

First grader Geniss Gibbs practices reading skills at Eastern Elementary School in Washington, N.C., in May.

— Kate Medley for Education Week

K-8 Reading

EDITOR'S NOTE

Supporting K-8 reading is essential to student achievement. This Spotlight will help you analyze reading gaps; discover how educational television shows can help build students' reading abilities; gain practical insights into implementing the science of reading; examine efforts to improve reading instruction; explore data on the impact of book bans; investigate strategies for improving literacy skills; and more.

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Students' Math and Reading Plummet, Erasing Years Of Gains, National Assessment Finds

By Sarah Schwartz

The pandemic brought historic declines in students' math and reading abilities, with students who were already the furthest behind before COVID losing the most ground, according to new data from the nation's only long-term measure of student progress.

The results, released today from the National Assessment of Educational Progress' Long-Term Trend test, paint a stark picture of 9-year-olds' achievement in 2022. Over the past two years, math scores dropped by seven points—the first ever decline in the long-term trend assessment's 50-year history. Reading scores also fell by five points, the biggest drop since 1990.

"These results are sobering," Peggy G. Carr, commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics, which administers the NAEP, said in a call with reporters. "It's clear that COVID-19 shocked American education and stunted the academic growth of this age group of children."

These data confirm a chorus of other reports showing the academic impact of the pandemic. Interim test data from assessment providers and state test results have also revealed slackening or backtracking in student progress. But the NAEP long-term trend results are unique in that they provide a national snapshot that can be reliably compared to student achievement in years past.

NAEP's long-term trend study is a separate test from the other subject-area assessments that students take. While NAEP's main tests are updated regularly to reflect changes in standards and curricula, the long-term trend test has been relatively unchanged since it was first administered in the 1970s. That means it permits comparisons in students' abilities across decades.

The last scheduled long-term trend test occurred right before the pandemic hit, in 2020. This administration was added for January through March 2022, in order to measure the effect that the COVID had on student scores.

However the data is sliced, the effects of the pandemic are clear: Many subgroups show declines in student scores. White, Black, and Hispanic students all saw drops in reading and



—iStock/Getty Images Plus

math scores. Students across all regions of the country fell in math; students in every region except the West fell in reading.

"This report is disappointing, yet the factors contributing to the findings are not surprising given what the education landscape has looked like over the past two-and-a-half years," said Dan Domenech, executive director of AASA, The School Superintendents Association, in a statement on Thursday.

But students who were already struggling before COVID hit saw the greatest drops in scores during the past two years.

This inequality in scores is consistent with trends that predate the pandemic. Long-term trend data from before COVID, released this past October, showed that the lowest-performing students were already losing more ground in reading and math than their higher-performing peers.

Other gaps expanded, too. White students' math scores only fell five points, while Black students' scores fell 13 points, widening the gap between the two from 25 points in 2020 to 33 points in 2022.

Still, some subgroups' scores held steady over the past two years. There were no statistically significant changes in scores in either subject for Asian, Native American, or mul-

tiracial students. And in reading, students in cities maintained their scores while suburban students' scores fell, narrowing the city-suburb gap. Reading scores for English-language learners also remained steady.

"These results are quite notable at this moment in time," Carr said. "The fact that reading achievement among students in the cities held steady, when you consider the extreme crisis cities were dealing with during the pandemic, is especially significant."

Lower-performing students had fewer supports during remote learning

In addition to student performance, the results also provide new insight into the conditions of remote learning during the 2020-21 school year. Students who took the test were asked about the support they had at home—and then researchers were able to show how that support differed for students who performed well on the assessment and students who performed less well.

The results show glaring inequities.

For instance, among students who scored at or above the 75th percentile in reading—the high performers—83 percent said that they had

access to a desktop computer, laptop, or tablet all the time during remote learning. Among lower-performing students, at or below the 25th percentile, only 58 percent said the same.

These discrepancies persist across all of the categories that NAEP reported—from access to high-speed internet to having a quiet place to work to having a teacher available to help with assignments.

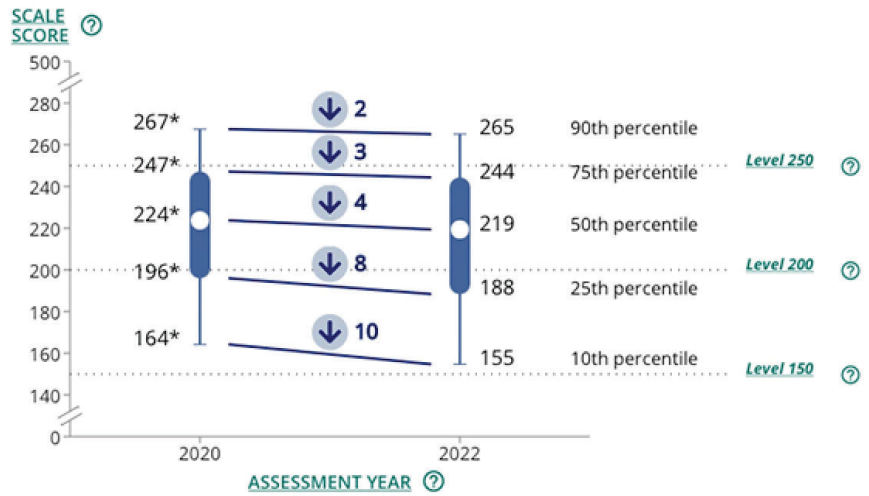
While suggestive, the results don't determine a cause-and-effect relationship—from this data alone, it's not possible to say that less access to support resources is what caused students to score lower on the long-term trend assessment.

But these results are in line with other data throughout the pandemic that has shown that students with the highest need were often the least likely to have access to reliable internet connection and space to work during remote learning.

“Decision-makers at all levels have not done nearly enough to address the long-standing resource inequities that prohibit Black, Latino, and students from low-income backgrounds from reaching their full academic potential,” said Denise Forte, the interim CEO of The Education Trust, in a statement on Thursday.

“And while there are decision-makers that are rightly pushing for equity and justice in schools, they are far too often met with fierce opposition from those who want to maintain the status quo.” ■

READING



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Can a TV Show Really Help Kids Develop Reading Skills? What a New Study Says

By Sarah Schwartz

For decades, television shows have helped young children practice their ABCs and 1-2-3s. From “The Electric Company” to “Sesame Street” to “Between the Lions,” research has shown that educational programs can effectively teach kids the foundations of literacy and numeracy, like recognizing letters and sounds and how numbers represent quantity.

Now, a new study finds that educational television can teach young children more complex reading skills, too—skills that could help set them up for greater success in a school setting.

The paper, from researchers at SRI Education and the Education Development Center, examines one TV program’s effectiveness at teaching children about informational text. The term refers to nonfiction books and articles, but also a host of other sources with distinct purposes and text features—like reference books, recipes, or lectures.

The particular show studied in the paper, a program on PBS called “Molly of Denali,” was designed to teach children how to understand and use these kinds of informational texts.

And the researchers found that it was effective: 1st graders who were assigned

to watch the show and play related digital games were better able to use informational text to answer questions and solve what the researchers call “real-world problems” than students in a control group.

Building information literacy early can help lay the foundation for work that students do in school—but also, for skills they’ll eventually use throughout their life, said Shelley Pasnik, a senior vice president at the Education Development Center, and a co-author on the study.

“When students do not have a good foundation in informational text, they are less likely to succeed academically and also to be able to engage in these very practical ways—to know how a caption conveys information, or map reading,” she said. “Just all the ways that one might navigate in life—that’s missed.”

The study also suggests the potential for educational media to teach beyond foundational skills, as many school systems have turned to shows, games, and apps as lifelines during COVID-related school disruptions.

Why reading informational text requires different skills than fiction

Over the past decade, schools faced pressure to ramp up the amount of informational

text included in the curriculum—a trend that can be traced back to the introduction of the Common Core State Standards in 2010.

The shared standards, at one point adopted by 46 states and the District of Columbia, called for elementary students to read an even mix of fiction and informational texts across subjects, and for high schoolers to read 70 percent nonfiction. As Education Week reported in 2012, the Common Core’s authors shaped this recommendation in response to concerns from employers and universities that students didn’t have the skills or knowledge to analyze arguments or parse complex information.

More recently, informational text has become a key component of what has come to be known as the “science of reading.” In response to research showing that students can understand text better when they have background knowledge about the subject, some advocates have pushed for knowledge-building curricula: English/language arts programs that aim to help students develop a deep understanding of certain topics—like ancient cultures, the systems of the body, or the Civil Rights Movement—while also teaching literacy skills.

But reading a nonfiction book, or looking up information in reference material, is different from reading a narrative story. Informational text has different features, like topic headings, indices, and graphs. The language can also be more technical and subject-specific. Students have to be taught how to navigate these features and how to gain information from them, said Pasnik.

That’s what the TV show in the study, “Molly of Denali,” aims to do. The program is about Molly, a 10-year-old Alaskan Native girl, who goes on adventures and tries to solve problems in her community. Along the way, she uses different kinds of informational text, like field guides, maps, and informational websites.

The show, developed under a federal Ready to Learn grant, is designed to meet learning goals that are aligned to the Common Core State Standards.

In the two studies described in this paper, 263 1st grade children from low-income families were randomly assigned to one of two groups. In the treatment group, parents were given a tablet loaded with “Molly of Denali” episodes and educational games. They were told to have their children use these materials at least one hour per week.

Parents in the control group were also given an internet-enabled tablet, but instead were told to have their children use it for “educational purposes” for at least one hour per

week. (On these tablets, access to “Molly of Denali” was blocked.)

After nine weeks, students were assessed on their ability to use informational text to answer questions or solve problems. Students in the group that watched “Molly of Denali” outperformed students in the control group. The difference was equivalent to the amount of reading skill a typical 1st grade student develops over three months, said Pasnik.

These effects held regardless of students’ gender, parent income, parent education, or ethnicity, though older 1st graders benefitted less from the intervention than younger 1st graders. The second study replicated these same conditions with a broader geographic sample, and saw the same findings.

Children varied in how much they used the tablets at home, and how often they watched the show and played the games. The researchers found a correlation between time spent on the videos, specifically, and achievement scores on the assessment: Students in the treatment group that spent more time watching the show had higher post-test scores.

Districts should develop a ‘curatorial list’ of educational media, expert says

The study doesn’t examine what, exactly, made “Molly of Denali” effective. But there are general best practices for educational media, Pasnik said.

To start with, a show needs to have characters and a plot that are actually engaging for children—a story built on “imagination and authenticity,” Pasnik said. In the case of “Molly of

Denali,” the story is also culturally rich: Molly is Native Alaskan, and her heritage and traditions are woven throughout the show. (More than 60 Alaska Native, First Nations, and Indigenous consultants worked on its production.)

Then, the learning needs to be integrated into that story. It shouldn’t feel like the action stops for a lesson. Educational media producers call this “learning on the plot line,” said Pasnik.

Schools and districts can use this kind of high-quality educational media to support classwork, Pasnik said—something that many school systems attempted as they searched for solutions during remote learning.

In spring 2020 and into the 2020-21 school year, many states and some school districts partnered with local public media stations to expand children’s programming time slots throughout the day. A few created their own shows: New York City schools developed Let’s Learn NYC!—supplemental lessons in math, literacy, science, and social studies for kids in grades pre-K-2 that air on public television. The state of Tennessee did something similar with Teaching Tennessee, its video series for students in grades pre-K-3.

Going forward, districts that want to encourage teachers or parents to continue using public television or other educational media would benefit from providing a “curatorial list” or investing in curators, Pasnik said.

“There are highly regarded programs, many with research backing,” she said. “Who has the time to review them, vet them, figure out what’s possible?”

“It’s not unlike what media specialists and librarians have done,” she added. “But it could happen on a bigger scale.” ■

“

When students do not have a good foundation in informational text, they are less likely to succeed academically and also to be able to engage in these very practical ways—to know how a caption conveys information, or map reading.”

SHELLEY PASNIK

Senior vice president, Education Development Center

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EdW

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5 Insights on Getting the ‘Science of Reading’ Into Classrooms

By Sarah Schwartz

More than half of the states are mandating changes to how early reading is taught. The process of phasing in new methods, materials, and philosophies will be challenging. And as one researcher said, “the dirt is in the details.”

The legislative movement aims to bring teaching in line with what advocates are calling the “science of reading”—the body of research on how children learn to read text. Many of the practices that schools currently use, and that are promoted by popular reading programs, do not align with this evidence base.

Education Week’s new series of stories looks deeply at how the attempt to change teaching practice at scale is unfolding on the ground. The collection examines the national landscape and dives deep into the experience of one state—North Carolina—as it implemented a new reading law this past school year.

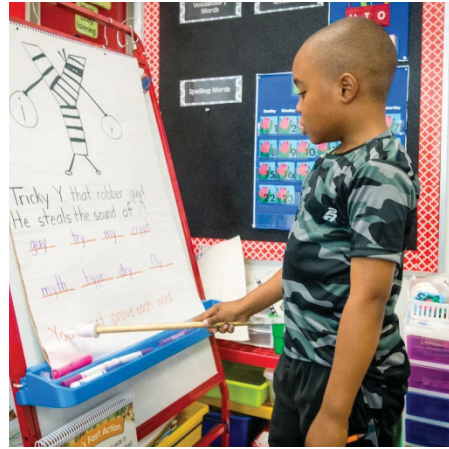
1. States’ number one priority? Professional development

Most states that have passed legislation or implemented other policies related to evidence-based reading instruction are focused on training current teachers in new practices. Of the at least 29 states that have issued a mandate, 23 include some form of professional development or coaching.

This trend has grown out of the idea that the most important factor for strong instruction is teacher knowledge. “When you know better, you do better,” goes a popular saying among science of reading proponents.

States vary in how they’re rolling out this training. Some are creating their own programs; some are bringing in outside vendors; others are letting districts choose from a few options.

One course stands out as more popular than the rest: Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling, more commonly known as LETRS. While its content is aligned to a science of reading framework, studies have shown that LETRS doesn’t necessarily improve the achievement of students whose teachers take the course.



—Kate Medley for Education Week

2. Teachers can’t do it alone. Systems matter

Overhauling a school or district’s approach to reading instruction requires a lot more than just teacher training—and the burden can’t rest on teachers alone.

In Mississippi, a state that many others have regarded as a model for reading overhaul, the state created systems for assigning and training coaches, for maintaining professional learning quality, for identifying schools that needed extra support, and for providing principals with updates on school progress.

In Tennessee, another state that has worked over the past few years to revamp reading instruction, the department of education designed its own teacher training and foundational skills curriculum with input from educators. Doing so allowed the department to respond directly to districts’ needs, and to align the training to a common set of materials, said Lisa Coons, the chief of standards and materials at the Tennessee Department of Education.

Creating a thoughtful, detailed plan for implementation takes time and effort, Coons said. “It’s not something I can put on a one pager and go shop to different states and say, ‘Do this, it’s magic.’”

3. The ‘science of reading’ isn’t just about phonics. (Really)

The “science of reading” is often described as an emphasis on foundational skills instruction—teaching students how to recognize the different sounds in words, how to

link those sounds to letters, and how to blend those letters together to read words.

While systematic, explicit instruction in these foundational word-reading skills is a key component of an evidence-based approach to reading instruction, the “science of reading” involves more than just phonics.

Experts say that students also need to have rich conversations to develop oral language, vocabulary, and critical thinking—even before they can read text. They need opportunities to build knowledge about different subjects and learn how to use comprehension strategies. They need to write about what they’re reading.

Once students have some decoding ability, all of these parts of reading instruction are integrated, said Gina Cervetti, an associate professor of education at the University of Michigan who studies the intersection of literacy and content-area learning. Students are practicing their decoding skills in text, talking about that text, learning vocabulary from that text, and writing about that text.

If states don’t put as much effort into getting all of these aspects of reading right as they do with foundational skills, they’re not going to get the results they want, Cervetti said.

4. Educators must fundamentally reimagine their practice. And old habits can be hard to shake

Researchers say that many techniques that are commonly taught in teacher preparation and promoted in popular reading programs can undermine evidence-based practices. Take, for example, a technique known as three-cueing.

A teacher will observe a child reading a book, coaching them when they come to a word that stumps them. The teacher might suggest that the student look at the letters to try to sound the word out, but she could also tell the child to look at the picture for clues, or think about what word would make sense.

But studies have shown that encouraging students to rely on other “cues” can take students’ focus away from the words and lower the chances that they’ll apply their phonics skills in context. And if teachers are teaching students a systematic, explicit phonics sequence in the morning but then using cueing in the afternoon, experts say, it could undermine the effectiveness of their instruction.

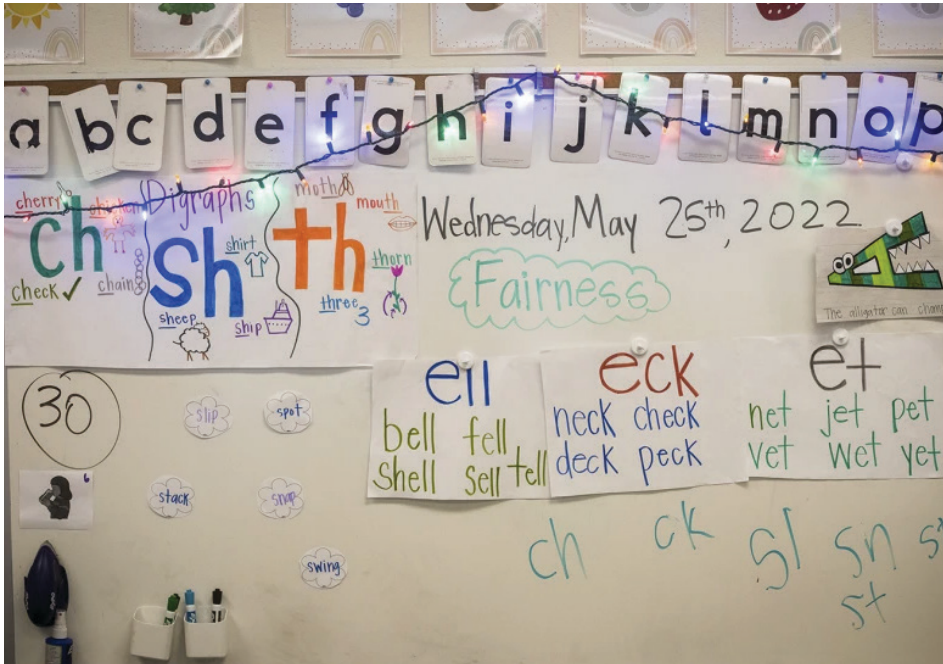
There's some evidence that this mismatch of practices is occurring now. Despite the many states that have passed "science of reading" legislation, 61 percent of teachers say that they still use cueing.

5. Follow-up support and coaching could make a big difference

In interviews with Education Week, teachers said that they wanted more support in putting all of the new learning they're doing into practice.

"I felt like a lot of it was giving me background knowledge, background knowledge. But I wasn't getting—how do you apply it?" said Raul Olivares Jr., a kindergarten teacher at Eastern Elementary in Washington, N.C., who is currently taking LETRS as part of the state's reading initiative.

Research on providing coaching in addition to LETRS has shown that it raises the chances that teachers will make changes to their practice. And the evidence base on coaching as a lever to change practice in general is strong. Good coaching systems, in which coaches are trained themselves and are strategically placed in schools, can improve teacher practice and student achievement. ■



The state of North Carolina is taking measures to improve reading rates in elementary schools, including this classroom at Lacy Elementary in Raleigh, N.C.

Published July 20, 2022

States Are Pushing Changes To Reading Instruction. But Old Practices Prove Hard To Shake

By Sarah Schwartz

More than half the states—29 of them—have passed laws or implemented policies over the past decade to bring teacher training, materials, interventions, or teacher preparation in line with evidence-based approaches to reading instruction. New data helps to illuminate where progress has been made—and how far states have to go.

Exclusive survey findings from the EdWeek Research Center show that old practices—like asking students to use multiple “cues” or sources of information to learn new words—persist. And educators also said that the past few years have been upended by the pandemic, making new initiatives more difficult to implement and maintain.

This patchwork worries some reading experts, who fear that these reading initiatives

will fail without clear, consistent plans for implementation.

“Getting the law to pass is actually the easy part. ... Just because you pass a law doesn’t mean anything changes for kids,” said Emily Solari, a professor of reading education at the University of Virginia. She worked with Virginia legislators to provide feedback on their reading law plan.

Many states have attempted to copy Mississippi’s 2013 approach and its subsequent academic gains. But officials in the Magnolia State say that simply passing the same legislative requirements won’t lead to the same outcomes.

“You’ll hear about some states that will say, ‘We’re doing all of these things.’ If you had a checklist, they could check everything off. But implementation truly matters,” said Kymyona Burk, a senior policy fellow at ExcellinEd, who led the implementation of Mississippi’s law as the state’s literacy director.

The shifts in reading teaching that many

states are asking schools to make go beyond simply adding a few new practices to teachers’ toolboxes. Instead, the “science of reading” asks teachers and leaders to adopt a new framework of how skilled reading develops—and what educators need to do to support that process.

State legislation is ‘a mixed bag,’ researchers say

States have legislated dozens of different fixes designed to bring schools in line with the “science of reading,” which refers to approaches based on the decades of evidence on how students learn to read: mandating teacher training, putting out new lists of approved materials, and changing how schools support struggling readers.

The ambitious plans are costing millions of dollars and thousands of teacher and student hours.

Some states have made gains, like Mississippi, which made headlines in 2019 for its much-improved reading scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Key components of its legislation have since been copied by others seeking to replicate the “Mississippi model.”

Since the state passed its law in 2013, 29 other states have passed legislation or implemented policies that mandate changes to bring teacher training, materials, interventions, or teacher preparation in line with evidence-based approaches to reading instruction. Many have been completed just in the past few years. (See Education Week’s reading legislation tracker for more information about which steps different states are taking.)

In brief, the science of reading embraces the systematic, explicit teaching of sounds and letters. While they learn how to crack the code, students are also introduced to rich stories and texts that build their background knowledge. Eventually, teachers help students weave these skills together like strands in a rope, allowing them to read more complex texts.

The most commonly cited requirement in legislation is for professional development—meant to increase teacher knowledge related to the science of reading, or to help them apply new learning to practice.

The policies proposed in these laws are “a real mixed bag” in how effective they might be in changing student outcomes, said Nell Duke, a professor of early literacy development at the University of Michigan.

Some are promising, like coaching. Re-

search shows that good coaching systems, in which coaches are trained themselves and are strategically placed in schools, can improve teacher practice and student achievement. “We have a lot of reason to believe that that is going to move the needle” if it’s implemented carefully, Duke said.

Others don’t have the same evidence base. Policies to retain 3rd graders who aren’t yet reading at grade level—which are part of some of these laws—show some short-term gains for students, but show no effects, or sometimes negative effects, in the longer term.

And still other potential solutions will depend largely on how they’re implemented, Duke said. Take curriculum.

“We do know that curriculum makes a difference,” she said. But what curriculum schools end up with depends on how a state defines alignment to the research, and who determines whether certain materials fulfill that definition, Duke said.

Training is occurring, but old practices persist, new survey data show

In 2022, to gain a sense of how the instructional landscape has changed since Education Week last surveyed educators about reading in 2019, the media organization’s research center administered a new survey of teachers, principals, and district administrators who conduct or oversee early reading instruction.

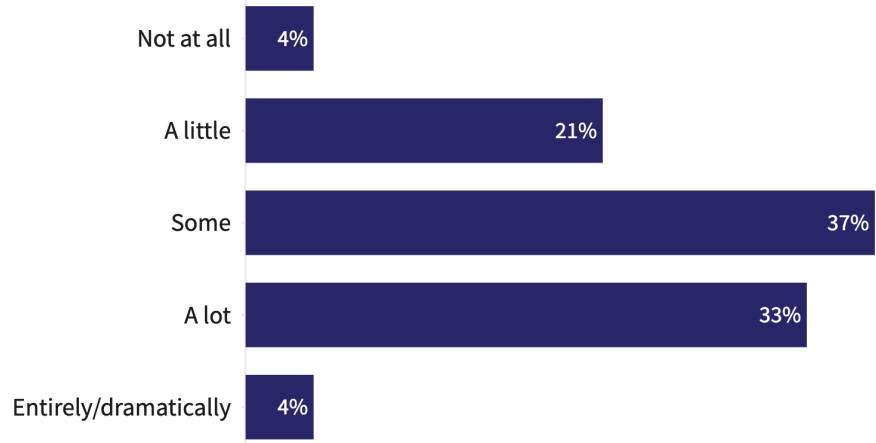
Results suggest that, so far, any changes to reading teaching are happening slowly and unevenly across the country.

Almost all respondents—93 percent—said that they or the teachers they supervised had participated in some reading professional learning over the past five years. But this training didn’t always lead to changes in teaching.

Of all respondents who said they or the teachers they work with had taken reading training over the past five years, half said they had taken one of two programs: Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling, also known as LETRS, or training in the Orton-Gillingham approach. Both are designed to help students support students with reading difficulties.

Education systems are also turning to COVID relief funding to support changes to reading instruction. Twenty-six states have used some federal COVID money to train teachers, run summer reading programs, purchase new curricula and assessments, or hire new staff such as reading coaches. Of the 22 states that planned to put these dollars

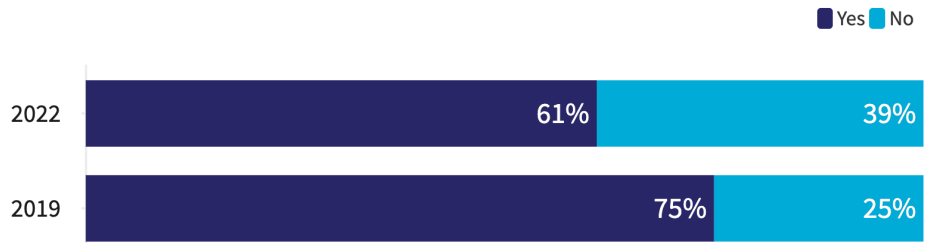
As the result of professional learning on early reading instruction since 2017-18, I/the teachers I supervise have changed my/their practice:



*Results show responses from preK-2 teachers and principals/district leaders whose job responsibilities include supervising early reading instruction. SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center survey, May 2022



When you are teaching students to read, do you teach the three-cueing system (i.e., meaning/structure/visual or semantic/syntactic/graphophonic)?



*Results show responses from surveys of K-2 and special education teachers in 2019 and preK-2 and special education teachers in 2022. SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center survey, May 2022



toward training, at least 12 are using some funds for LETRS training.

Despite all this training, respondents felt that they or the teachers they worked with still needed more support across a range of areas involved in early reading instruction.

As demonstrated above, educators say

they want more training on how to teach kids phonemic awareness and phonics—skills that help students understand the foundations of written language and decode words.

At the same time, though, teachers have continued to use some practices that can discourage students from attending to letters

while they read. Sixty-one percent of teachers said that they use three-cueing to teach beginning readers. In that method, teachers tell students to use multiple sources of information—such as pictures and context, as well as letters—to predict what words say.

Schools have made some changes.

The survey asked what materials teachers used for instruction and intervention. This list of top 10 responses differs from the results of a 2019 EdWeek Research Center survey that asked the same question.

These results don't offer insight into why teachers and administrators switched what they were using. The changes could be a result of state legislation around reading, but they could also be related to the changing needs of schools during the pandemic, said P. David Pearson, a professor emeritus of reading at the University of California, Berkeley.

Some of the programs most popular in 2022 are research-tested—such as some Orton-Gillingham-based programs, said Duke. But others don't have the same research base to support their effectiveness in practice.

The top five programs listed are also all supplements or interventions. That speaks to the fact that many schools have to mix and match to cover all the bases—using one set of materials for foundational skills, for example, and another for reading comprehension, said Kelly Butler, the CEO of Mississippi's Barksdale Reading Institute.

Some of the programs that made the top of the list in 2019, such as Lucy Calkins' Units of Study for Teaching Reading and Fountas and Pinnell's Leveled Literacy Intervention, have declined in popularity. These data come after sharp criticism of these materials from reading researchers and literacy experts who say that they don't follow evidence-based best practices.

Lessons learned from 'Reading First'

Pearson sees the latest state action as “another substantiation of a movement that, as far as I can tell, has been going on since the 1960s.” For decades, he said, those who support a more skills-based approach to teaching beginning reading have battled it out with those who champion a more constructivist approach.

Gina Cervetti, an associate professor of literacy education at the University of Michigan, sees more nuance.

Most of these laws mandate that schools address multiple components of reading instruction, not just phonics, she said. But if “more phonics” is school districts' only

takeaway, they'll be ignoring the need for research-based approaches to building students' knowledge, comprehension skills, and language abilities. And they'll miss opportunities to integrate all of these components of reading instruction into a cohesive whole.

“The dirt is in the details,” Cervetti said.

This lack of a cohesive whole plagued the last big effort to get U.S. schools aligned to reading science, said Susan Neuman, a professor of childhood and literacy education at New York University.

She knows firsthand: She implemented that federal program, Reading First, as U.S. Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education under George W. Bush. National evaluations of Reading First found that it had positive effects on students' phonics skills, but not on comprehension.

The program identified the reading skills that students needed to learn, but it didn't provide schools with a roadmap for the “implementation science of teaching,” Neuman said. And so schools didn't get enough guidance on how to appropriately layer and integrate those skills—what that looks like in the classroom, and what leadership supports need to be in place to make it happen.

Neuman sees a similar trend in the new laws and the current science of reading movement.

“It's missing an infrastructure piece,” she said. “What are the conditions in a school that have to come about in order for the science of reading to be actualized? What do we need from our principals, our leadership, districts, parents?”

Some states have found the implementation sweet spot. Others are 'tinkering'

A few states have focused heavily on what Neuman calls the “infrastructure piece.”

“One thing that I really urged was to create a model,” said Burk, of ExcelinEd. The group has worked with states implementing reading overhauls. “There has to be some guidance for this in how this needs to be done for consistency across our state.”

In Mississippi, Burk said, they created lots of systems: for assigning and training coaches, for maintaining professional learning quality, for identifying schools that needed extra support, for providing principals with updates on school progress. And, the literacy work had centralized leadership at the state department of education. (North Carolina has recently adopted a similar coaching program—to read more, see this story.)

“

Getting the law to pass is actually the easy part. ... Just because you pass a law doesn't mean anything changes for kids.”

EMILY SOLARI

Professor of reading education,
University of Virginia

Tennessee designed its own teacher training and foundational skills curriculum with input from educators. Doing so allowed the department of education to respond directly to districts' needs, and to align the training to a common set of materials, said Lisa Coons, the chief of standards and materials at the Tennessee Department of Education.

Still, this approach took a lot of time and work to customize, Coons said. “It's not something I can put on a one pager and go shop to different states and say, ‘Do this, it's magic.’”

Butler, with the Barksdale Reading Institute, has a similar perspective. She's encouraged by states' ambitions, even if these measures only affect one part of the system—like putting in place a screener to identify kids who need more support.

But to enact systemwide change, states need to pull on lots of levers at once, she said.

“As I talk to states and listen to what they're doing, I do still think that they're tinkering at the edges.” ■

Additional Resource

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



— VTT Studio/Stock/Getty

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How Prevalent Are Book Bans This Year? New Data Show Impact

By Eesha Pendharkar

Two million students in 86 school districts across the country have had their access to books restricted because of book bans this school year, according to a new report by PEN America, a free speech advocacy organization.

While book bans—specifically books with LGBTQ characters and people of color, or about race and racism—have been reported by media outlets across the country this year, the report sheds light on how widespread the book bans actually are through anecdotal accounts and by tracking what kinds of books are being targeted.

There are 13,452 public school districts and more than 50 million students in America.

Parents and community members have complained that many books provided by schools contain explicit or inappropriate content. Administrators have also preemptively pulled books from libraries or classrooms to avoid controversy and publicity, according to the report.

Between July 2021 and March 2022, PEN America analyzed news stories on challenges, restrictions, and bans on books, to find that books had been banned in 2,899 schools across the country over the nine-month period. PEN

“We are witnessing the erasure of topics that only recently represented progress toward inclusion.”

JONATHAN FRIEDMAN

Director of PEN America’s Free Expression and Education program and lead author of the report

America also found 1,586 decisions to ban a book from a library, classroom or curriculum. The banning of a single book title can mean anywhere from a single copy to hundreds of copies being pulled from libraries or classrooms in a school district, according to researchers.

“Because of the tactics of censors and the politicization of books, we are seeing the same books removed across state lines: books about race, gender, LGBTQ+ identities and sex most often,” said Jonathan Friedman, Director of

PEN America’s Free Expression and Education program and lead author of the report. “We are witnessing the erasure of topics that only recently represented progress toward inclusion.”

Here are five numbers describing the quantitative scope of book bans:

More than 1,100 unique books have been banned.

In the nine-month period of PEN America’s study, 1,145 unique book titles were banned across the country.

Of those, 21 have been banned in five districts or more.

The work of 874 different authors, 198 illustrators, and nine translators has been impacted by the book bans, PEN America found.

Most of the books being banned are fiction—a total of 819 titles—although some of the most commonly banned ones, such as *Gender Queer*, are graphic novels.

Districts in 26 states have banned books

Texas has the largest number of districts enacting bans, with 713 titles being banned in 16 districts across the state. Pennsylvania and Florida also have seen 456 and 204 book bans respectively.

Five states have at least five different districts that have banned books: Texas, Pennsylvania, Florida, Virginia, and Missouri.

The district with the most books banned is The Central York School District in Pennsylvania, where 441 books were banned. But after students protested and the bans got national attention, the school board reversed its decision.

The top five most commonly banned books account for 106 book bans

The most commonly banned book is Maia Kobabe’s *Gender Queer: A Memoir*, which has been removed from school libraries or classrooms at least 30 times, PEN America found. It’s a graphic novel about the author’s own struggle with, and explanation of gender identity.

All Boys aren’t Blue, a young-adult memoir by George M. Johnson of growing up in New Jersey as a young Black queer boy, is the second most-commonly banned book, removed from libraries and classrooms 21 times over the past nine months.

The other most-commonly banned titles include *Lawn Boy*, by Jonathan Evison and *Out of Darkness*, by Ashley Hope Pérez, which have both been banned 16 times; *The Bluest Eye* by

Toni Morrison, which has been banned 12 times; and *Beyond Magenta: Transgender Teens Speak Out*, by Susan Kuklin, banned 11 times.

A third of books deal with LGBTQ issues

Books with protagonists of color made up a significant part of banned books nationwide, including 467 titles, or almost 41 percent of all book bans.

Books that are explicitly about LGBTQ topics, or have LGBTQ protagonists or prominent characters have been disproportionately targeted during the last nine months of bans, PEN America found. Thirty three percent of all banned books—or 379 books—contained LGBTQ themes, including a subset of 84 titles that deal with transgender characters and topics.

Books about race and racism were also commonly banned, accounting for more than a fifth of all bans. About 22 percent—or 247 books—about race and racism primarily in the United States, including fiction and nonfiction titles, have been banned.

This includes frequently banned books such as Perez’s *Out of Darkness*, a book about a relationship between a teenage Mexican-American girl and a teenage African-American boy in 1930s New London, Texas, *How to Be an Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi, within which the author proposes ways to fight systemic racism, and *Dear Martin* by Nic Stone, a novel about a Black teenager writing letters to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to make sense of the racial injustice he experienced.

Almost all of the bans were initiated by administrators

Of the 1,586 book bans, just 4 percent have been the result of parents or community members filing formal challenges to library or classroom materials. A vast majority have instead been decisions by school administrators or board members, often following comments from the community in public meetings, PEN America found.

In Wicomico County, Md., the superintendent pulled *All Boys Aren’t Blue* after a board meeting during which public comment was dominated by complaints about the book, the report said.

Sometimes, books were removed from reading lists based on a single parent’s complaint. According to the report, in Pitt County, N.C., an English/language arts teachers at one middle school allegedly changed plans to read five books after a single parent objected. ■



How You Can Integrate Academic Development and Social Emotional Learning

Social emotional learning (SEL) in education is a phrase that has been known to elicit eye rolls. One reason for those exasperated responses is that it feels like yet another concept and practice for which schools are responsible when there isn't extra time for planning or implementation.

This article will debunk the notion that SEL cannot be measured and that critical thinking and SEL are mutually exclusive. It will also provide activities and materials from Junior Great Books® (JGB) programs that allow teachers and students alike to practice their own social emotional growth in the classroom.

TRUE OR FALSE?

It's Impossible to Measure a Student's SEL Skills

False. Social emotional learning is about feelings, expression, and listening. That description feels nebulous, and measurement therefore becomes subjective. But SEL can also refer to a set of skills that can be actively practiced, measured, and reflected on. While still qualitative in nature, these measurements can be used to set individual and group speaking and listening goals.

Junior Great Books employs a learning method called Shared Inquiry™, which is rooted in the Socratic method. JGB activities expand on the practice of civil discourse and provide authentic learning opportunities through dialogue and active listening. Students discuss a rich text, connect their ideas about the text with evidence, and respond to each other's thoughts. SEL skills are embedded in the process and encourage a strong inquiry-based environment.

To help students measure their skills development, JGB uses the standards set out by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), a nationally recognized organization that emphasizes that SEL is foremost a practice taken on by whole school communities. With this approach, Shared Inquiry facilitates opportunities for teachers and students to strengthen the following SEL competencies:

- Self-awareness and self-management
- Social awareness and relationship skills
- Responsible decision-making

This chart lays out how the Shared Inquiry method provides students with the opportunity to reflect and build their SEL skills as outlined by CASEL's framework:

Shared Inquiry Sequence of Activities	Primary Social and Emotional Learning Competencies Addressed
Prereading: Students share responses to a question about the text's topic.	Self-Awareness and Social Awareness: Students share personal connections to the text and listen to the perspectives of others.
First Reading: Students listen to or read a text and mark places where they are confused or curious.	Self-Awareness and Self-Management: Students build cognitive control by tracking and recording their responses.
Sharing Questions: Students share their questions about the text and explore answers with a teacher's help.	Social Awareness and Relationship Skills: Students take turns sharing questions and listening to those of others. All questions are regarded as valuable, and students respond to and help answer others' questions.
Second Reading: Students read or listen to the text again, engaging in close-reading activities.	Social Awareness and Relationship Skills: Students take turns sharing their own perspectives and listening to others, with an emphasis on explaining and comparing reactions.
Shared Inquiry Discussion: Students collaboratively explore a central problem of meaning in the text. Guided by a teacher's questioning, students develop ideas, find and explain evidence, and respond to their peers' contributions.	Responsible Decision-Making, Self-Awareness, Self-Management, and Relationship Skills: This cornerstone activity addresses many SEL competencies. Developing and explaining a personally satisfying answer to the discussion question prepares students to make responsible choices in other complex situations.
Writing Activities: Students further develop their response to a text in a persuasive essay.	Responsible Decision-Making: Students synthesize their own thinking about a topic while drawing on perspectives they heard in Shared Inquiry discussion.

TRUE OR FALSE?

Schools Must Choose Between Academic Development and SEL

False, although it can feel true. When reading some K–12 English Language Arts standards, it feels as though specific, foundational reading and writing skills are being supported with such laser focus that there is no room for anything else in the classroom. In other words, meeting and teaching only towards objectives that meet standards requires us to sacrifice supporting the growth of the whole child, including their social and emotional development.

The good news is that *this feeling does not need to be a reality* for students or teachers. The Great Books Foundation has found that building a child's social and emotional development plays an active role in building their critical thinking and reading skills.

Separately, states like Texas acknowledge the validity of practicing social skills in tandem with academic skills. The Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) emphasize the process of learning through speaking and listening. In the TEKS, each grade incorporates speaking and listening standards, and it is explicitly stated that "speaking, listening, and thinking are interconnected."

TRUE OR FALSE?

Making Thematic Connections to the Text Means that Students Will Only Be Making Text-to-Self Connections

False. While text-to-self connections in literature can be a helpful entry point for students, they can also be used as a way to avoid thinking deeply about a text or its characters. As a result, students are content, even excited, to chatter, without *connecting* with each other or the text itself. Rigor is lost.

The selections and curricula that comprise Junior Great Books programs expand the focus from text-to-self to one in which students are prompted to consider characters' perspectives and motivations, as well as probe the themes of a story or text selection. The materials plainly ask students to think and wonder about social emotional themes. The lessons themselves offer up questions that exclusively focus on social emotional learning and are scaffolded to support all learners.

Apart from the questions that directly address emotions, there are also questions that ensure students are using evidence from a text to support their thinking, creating the opportunity for students to empathize with and understand characters, regardless of whether they are alike or not. Rigor and empathy can work in tandem, authentically supporting students as they speak, listen, and think critically about a text.

Junior Great Books Themes		
Kindergarten and First Grade		
Subject Themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seeds and plants The five senses Weather 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Visual perspective Native American culture
Social Emotional Themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Generosity Imagination Homes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community Growing up
Second Through Fifth Grade		
Grade 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Friendship Responsibility Bravery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Generosity Community Being yourself
Grade 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relationships Kindness Confidence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gratitude Courage Cleverness
Grade 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trust Resourcefulness Communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strength Integrity Perspective
Grade 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Honesty Self-respect Fitting in 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Family Humility Compassion

IMPORTANT QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT

Before starting this section, think about your own experiences with trust:

- Who do you trust the most?
- How do you feel when you know someone trusts you?
- How does it feel when you know you can trust someone?

Once you have thought about your own experiences with trust, think about this theme question and write down your answers or share them aloud:

How do you earn someone's trust?

After reading each story in this section, ask yourself the theme question again. You may have some new ideas you want to add.

Introduction to Junior Great Books fourth-grade thematic unit on Trust.

A Final Thought

Social emotional and academic learning and teaching happen in every school community, whether intentionally or not. As a field, we need to consider how we are providing opportunities for students and teachers to build their skills and expand their perspectives. The Shared Inquiry method and Junior Great Books provide flexible learning opportunities for students to express their thinking through reading, writing, speaking, and listening. It is important that as we enter the 2022–23 school year, we encourage whole school communities to make this work a priority, as both academic achievement and social well-being depend on it.

OPINION

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A Simple Formula to Improve Reading and Writing Skills

By Mike Schmoker

In a recent opinion essay, I defended the primacy of traditional literacy skills against the National Council of Teachers of English’s mystifying call to “decenter” them. In this essay, I will describe how any teacher can effectively impart core literacy skills. Then I’ll provide examples of schools where such efforts have had a decisive impact on student learning.

For starters: We need to maximize opportunities for students to engage in *purposeful* reading, discussion, and writing. We should aim for 90-120 minutes per day, spread across the curriculum.

All three elements require suitable amounts of explicit or “scaffolded” instruction.

1. Let’s begin with reading.

Every student will enjoy and glean far more meaning from any text if we start with some background (and a dash of enthusiasm) to establish relevance.

Then, provide brief simple definitions for potentially unfamiliar words in the text. This boosts comprehension by about 3 grade levels for struggling readers, according to education researcher Robert J. Marzano’s 1999 *Essential Knowledge: The Debate Over What American Students Should Know*.

Finish by writing an arresting question or prompt on the board—which gives students a reason to read. For nonfiction, pose questions that require them to analyze, compare, or evaluate as they read. As a former teacher and now as a guest instructor, I’ve had success asking middle and high school students to compare historical figures, argue for or against nuclear power, and evaluate the logic of Supreme Court decisions. (Middle schoolers are quite adept at detecting the weaknesses of the “separate but equal” doctrine.)

For literature, lean hard on character analysis: Is Jack a hero or a jerk in “Jack and the Beanstalk”? Is Gatsby a lout or a lovesick victim of the decadent ‘20s? Students enjoy such inquiry, which is an excellent entry point into theme and meaning. (Structure and symbolism? Not so much.)

To fully engage with texts, students need



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to be apprenticed in the indispensable tools of analytic reading—how to underline, annotate, and note-take at increasing levels of sophistication. We need to show them how to employ these, in step-by-step cycles of scaffolded instruction, checks for understanding, and re-teaching—until they gain command of these strategies.

And please: Never stop reading out loud to them, with expression, as they read along. This promotes fluency, comprehension, and literary appreciation.

2. Now, students are ready to discuss.

Start by having them briefly pair up to share what they underlined and why. This is the perfect rehearsal for the ensuing whole-class discussion.

Discussion must also be taught explicitly, with liberal amounts of random “cold calling” to ensure that all students participate. Throughout, provide gentle but specific guidance to ensure that they speak audibly, clearly, and always with civility. When I ask students

to clarify a jumbled or muffled remark, their subsequent attempts are always fruitful. Students enjoy these discussions and are honored to have their thoughts taken seriously.

3. Finish with writing.

We can intersperse reading and discussion with short bursts of writing, which generate and clarify thought before the discussion. Every teacher should be apprised of one of education’s best kept secrets: Analyzing, then arguing the issues in a text may have more impact on student motivation and writing quality than any other factor.

Students also need structured instruction on the rudiments of writing. Nothing exotic here: Simply show them—through cycles of whole-class modeling, monitoring, and reteaching—how to: write an interesting introduction, rough out a working outline, integrate quotes, and explain how quotes or paraphrased material supports their claim.

None of these is particularly difficult to teach if we develop and refine such lessons

with colleagues. Such instruction is exceedingly effective and vastly reduces time spent grading papers.

Make no mistake: When schools conscientiously apply such evidence-based approaches, they achieve “stunningly powerful consequences” in as little as a school year, according to Michael Fullan’s research. I’ve worked with elementary teams who developed and refined reading and writing lessons at monthly meetings at which they routinely celebrated double-digit writing gains.

For decades, schools that adopt these methods have proven the power of such a focus. In 2009, New Dorp High school, in the Bronx, performed so poorly it was marked for closure—until Judith Hochman guided faculty as a consultant in how to systematically teach reading, speaking, and writing. In two years, scores soared and the school became an educational mecca.

Starting in 2001, Massachusetts’ Brockton High School made immediate, then meteoric and sustained gains the moment that school leaders made explicit instruction in “reading, writing, thinking, and reasoning” their schoolwide focus, the principal told me in an interview not long after.

I heard a similar success story when I interviewed the assistant principal at View Park Preparatory High School in Los Angeles in the early 2000s. The school experienced a surge in achievement when it applied such practices in English/language arts, then across the curriculum. It became the highest-achieving majority-minority school in California.

In the Tucson-area district where I formerly worked at the central office, a middle school English and social studies team made a radical move in the 1990s: They rebuilt their curriculum exclusively around systematic instruction in reading, discussion, and weekly argumentative writing assignments. In one year, their scores rose from just average to the highest in their metropolitan area. That doesn’t begin to capture what I saw those students learn in terms of their ability to speak, listen, weigh ideas and write well.

That’s the power of focusing on the elements of traditional literacy. When we commit to it, tens of millions more students will receive a life-changing education, even as we manage the academic fallout from the pandemic. ■

Mike Schmoker, a former teacher and administrator, is now an author, speaker, and consultant. His latest book is FOCUS: Elevating the Essentials to Radically Improve Student Learning, 2nd edition (ASCD, 2018).

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