



## Key Takeaways: Getting Reading Right Online Summit 2019

*Thank you to those who joined us for this event, which took place on Tuesday, Jan. 28, 2020.*

*Below, you can read the reporter wrap-up our journalists wrote for you.*

Learning to read is arguably the most important academic experience students will have during their school years. But it's not a given.

The “nation’s report card” shows that just over a third of 4th graders are proficient readers. That’s despite decades of cognitive research specifying the skills students need to be taught to read fluently. So what’s happening in schools—and in teacher preparation—that’s making it so hard for some students to gain these foundational skills?

In this online summit, Education Week reporters and their expert guests discussed the science behind how kids learn to read and original survey data on what elementary teachers and education professors know and believe about early reading.



### ***Improving Comprehension With Emerging Readers***

Learning how to decode words is an essential step in learning how to read, but it’s only half of the equation. Children also need a strong vocabulary and a wealth of background knowledge to comprehend text. This discussion will explore how teachers can develop these building blocks of reading comprehension with the earliest readers.

**Guests:**

- **Jackie Gross**, 1st Grade Teacher, Detroit Prep
- **Margaret McKeown**, Clinical Professor Emerita, School of Education; and Senior Scientist, Learning Research and Development Center, University of Pittsburgh
- **Jen McMillan**, Co-Founder and Head of School, Detroit Prep

**Moderator:** Sarah Schwartz, Staff Writer, Education Week

Here are a few takeaways from our discussion:

- **Knowledge matters for reading comprehension.** A student who lives in Minnesota will likely have a lot more success reading a text about ice fishing than a student who lives in Florida. That’s because the Minnesota student has more relevant background knowledge. Teachers said that not having this knowledge affected their students’ comprehension, but also their motivation.
- **Building vocabulary and background knowledge takes time.** Just like in phonics instruction, students need lots of practice with concepts to make them automatic. Teachers should present multiple opportunities for students to use words in context and discuss topics in interactive conversations. Research has shown that students typically need to encounter a word in meaningful context 12 times before they really learn it, said Margaret McKeown, a vocabulary researcher at the University of Pittsburgh.
- **Experts tout the benefits of a knowledge-building curriculum, but some teachers find it challenging to align with assessment priorities.** Knowledge-building curricula ask students to become experts in certain subjects, rather than explicitly practicing skills like finding the main idea. But standardized tests are mostly skill-based. Still, teachers and researchers in the conversation said that it doesn’t have to be an either-or scenario. Teachers can have authentic conversations about books that the class is reading, introducing the concept of main idea as part of that discussion, without making the skill the focus of the lesson.



### ***What Teachers and Professors Say About Early Reading***

An Education Week Research Center survey, released just days prior to the Summit, provides one of the first national gauges of K-2 general and special education reading teachers’ attitudes

and practices on early reading, as well as those of education professors. Associate Editor Stephen Sawchuk led attendees through some of the marquee findings in the survey and fielded questions and comments.

**Moderator: Stephen Sawchuk**, Associate Editor, Education Week

**Here are a few takeaways from our discussion:**

- Two-thirds of teachers and 52 percent of teacher educators in the survey said they teach “balanced literacy,” but as commentators point out, there is no agreed-upon definition for this term. Some said that it refers to teaching in line with the 2000 National Reading Panel report findings; others cited specific reading programs. Most commenters agreed that the lack of agreement meant that K-2 teachers use a wide range and blend of practices, some more effective than others.
- The survey found that using the “three-cueing system” to teach word identification, though not based on research, is widely taught in classrooms. Commenters suggested that many teachers probably believe they are teaching phonics systematically, but are actually teaching it alongside the other cues. As one put it: “Perhaps it's easier for teachers to ‘overlay’ intentional phonics instruction into their existing approach to teaching reading. Recognizing this need is a first step, but as you point out, there is a mismatch between using a 3-cueing system approach and simply adding more robust phonics components.”
- Commenters were struck by the survey finding that very low percentages of both teachers and professors said they learned what they know about reading from an undergraduate program. (Many more of them said they learned it through in-service professional development, or in graduate school.) To quote one commenter: “As an Elementary Principal for 3 years, I found it alarming how little the teachers were trained in actual reading instruction or the BIG 5 [components of reading, i.e., phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension]. How can we expect them to teach these concepts with confidence and fidelity if they are not properly trained?”
- Commenters said they wrestled with the sociological implications of making change to their literacy programs. It’s one thing to KNOW the research, they pointed out, and another to embed it in a system that helps teachers grab onto it. As one put it: “When we think about making real change to reading instruction, we have to look at teacher experiences, human motivation. There is a natural feedback loop in the classroom, in real time, that is powerfully motivating. Education professors are biased by this, too, by their early educator experiences. We can't ignore that and just continually point to the science, and wonder why no one is changing their approaches.”



## ***How Do Kids Learn to Read? What the Research Says***

How does a young child's brain respond to an unfamiliar word? How does learning to read differ from learning to speak? This discussion explored the decades of research on the sounds and sights, synapses and stories that coalesce in early reading experiences.

**Moderator:** Sarah D. Sparks, Assistant Editor, Education Week

**Here are a few takeaways from our discussion:**

- “Science of reading” sometimes gets referred to as though it is a particular brand or program of instruction, but it is not. It simply means our evolving understanding of how children learn to read, based on the collected evidence of psychology, neuroscience, education, and other fields. For an explainer of the most common questions, see <https://www.edweek.org/ew/issues/how-do-kids-learn-to-read.html#annotations:18158686>.
- Commenters voiced frustration with the difficulty of convincing their colleagues to consider changing their practice based on research. “I think the resistance comes from the not knowing,” said participant Kim D. “If teachers haven't been instructed in specific evidence-based reading instruction, they will tend to shy away or implement [it] partially. What comes across as resistance is more likely a knowledge and practice gap.” For one classroom's change, see: <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2019/12/04/a-look-inside-one-classrooms-reading-overhaul.html>.
- Educators are uncertain about how the use of digital tools for instruction will affect their children learning to read. There is little long-term research on this. Some of what has been done has found digital applications may give students access to more books and other materials, but other studies have found reading in digital formats may hinder comprehension and attention. <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2019/11/08/screen-time-up-as-reading-scores-drop.html>
- Several educators and leaders discussed how to find scientifically backed reading programs, or to identify whether the ones their district used had a strong foundation of

evidence. That's an issue many districts are grappling with nationwide:

<https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2019/12/04/the-most-popular-reading-programs-arent-backed.html>



### ***How Colleges of Education Are Approaching Early Reading***

According to an Education Week Research Center survey, just 22 percent of professors of early reading instruction said their philosophy of reading is based on systematic, explicit phonics, with comprehension as a separate focus. In a conversation led by Education Week reporter Madeline Will, professors and other experts discussed how teacher-preparation programs are working to introduce the cognitive science of reading.

#### **Guests:**

- **Kelly Butler**, Chief Executive Officer, Barksdale Reading Institute
- **Billie Tingle**, Assistant Teaching Professor, University of Southern Mississippi
- **Amy Murdoch**, Reading Science Program Director, Mount St. Joseph University

**Moderator:** Madeline Will, Staff Writer, Education Week

#### **Here are a few takeaways from our discussion:**

Balanced literacy, an approach that often does not include systematic phonics instruction, dominates colleges of education, according to Education Week's survey. During this conversation, experts discussed why many teacher-educators have been slow to embrace what has become known as the science of reading. Here are some of the highlights of the conversation:

- The cognitive research on reading instruction often wasn't part of teacher-educators' own training, even in their doctorate programs, Butler said. The first step is to create a safe space for faculty to recognize that they don't know the science of reading, she said, and give them access to coaches and professional development.
- Preservice teachers might be getting mixed messages in their training. Tingle said many textbooks commonly used in early reading courses include very little about the science

of reading, and instead focus on strategies not supported by research, such as three-cueing.

- Also, Murdoch said that different professors could be telling candidates very different things. One year, she taught her students about the benefits of a direct assessment that local schools were using—only to find out that a professor down the hall was describing that same assessment as damaging. Murdoch said her university has been working to get the faculty on the same page, through common training, collaborative work on syllabi, book discussions, and an agreement to share all syllabi and course materials with one another.
- Teacher-preparation is only one piece of the puzzle. Butler pointed to commonly used curricula that are not supported by the science as another factor. When new teachers are required to use those curricula, they might not apply what they were taught in their preservice training. Tingle said she tries to stress to students that they must be conscious consumers of curricula and consider both the advantages and deficiencies.

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For more information about the “Getting Reading Right” special report, read the entire report here: [www.edweek.org/go/reading-series](http://www.edweek.org/go/reading-series).

[Find out](#) if your state or district requirements enable you to use our [Certificates of Completion](#) for CEUs and professional development or "[clock hours](#)" for attending this year’s event.