Signal - Ask students to show you a signal or hand gesture—thumbs-up, stand up, hand on chin, or knock on the table—to let you know they are ready to share. This step gives the students wait time to process and think about the question and it gives them the opportunity to take them to the resource they are asked to use to respond to the question. I believe this step is the most important because it builds a sense of community and allows for total participation.

Stem - Providing students with a sentence stem will allow them to participate in the conversation in a nonthreatening way. The sentence stem will help them organize their thoughts so that they just plug in the academic word (missing words) and have a structured complete sentence to share. Example: The most important issue in the Boston Tea Party Act is _____ because _____.

Share: Instruct students to share their answer to the question by using their sentence stems with a small group, with their elbow partner, their peanut butter and jelly partner, at their table group, with their designated-number partner, or with the whole class. It's very important to let them know exactly who they will share it with. It will make the process easier if you also structure who will share first and who will go next. You can get creative and ask the students to share their answers with their "Sole mate" (same kind of shoes), the person with the longest/shortest hair, or with the person with the same color shirt.

Assess: Finally, you will ask students to share their answers with the whole group. This will be an opportunity to assess and check for understanding in real time. It is a best practice to have a randomizing system in place. That way, students know they will be called on and will prepare to engage in the conversation.

The QSSSA is a great strategy to scaffold for your language learners. You can use this strategy according to your students' language proficiency level. You can go as simple or as

rigorous in level to meet your students' language needs. It is also a great strategy to practice all language domains, listening, speaking, reading and writing, and you can use this small move consistently to help your emergent bilingual students master their linguistic skills all in one activity.

The QSSSA strategy requires minimal planning, and it encourages student engagement, active participation, and deeper thinking in any content. Engaging emergent bilingual students in academic conversations is essential for their linguistic, cognitive, social, and academic development.

'Turn-and-Talks' and 'Cold Calling'

Courtney Rose, Ed.D., is a professor, educational consultant, culturally relevant/responsive educator, founder of Ivy Rose Consulting, and the author of the book, Woven Together: How Unpacking Your Teacher Identity Creates a Stronger Learning Community*:*

This question took me deep into reflection on my time in the K-12 classroom and the many teaching moves that I tried as I grew into my identity as "classroom teacher." The moves that made the most positive impacts on my classroom environment were those that were woven from deeper understanding of myself and my students and the places where our experiences as learners overlapped.

During my time as a 5th grade math/science teacher, I had an observation that resulted in a map of my movement around the room and tallies of the number of times I called on each student.

After reviewing the map, I was shocked to see that I was spending the majority of my time around the tables closest to my desk and calling on the students at those tables more. This was leading to students on the other side of the room to become disengaged in the activities. Some deeper reflections on who I was calling on led me to realize that these students had been more actively engaged early in the year, and I'd conditioned myself to look for their hands.

To combat this, I actually combined two small moves: Turn-and-talks (which my students loved) and cold calling (which they and I didn't love so much). At the top of the lesson, each student took a colored connecting cube (red, blue, green, or yellow) making sure no two people at any table had the same color cube.

I would pose a question or problem to the entire class and gave students 1-2 minutes to speak with either the person sitting next to, across from, or diagonally to them about the answer. To select the person, I spun two spinners, one with the cube colors and one with the table names/numbers. The student at the chosen table with the chosen cube color gave the answer. If the answer was incorrect, I spun again and if that answer was also incorrect, we did a little reteaching before moving on to the next question.

Within days of implementing this strategy, which required VERY little planning and prep outside of regular lesson planning, engagement and participation in lessons increased TENFOLD. Students were asking and answering more questions during whole-group lessons and working together even better during centers and small-group work time. On rare occasions, some questions could earn table points (usually not tied to academic content), but my students really just enjoyed the opportunities to speak with and learn from each other.

Turn-and-talks and other methods that give students time to chat before answering a question are proven approaches that have many benefits including but not limited to:

- Encouraging collaboration among students.
- Helping students to see each other as assets and resources in their learning process.
- Disrupting hierarchies and dynamics that place the teacher as the sole owner of the knowledge.
- Developing students' sense of ownership and engagement with the learning process.
- Strengthening class culture and community through a collective responsibility for our learning.

This method also helped me break away from my practices that negatively impacted the learning environment without unnecessarily adding stress or pressure to students. As a student, I hated cold calling because of the ways it was often used as a punishment or gotcha by teachers.

My belief then, and now, is that I'm never the only teacher in the room. Sometimes, the most effective teachers for our students are the people in the seats right next to them. As I communicated that trust in their ability to drive and support each other in their learning, they rose to and surpassed my expectations.

This collaborative and collective approach to teaching and learning continues to drive my practice today, and although I'm not using connecting cubes and spinners, I still provide my students (both undergraduate and graduate) an opportunity to learn with and from each other as often as possible.

Student Identities

As a teacher, professor, consultant, and member of senior leadership teams, Kristopher J. Childs, Ph.D., focuses on excellence in teacher content and pedagogical knowledge, equity, leadership development, and organizational change. His book Teaching Mathematics for Social Justice, Grades K-12 *was published in June 2024 (Corwin):*

A small teaching move that every teacher should incorporate into their routine is the inclusion of children's identities into core curriculum experiences. Each child brings into the classroom their unique identity, which is often not centered in an educational experience if their identity is not in alignment with the "dominant" societal identities.

However, this is problematic as it requires some children to assimilate into an environment to hope to achieve an impactful educational experience. In contrast, other children naturally fit into the environment as it was designed with them in mind.

However, we educators can take steps to decenter identities in the classroom. Picture a circle where no single identity holds the center; instead, each one is placed along the edge, with equal reach toward the middle.

In practice, this means designing lessons so that no cultural reference or family background is treated as the "default." A mathematics teacher, for example, might rotate the contexts used in word problems—one day drawing from a child's favorite sport, another day from a family tradition, and another from a cultural food. In classroom discussions, teachers can set expectations that every child's perspective is welcomed and seen as a meaningful contribution. Over time, these small but intentional choices make the center of learning a shared space rather than a fixed point.

Consider a 3rd grade lesson on measurement. Instead of asking students only to measure desks or textbooks, the teacher invited them to bring in objects from home. One child measured their grandmother's prayer rug, another measured a baseball glove, and another measured the pan used for Sunday dinner. In that moment, each child's identity was not only acknowledged but became part of the mathematics lesson itself. This is what

it means to place identities on the edge of the circle—every child has equal access to the center of learning.

This small teaching move allows all children not only opportunities to see their identities intertwined within the educational experience, but also other children can learn about others' identities in the process. Using this small teaching move creates an inclusive educational experience where every child and their identity is valued, accepted, and, most importantly, intertwined in their educational experience. To accomplish this, a teacher must embrace the following five practices:

1. Reflect upon who you are.
2. Embody classroom equity in your environment.
3. Authentically get to know the children under their purview.
4. Incorporate children's lived experiences in the educational experience.
5. Be unapologetic in creating a diverse, equitable, and inclusive environment. despite "political pressures"?

By reflecting upon who you are, you can learn more about yourself and how your identity and lived experiences impact your instructional practices and the development of your educational environment.

Embodying classroom equity in your environment showcases your commitment to ensuring every child receives a high-quality educational experience that maintains high standards but is also differentiated to ensure each child receives what they need to be successful. Authentically getting to know the children under your purview involves taking time to find out who they are, their likes and dislikes, getting to know their families, and showing them through your actions that they are valued in your environment and their contributions matter.

Incorporating their lived experiences into the educational experiences showcases to the child that their life matters, and it provides them an opportunity when engaging in their educational experience to see themselves as naturally a part of the environment.

Being unapologetic in creating a diverse, equitable, and inclusive environment is imperative in this small teaching move as schools are becoming more racially/ethnically diverse, and we need to ensure the environments reflect an understanding of the demographic shift through an all-encompassing experience that shows a child and their families that inclusivity is valued. Incorporating this small teaching move of including a child's identity in the educational experience will transform your environment and create an improved educational experience for all.

Thanks to Melanie, Isabel, and Courtney, for contributing their thoughts! ■

Larry Ferlazzo is a former award-winning high school English and social studies teacher of more than two decades. He is currently a volunteer tutor to English-learner newcomers at a local school and to youth in juvenile hall.

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