EDITOR’S NOTE
With its focus on evidence-based instruction, the science of reading (SOR) is crucial to ensuring all students unlock strong literacy skills, the foundation for future success. This Spotlight will help you get up to speed with the latest state initiatives; review our reading comprehension glossary highlighting the key components for success; examine California’s approach to align teacher prep to the SOR; and more.
The ‘Science of Reading’ in 2024: 5 State Initiatives to Watch

By Sarah Schwartz

The ‘science of reading’ is making its way onto more governors’ and state legislators’ priority lists as the 2024 legislative session gets underway.

In Massachusetts, Gov. Maura Healey, a Democrat, proposed a five-year early literacy plan to align reading instruction through grade 3 with evidence-based practices, allocating $30 million for the effort in her 2025 budget proposal.

Healey’s announcement comes only a few weeks after New York’s Gov. Kathy Hochul, a Democrat, unveiled her plan to bring the state “back to basics” in literacy. Hochul’s proposed 2025 budget includes requirements that districts’ curriculum and instructional approaches follow “scientifically based” practices.

In other states—including Indiana and Iowa—lawmakers have proposed bills that would ban outdated methods and instate a controversial mandate that 3rd graders not reading at grade level by the end of the school year be held back and taught with materials designed to address reading deficiencies.

These actions join a mounting tide of reading legislation across the country. Over the past decade, 37 states and the District of Columbia have passed laws or other policies related to evidence-based reading instruction.

The majority of this legislation has emerged in the past five years—in 2023 alone, 17 states implemented new policies.

Education Week has rounded up five initiatives to watch in 2024. Read on for more about what’s happening in each state.

New York

Hochul’s budget proposal would dedicate $10 million to train 20,000 teachers in the science of reading, and require the state’s department of education to provide school districts with guidance on best practices for reading instruction by July 2024.

School districts would have to review their curriculum and teaching approaches annually to ensure that they align, and demonstrate how to the state department of education.

In her announcement of the “Back to Basics” plan on Jan. 3, Hochul called this new push to reshape reading instruction “long overdue.”

“Their idea, about 20 years ago, they thought, ‘Hey, there’s a whole different way of learning. Why don’t we just put kids in a room with books, and they’ll figure it out?’ Hochul said. Studies show that this method, which often includes teaching children to rely on contextual clues in stories, doesn’t work, she said.

“Let’s teach … how to say the words. Let’s teach the kids what they mean. And that’s the difference—that has not been taught,” Hochul said.

At the same time, the state’s education department has launched a literacy initiative, publishing a series of briefs on evidence-based practices. But that work will focus on providing guidance for districts—not mandates or lists of required curricula, Commissioner Betty Rosa said in an interview with Education Week earlier this month.

The Reading League, a nonprofit headquartered in Syracuse, N.Y., that advocates for evidence-aligned instruction, said the organization is “cautiously optimistic” about the governor’s plan.

“These findings are not new, and we have yet to implement them fully to benefit our students,” the group wrote in a statement. The Reading League also cautioned that the science of reading isn’t exclusively about phonics, and encouraged state officials to “elevate the importance of other facets of evidence-based reading instruction in its messaging.”

Massachusetts

In her Jan. 17 State of the Commonwealth address, Healey introduced the Literacy Launch program, a 5-year plan to make high-quality reading materials available to districts, provide professional development for teachers, and mandate that teacher-preparation programs teach evidence-based instructional approaches.

“By every metric, Massachusetts has the best schools in the country. But I want to talk about an urgent issue that we need to address,” Healey said in her speech. The majority of 3rd graders did not meet expectations in English/language arts on last year’s state tests.

“That number reflects social inequities. It also reflects the fact that many districts are using out of date, disproven methods to teach reading, and our children are paying the price,” Healey said.

A recent Boston Globe investigation found that almost half of Massachusetts districts used low-quality reading curricula in grades K-3.

Maryland

The state’s board of education approved a
resolution this week that will require districts to align all literacy instruction to the science of reading by school year 2024-25.

The resolution will also require the state superintendent to draft a comprehensive literacy plan, to review the state’s current literacy guidance, and to establish partnerships with teacher-preparation programs to improve their alignment to evidence-based practices.

Carey Wright, the state’s interim superintendent, has been at the forefront of the science of reading movement. She previously led the school system in Mississippi, launching an overhaul of early reading instruction, curriculum, and teacher training there a decade ago.

The Magnolia State jumped from second-to-last place in 4th grade reading scores in 2013 to the middle of the pack in 2019, a transformation some have called the “Mississippi Miracle.” States emulating Mississippi have copied key components of the approach in their reading legislation.

Wright, who entered her role in October, has said that she wants to do the same work to promote evidence-based practices in Maryland that she did in Mississippi.

Maryland’s former schools superintendent, Mohammed Choudhury, told the Baltimore Banner that the culture of local control in the state “has contributed to a hodgepodge of reading practices, from places where they are doing amazing things to places where they are committing malpractice.”

Indiana

Two bills in Indiana would alter the state’s reading policies, adding a 3rd grade retention requirement and extending support for struggling readers through grade 8.

SB 1, introduced by Republican Sen. Linda Rogers and 30 co-authors, would require schools to give the state’s 3rd grade reading test to 2nd graders, too. Students who fail the test in 2nd grade would be offered additional support, including summer school.

The bill would also require that 3rd grade students who did not pass the test repeat the grade, with some exemptions. This proposal has received pushback from educators, who have argued that the retention policy would put strain on 3rd grade teachers and could disproportionately affect Black and Latino students—without much educational benefit.

Third grade retention is a controversial element of many states’ early reading legislation, and the evidence on the practice is mixed. Experts caution that the policy is only effective if it’s coupled with additional support above and beyond traditional classroom instruction.

Another Indiana bill, SB 6, would require the department of education to develop a method for identifying students in later grades, from 4-8, who aren’t proficient in reading. Virginia passed a similar law last year.

Iowa

A bill introduced in the state would mandate that schools use evidence-based reading instruction and curricula beginning July 2026. It would also ban the use of cueing, a strategy that encourages students to rely on context clues to read words, rather than exclusively relying on letters. Experts have said that this approach can prevent children from consolidating their phonics skills.

Cueing bans have become increasingly popular over the past year—at least 11 states have prohibited the practice. Some educators criticize these bans, arguing that they rob teachers of the professional autonomy to make decisions about what will best serve their students.

The bill in Iowa has seen a similar reception, with educators saying that cueing can help certain students.

Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds, a Republican, also announced several reading initiatives in her Jan. 9 Condition of the State address. She highlighted a state partnership with Lexia Learning, a curriculum and training company, to provide professional development for Iowa teachers in evidence-based methods.

Reynolds also said that the state would require prospective teachers to pass a nationally recognized test to earn a credential to teach reading. Iowa is the only state in the country that doesn’t currently require elementary teachers to pass such a test.
Literacy Is the Foundation for All Learning

Recent Washington NAEP scores indicate only 34% of fourth-grade students and 32% of eighth-grade students read proficiently. When students learn to read, they can go on to learn almost anything. But teaching students to read is far from straightforward, and educators often find themselves navigating uncertain terrain. Teacher support is needed—and more importantly, the right kind of support. To maximize effectiveness for teachers and students, it’s crucial this literacy support be reputable, evidence-based, and aligned with curriculum standards, instilling trust among administrators.

95% of students can learn to read using the science of reading. But only one-third of students read proficiently. (NAEP, 2022)
New York Joins the 'Science of Reading' Movement, Offering Guidance—Not Mandates

By Sarah Schwartz

New York state officials have recently announced a flurry of initiatives to improve early literacy, pulling the state, which has one of the largest K-12 populations in the country, into the “science of reading” movement.

The shift shows how deep the turn toward evidence-based reading has penetrated public policy. Still, some education advocates question whether new guidance from the state department of education goes far enough to move the needle on instruction.

Earlier this month, Gov. Kathy Hochul, a Democrat, unveiled her plan to bring the state “back to basics” in literacy. Her 2023 budget proposal includes requirements that districts’ curriculum and instructional approaches align with “evidence-based and scientifically based” practices.

Hochul’s announcement followed big changes to early reading instruction in New York City. Last May, the city’s education department required schools to choose from three literacy curricula that they say are based on the evidence behind how children learn to read.

Now, the state department of education is taking up the science of reading mantle, too—though with a less prescriptive approach.

Last week, the department released a series of literacy briefs that outline a guiding instructional framework for grades pre-K-12, urging regional education cooperatives and district leaders to audit their current practices against the recommendations.

Other resources are forthcoming, including a tool that districts can use to evaluate their curricula, and specialized guides for supporting English learners and special education students, said Angelique Johnson-Dingle, the state’s deputy commissioner for P-12 instructional support.

The action from the state department of education is an “historic step forward,” said Tarja Parssinen, the founder of the WNY Education Alliance, a nonprofit that advocates for evidence-based literacy approaches in Western New York, among other education issues.

But New York is trailing other states that have already offered this kind of support to districts, said Susan Neuman, a professor of childhood and literacy education at New York University.

“I think one of the things that you’re seeing is a little bit of embarrassment that they’re so far behind, and they’re trying to catch up, and catch up fast,” she said.

New York encourages districts to ‘take stock’

Over the past five years, more than half of all states have passed laws or introduced other policies to bring early literacy instruction in line with the evidence base on how children learn to read. States’ plans vary. Some mandate that schools choose specific new curricula and that teachers go through the same training; others leave it up to districts to evaluate their instructional practices against state guidance.

New York is taking the latter approach.

“The one thing we’re not doing is mandating,” said Betty Rosa, New York’s commissioner of education, in an interview. “We want to create the opportunity to truly help and support school districts to take stock, to look at their inventories, to look at their programs.”

New York has a long history of local control. School districts make decisions about what materials to use—not the state.

“While I understand they want to respect local control, we do need guidance that is explicit,” Parssinen said. “I don’t think our kids have time for reflection.”

The seven literacy briefs released last week introduce the science of reading and offer a broad overview of instruction at the pre-K, elementary, and secondary levels. They describe the science of reading as “50+ years of interdisciplinary research that documents and describes how children develop reading and writing skills and competencies.”

Nonie Lesaux, a professor of education and human development at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and a co-author of the briefs, presented their contents in a virtual conference for the state’s education service centers Jan 10. She emphasized that foundational skills are a core part of the science of reading, but not the only part.

For too long, word-reading instruction has not been anchored in the science of reading, she said. “Somehow, we got caught up in thinking that kids would pick up that sound-symbol correspondence... and the science is very, very, very clear. That instruction needs to be explicit and intentional,” she continued.

But vocabulary and comprehension instruction have also been a “pain point,” she said.

“Science of reading is not just a code name
“People are going to hear what they want to hear”

At the literacy summit, representatives from New York’s Boards of Cooperative Educational Services, or BOCES, shared their takeaways from the briefs. The BOCES offer regional support and services to local school districts. At times, their reflections were at odds.

In one discussion of a brief on “Debunking Common Myths,” one BOCES representative noted that while phonics instruction had become more of a focus among educators, it might need to be highlighted even more.

A speaker from a separate BOCES offered a different view. They wanted to ensure that support for explicit instruction didn’t lead to an overemphasis on phonics and decoding, which “may take us backwards instead of forwards in terms of our students’ ability,” they said.

It’s not surprising that BOCES aren’t all on the same page, said Parssinen. “When you are just offering briefs, people are going to hear what they want to hear and take away what they want to take away,” she said.

She would like to see more detailed guidance—including explicit communication from the state’s department of education about which practices aren’t evidence-based. “We need guidance on what we should not be doing,” she said.

Curriculum programs that have used dis-proven methods for word-identification, such as Fountas & Pinnell Classroom and the Units of Study in Reading, are still in use in New York, Parssinen said. The independent reviewing organization EdReports has given both of these programs failing ratings.

Asked how the department would approach districts using programs that were low-rated, Rosa said that educators should take stock with their professional learning communities.

“A lot of times people feel like you say, ‘Everything is wrong, what you’re doing is wrong,’” she said. “It’s not helpful to start with a deficit model or a negative approach.”
A Reading Comprehension Glossary: Learn About the Key Components for Success

By Sarah Schwartz

Reading comprehension seems like it should be easy to define. In simple terms, it’s the ability to understand what one reads. But beneath that simple definition lies a diverse array of component skills and knowledge that make comprehension possible as well as ongoing arguments about how comprehension should best be taught.

In our new special report on comprehension, Education Week reporters address these specifics and open questions. Here, we have defined a list of common terms readers will encounter across these stories.

Reading comprehension: The ability to understand what one reads. The skills that underlie reading comprehension, though, are complex and varied. Students need to be able to decode the words on the page, understand the vocabulary used, apply their own background knowledge to make sense of text, parse syntax and text structure, and monitor their own understanding as they read. Supporting students’ reading comprehension requires carefully planned and sequenced instruction.

Knowledge-building curriculum: An approach to English/language arts instruction that aims to systematically grow students’ knowledge about the world. Literacy skills—such as applying comprehension strategies, analyzing text, writing about texts, and discussing them—are taught in the context of this content. Studies show that teaching students literacy skills in context in this way can improve reading outcomes, though many curricula in this category have not been evaluated for efficacy.

Oral language: The spoken words, knowledge of semantics, and use of syntax that people use to communicate orally with one another. Developing students’ ability to speak and listen is a key component of early-reading-comprehension instruction—important for all children but especially critical for English learners. Once students know how to decode written words, their oral language ability is predictive of their reading comprehension.

Reading “stamina”: The notion that students must gradually be able to read texts for sustained periods of time as they progress through school and are expected to gain knowledge from their reading. Although research has connected various features of text, including its length, diction, and syntax, to estimates of how difficult a text is to read, there is not much research on how to build stamina among students.

Morphology: The study of word parts and their meanings. Most words in academic language are comprised of multiple morphemes—units within words that shape the word’s meaning, such as prefixes, suffixes, and bases. Some studies show that explicitly teaching morphology can improve students’ word reading, spelling, and vocabulary knowledge.

Vocabulary: The words used in a language. Best practices for vocabulary instruction include teaching words within a meaningful context (rather than the traditional list of unrelated words), offering children multiple exposures to a word and opportunities to use it, and connecting new words to related words that children already know.

Reading-comprehension assessment: A test of students’ ability to understand what they read. Most of these assessments, such as the ones states give at the end of the year, test general comprehension skills—asking students to read unfamiliar passages and then answer related questions. Because students’ comprehension abilities are tightly connected to their background knowledge on the topic, some researchers have argued that reading-comprehension assessments should be more closely related to the content that students learn throughout the school year.

Comprehension strategies: Routines and tools that readers can use to make sense of text. Decades of studies have shown that explicitly teaching students how to use certain strategies—such as summarizing, visualizing, inferencing, creating graphic organizers, and asking questions about their understanding—can support their reading comprehension. Advocates of knowledge-building curricula have argued that isolated strategy practice isn’t as effective as teaching these skills within the context of topically related texts that allow students to draw connections.

Schema: A mental model that readers can apply to understand new, related concepts. Many knowledge-building curricula are built around units of topically connected information—a series of lessons on natural disasters, for example, that covers hurricanes, tornadoes, and blizzards—to make it easier for students to apply what they’ve already learned to understand something new.
What Will It Take to Align Teacher Prep to the Science Of Reading? California Offers Clues

By Sarah Schwartz

The most populous state in the nation is revamping how it credentials teachers to teach reading, replacing a test that has served as a controversial gatekeeper for teacher-candidates for more than 25 years.

This shift in California comes as dozens of states are attempting to align their teacher-preparation programs to the research behind how kids learn to read. The debate around this decision in the Golden State is a microcosm of the issues arising from this process across the country.

In 2021, California passed a law that ends the Reading Instruction Competence Assessment, or RICA in summer 2025—a test that has been praised by some as a strong evaluation of future teachers’ knowledge of the “science of reading,” but criticized by many as an outdated, biased hurdle that keeps otherwise qualified candidates out of the classroom.

The test will be replaced with a performance assessment, which a group of universities are gearing up to pilot this spring. The law also requires that preparation programs align their coursework to new literacy standards by summer 2024. The standards mandate the teaching of evidence-based approaches to foundational reading skills and incorporate the California Dyslexia Guidelines, a roadmap for identifying and teaching dyslexic students developed by the state’s department of education in 2017.

Unlike the RICA, which most candidates take as a standardized test, the new assessment will ask teachers to demonstrate teaching early reading in classrooms, a process that will “serve to strengthen and deepen a prospective teacher’s knowledge and skill,” Mary Vixie Sandy, executive director of the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, said in an emailed statement.

But some dyslexia advocates have raised concerns about whether the state’s new approach will ensure all candidates are prepared to teach reading—and how university instructors will be held accountable for meeting the new literacy standards.

Though about half of all states have required that programs follow evidence-based methods or that students pass a certification test aligned to the science of reading, imposing these mandates on universities challenges long-held traditions of academic freedom. They’re also notoriously difficult to enforce.

Still, there’s growing momentum within the field, said Kelly Butler, a senior adviser to Reading Universe, a site that offers free resources for reading teachers. Butler formerly led the Barksdale Reading Institute, a nonprofit that works to improve the quality of reading education in Mississippi.

“More and more states are recognizing that things need to change within teacher preparation. There is a growing awareness and willingness to do work around that,” she said. “I would like to get to a place where teacher-preparation programs are owning this themselves, and leading this parade, rather than being dragged to the table.”

A certification test is ‘one little juncture’ in the pipeline

The RICA was born out of a previous push to align reading instruction with evidence-based practice, more than two decades ago.

In the 1990s, California began to pass legislation requiring phonics instruction, a backlash to the rise of whole language in the state in the 1970s and 80s—an approach that emphasizes immersing students in books, with little direct instruction.

Starting in 1998, elementary and some middle school teacher candidates were expected to pass the RICA, a standardized test that assesses detailed knowledge in phonemic awareness and phonics instruction, as well as vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, and background knowledge. California was the first state to require that elementary teachers pass a standalone test in reading instruction.

In the intervening decades, the RICA has been the target of sustained criticism from different camps.

While the test does include crucial knowledge for future teachers of reading, it can also become a roadblock for students with disabilities, said Marga Madhuri, a professor in the University of La Verne’s LaFetra College of Education in La Verne, Calif., and the chair of the college’s dyslexia teacher training program. She remembered one candidate who himself had dyslexia, and had to take the test eight times before he passed and was accredited to teach 8th grade science.

University faculty and K-12 educators have also claimed that the test is racially biased. Between 2017 and 2022, 78 percent of white test-takers passed the RICA on their first at-
tempt, compared to 48 percent of African American and 53 percent of Latino test-takers. (Over time, 91 percent of white candidates pass after multiple attempts, compared to 68 percent of African American and 74 percent of Latino candidates.)

Others argue that the problem lies not with the test itself, but with teacher-preparation programs that don’t adequately prepare students to master its content.

“From what I can see in the past, the [California Commission on Teacher Credentialing] hasn’t done a thorough job of holding teacher-preparation programs accountable,” said Lori DePole, the co-state director of Decoding Dyslexia California. “So it’s really hard to know what the reasoning is behind low pass rates.”

The new test is similar in format to other performance-based assessments already given in California, said Christiane Wood, an associate professor of literacy education at California State University San Marcos, one of the pilot sites this spring. These portfolio assessments ask candidates to plan lessons, videotape teaching, and reflect on practice.

The new format will ensure that students have deep knowledge of early literacy skills, and that they can apply that knowledge in their classrooms, said Erika Daniels, a professor of literacy education at the same university.

But DePole worries that the CTC may not set the bar high enough for passing this exam. Universities may not fully integrate the state’s new literacy standards, preventing candidates from accessing the information that they would need to do well on a credentialing test, she fears.

Like other states, California periodically assesses whether programs meet these standards, but historically, most states haven’t taken strong steps to correct lapses.

“You can have the greatest standards out there, but if you’re not adequately enforcing them, and you’re not also helping to support institutes of higher education where perhaps the faculty aren’t up to date on science of reading, that’s the missing link,” she said.

A credentialing test is only “one little juncture” in the teacher-preparation pipeline, said Butler. To ensure that candidates are prepared to teach reading, programs need to focus on aligning instruction, too, she added.

Universities take different approaches to new standards

Some instructors say that their programs already meet these new standards—a requirement to participate in the new assessment pilot program.

“When we dug into it, we saw that we were already doing everything that they were asking us to implement in our literacy courses,” said Wood. (The university’s graduate program in reading received an F rating in 2023 from the National Council on Teacher Quality, which reviews programs for alignment to evidence-based practices. NCTQ’s methodology has received criticism.)

Wood sees the performance-based assessment as an opportunity to incorporate other methods of teaching beginning reading skills.

“[The RICA] only really assesses one method of how to teach literacy: explicit, scaffolded instruction,” she said. “The gradual release of responsibility—that’s the only approach the RICA takes.”

The new assessment will demonstrate what candidates know about teaching foundational skills “in not just one way, in other ways,” Wood said, noting that it would allow for the integration of vocabulary instruction and best practices for teaching English learners.

Research has long demonstrated that systematic, explicit instruction is the most effective way to help children learn how to read words. But some university professors have pushed back against what they see as a one-size-fits-all approach.

At other institutions, instructors are in the process of overhauling their courses.

A few years before the new standards were released, the LaFetra College of Education at the University of La Verne started to rethink how it approached teaching about dyslexia. The school brought in national experts and retooled its courses, said Madhuri.

“We thought it was going to be a brush-up on our skills, but it was a crash course,” she said. Faculty have continued revisions in light of the new literacy standards.

Still, she’s heard from colleagues at other universities who have told her they’re planning to tweak written course materials, but continue teaching as they have before. And she worries that it may be difficult for many colleges to fit the deep dive on early literacy practices that the standards require into one or two semesters.

Madhuri would like to see the new performance-based assessment align closely with the standards, which she thinks are rigorous and supportive of evidence-based practice.

“There will be no tears shed now that the RICA is gone,” she said.
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Reading Comprehension Hinges on Building Knowledge. New Curricula Aim to Help

By Sarah Schwartz

Portage, Mich.—

Portage, Mich., is more than 500 miles from the ocean—so students here who attend Moorsbridge Elementary don’t have much experience with tropical storms. They hardly ever make it up to the Great Lakes region.

And yet, the 4th graders at Moorsbridge know a lot about hurricanes.

In an English/language arts lesson last November, the class directed their teacher, Courtney Eiseler-Ward, as she drew a hurricane diagram at the front of the room. The students explained how to represent the storm, drawing on books they had read and videos they had watched.

The hurricane should look like a circle from above, they told her, because the collision of the hot air from the water and cold air from above makes it spin. Draw it in the middle of the ocean, they said, because that’s where hurricanes form before making their way to the coast.

Conversations about wind speed and low-pressure systems might usually be the province of science classes. But in Portage, these subjects—along with topics in history, civics, and world cultures—are the bedrock of the English/language arts program.

Portage is one of a growing number of districts across the country to use what the field has begun to call a “knowledge-building curriculum.” These ELA materials are designed to systematically grow students’ content knowledge about the world, often by integrating social studies and science topics.

Portage implemented its program this year with middle school teachers. A group of early-adopter elementary school teachers began, too.

Unlike other ELA curricula, which often give teachers choices of books or allow students to pick their own, knowledge-building programs feature tightly constructed sequences of text that are all thematically related. And while students still practice comprehension strategies—such as summarizing or inferring—the curriculum prioritizes deeply understanding the content, rather than isolated skill exercises.

These programs stem from the idea, backed by research, that having a broad array of background knowledge makes individuals better readers. General world knowledge is correlated with reading-comprehension ability.

Versions of knowledge-building curricula have been around for decades, but the idea has recently gained new acolytes. Advocates in the “science of reading” movement have championed these programs, and the concept has been repopularized through the book The Knowledge Gap, which argues that teaching decontextualized reading skills is the root cause of the country’s educational inequalities.

“The idea of ELA being about something is a really good one,” said Gina Cervetti, a professor in the University of Michigan’s Marsal Family School of Education who studies the intersection of literacy and content-area learning. “It can help students think more deeply about big ideas, make connections across topics, and show their understanding through their writing, she said.

Still, what that content should be, how teaching it should integrate strategy instruction, and how to approach this large shift in teaching practices are open questions—and researchers and educators don’t always agree on the answers.

The research behind ‘knowledge-building’

A knowledge-building curriculum turns the focus on comprehension instruction on its head. Its primary goal is to teach content. Skills and strategies are still present, but they’re a means to the end—not the end itself.

“The content becomes a chief driver,” said Sonia Cabell, an associate professor at Florida State University’s College of Education, Health, and Human Sciences. Cabell has co-authored several meta-analyses on the effect of teaching literacy skills and subject-area content in tandem.

Studies show that knowledge-building approaches that work in English classes share a few common traits, Cabell said.

Units are organized around content topics—such as plants or seasons—rather than general themes, such as “what makes a good friend?” They use text sets—readings and read-alouds—on conceptually linked topics to help students build a schema, or a mental model that allows them to apply what they’ve already learned to understand something new. The programs identify vocabulary words to teach explicitly.

First grade students work with teacher Megan Gose to craft alternate endings for stories they wrote together at Moorsbridge Elementary School in Portage, Mich.
that will repeat throughout a unit. And writing and discussion prompts connect directly to the text and give students an opportunity to analyze what they've learned.

The texts that students are reading in these curriculum series are generally more complex than those in an average ELA class, said Jackie Eunjung Relyea, an assistant professor of literacy education at North Carolina State University.

In classrooms where teachers use leveled texts, which purport to match students’ individualized reading levels, “the priority and emphasis is on readability,” she said. “But the texts they use in knowledge-building ELA programs challenge the students to engage critically,” she said.

Comprehension strategies are still important in this equation, Relyea added. Teaching these strategies explicitly can help students become better readers, a large body of research shows. But students can use these strategies more proficiently when they have some knowledge about the text they’re reading, said Cervetti.

“We have limited attention,” she said. “If we’re working really, really hard to understand a text that we’re totally unfamiliar with, it’s unlikely that we’ll be leveraging those strategies.”

(Recent EdWeek Research Center data, representing nearly 300 educators’ responses, found that most agreed that both teaching content and comprehension skills were important. But more of them put a top priority on the skills.)

Even if the theory of action behind the knowledge-building approach is sound, researchers note that there are still things to learn about how it works. Knowledge about a specific topic makes it easier to read text about that topic—knowing a lot about ocean animals, for example, might help one understand a book about deep sea diving. But it’s not always clear how far that knowledge can transfer to support understanding of other topics. Would knowing a lot about ocean animals help someone on a test of general reading comprehension?

Some research has shown that a couple of commercially available knowledge-building programs can lead to better general reading-comprehension scores. But few programs that schools can purchase have gone through these independent tests, and as Cervetti put it, “there’s a great difference between a controlled efficacy trial and use in the real world.”

She also cautioned that any ELA program, no matter how rich in social studies and science content, shouldn’t be considered a replacement for those courses. There are ways of reading, writing, and thinking that are unique to science, for example—analyzing and interpreting data or planning investigations.

If students’ only science instruction is learning about science content in ELA, “we lose a lot of what is most essential about acquiring disciplinary understanding,” Cervetti said.

How these curricula work in classrooms

In Eiseler-Ward’s 4th grade classroom in Portage, where students were discussing the hurricane diagram, she and her co-teacher, Susan Pullo, prepared the class for their daily writing assignment: Write about why and how hurricanes form, using cause and effect sentences.

“Will your drawing help you?” Eiseler-Ward asked, referencing the diagram the class made together. “What else could you use?”

Students worked together in teams, flipping through the book they had read earlier that day on hurricanes to pick out key information. At one table, a student started to write that hurricanes form in oceans. Another jumped in to correct—“warm oceans,” the second student said.

At the elementary school level, most of the lessons in the program that Portage uses follow the same format. First, teachers explicitly teach important vocabulary words or concepts—in this lesson, “atmosphere” and “evaporation.” Then students read a text. (In earlier grades, they listen to a read-aloud.) Finally, the class completes a written response.

This structure isn’t unique to a knowledge-building approach. But the questions that the curriculum asks students are vastly different from those in the district’s previous programs, said Courtney Huff, a district literacy coach.

For instance, she said, the 4th grade team had always read Shiloh, a novel by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor about the bond between a boy and his dog, a text teachers felt was dull. This curriculum also happens to include Shiloh. But the lesson was transformed.

“The unit we were doing before was so surface-level,” Huff said. The new unit plumbs deeper themes: What do the characters believe? What do they value? How do they change? “The kids would whine when it was time to put the books away,” Huff said.

And in 5th grade, students study human rights by exploring young women’s experiences in the Middle East under Taliban influence. They read The Breadwinner, a novel about an 11-year-old girl in Kabul, but also memoirs and first-person accounts from real children living in Afghanistan and a book about Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani women’s rights advocate who won the Nobel Peace Prize as a teenager. Incorporating knowledge from throughout the unit, students write about such sweeping questions as: “How do beliefs, ethics, and values influence behavior?” And: “When should you take a stand against injustice?”

“These big driving questions, kids can’t get enough of talking about them—versus, ‘who is the main character?’” said Mackenzie Sheahan, the district’s director of K-8 curriculum and professional development.

Debating the question: Whose knowledge?

Having students read the same books and articles allows them to share a common language in class discussions. But taking this kind of prescriptive approach to the texts students read can also court controversy.

English classrooms have long been at the center of a political battle about whose voices to center in the classroom. A knowledge-building curriculum prescribes these decisions for an entire district, and it can bring these issues to a head.

Some commercially available knowl-
edge-building programs have been criticized for having a Eurocentric slant, placing disproportionate emphasis on white, male authors and figures in history. Portage district leaders kept that in mind as they went through the curriculum-selection process. “We were really approaching it from the lens of, we want to represent every single person in our community,” said Sheahan. The district is about 77 percent white, 6 percent Black, 8 percent Latino, 7 percent Asian, and 9 percent two or more races.

One of Portage’s final choices didn’t pass muster on its diversity, equity, and inclusion metrics. A consultant pointed out that it featured some illustrations that seemed to offer a distorted historical representation, including one of enslaved children playing happily on a plantation.

“That was kind of shocking to us,” Sheahan said.

The program the district eventually picked met the district’s DEI benchmarks. But this past summer, before schools even began using it, some school board members and parents started to speak out against the program, calling it “biased” and “socio-politically driven” in a tense board meeting.

The district responded by hosting a family literacy night to walk parents through the curriculum and answer any questions they had. Going forward, Sheahan said, it will be important to invite parental input and approval earlier about these kinds of curriculum changes. “What I’ve learned is we have to do the back work,” she said.

In other districts, teachers are figuring out how to navigate some of the gray areas—a prescribed list of texts that meets their goals for representation in some ways but falls short in others.

In Evanston, Ill., 5th grade teacher Steve Yasukawa is in his first year using the district’s new knowledge-building curriculum, a different program from Portage’s.

He appreciates the tight link to social studies in the ELA materials, but he’s had mixed feelings about the way the curriculum depicts Indigenous people in U.S. history. In the year’s first unit, students explored the history of U.S. westward expansion and its effect on Indigenous tribes, specifically the Nimiipuu, also known as the Nez Perce.

That unit incorporated many primary sources that depicted Nimiipuu culture and presented maps that used not the state boundaries of today but the historic homelands of different Indigenous nations—choices that set students up for a “mental shift,” Yasukawa said. The program was, literally, centering In-
digenous voices.

But Yasukawa didn’t agree with the curriculum writers’ decision to use the term “Nez Perce” instead of Nimiipuu throughout the materials and felt that one novel in the unit inaccurately portrayed the relationship between the Nimiipuu and the U.S. government.

On balance, Yasukawa thought the pros of the unit outweighed the cons and knows that one curriculum won’t perfectly meet all his needs. But the knowledge-building curriculum is harder to flex.

“The knowledge building in these modules is so specific to the text that if we moved away from these texts, it would take years” to adapt the lessons, he said.

**Trying a new way of teaching**

This is a key feature of knowledge-building programs: The texts are set, unlike programs that are based on student choice.

In the Evanston/Skokie schools, where Yasukawa teaches, district leaders have talked about the change as a way to advance equity. Reading programs that match children with different books often operate on a leveling system that can keep students who score lower on reading-comprehension tests perpetually behind their peers.

“If students are always given materials that are below grade level, they will never be able to achieve grade level,” said Shyla Kinhal, the district’s director of literacy.

With the new ELA program, all students read the same texts. Now, Kinhal said, district leaders are working to help teachers offer other kinds of support for students with different reading abilities. Before moving on to specific texts, teachers can teach important vocabulary and concepts, or they can pair students to read the text together—without changing the text itself.

In Portage, instructional coaches have also created worksheets that students can use to organize their thoughts as they read or before they write—resources that make explicit some of the reading and writing strategies that are more implicitly conveyed in the curriculum.

Even with all this support, though, students still struggle with some of the lessons. Teachers and district leaders in Portage agree that they’re holding students to higher standards than they have in the past.

In one 6th grade English class, students were discussing similarities and differences between two brothers in the novel they were reading. Then, their teacher asked them to make connections to a news article they had read in an earlier class period about researchers’ different theories for why siblings develop diverging personality traits. She asked them: What evidence does the novel demonstrate for any of these theories?

This question stumped the group for a while. Translating the scientific ideas in the article to apply to the brothers in the book was a heavy lift.

Yasukawa, in Evanston, has also struggled at times to help students synthesize information from class discussions and the curriculum’s texts into their written work.

Still, students’ interest in the discussion demonstrates to him that the curriculum is helping students really connect with the text they’re reading.

“They love it. They love arguing,” he said, remembering how students kept raising their hands, agreeing, and laughing with one another during a recent Socratic seminar.

In education, people always talk about the pendulum swing, Yasukawa said—the way that thought leaders and district administrators seize onto a new idea and decree that everything about the way teachers approach their work should change.

“I hope what I’m experiencing right now is not the end of the swing,” he said. “I hope it’s still bringing us in this direction of knowledge-building and making connections—because the kids are really engaged.”
Reading Aloud to Students Shouldn't Get Lost in Shift To 'Science of Reading,' Teachers Say

By Elizabeth Heubeck

We've heard a lot about the science of reading this year. The term appeared 600-plus times in Education Week’s 2023 coverage alone.

Clearly, readers are interested in this topic, which refers to literacy instruction aimed at phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. But within this scripted method of how to make children proficient readers, there's one critical element that's been largely overlooked: the joy of reading.

"Decoding is absolutely the foundation of reading proficiency, but it is by no means where we end our efforts. Nor should it be the only effort," said Maryanne Wolf, director of the Center for Dyslexia, Diverse Learners, and Social Justice at the UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies.

As efforts toward developing strong readers go, reading aloud to children is one that teachers’ anecdotes and research inform us is worthwhile. Before emerging readers are able to automatically link the jumble of letters they see in front of them to the riveting stories these symbols create—whether magical, frightening, whimsical, eye-opening or otherwise entertaining or informative—someone must do it for them. And teachers are the most reliable source to take up the task.

Here's a glance at why reading out loud to students matters, the barriers teachers face in executing the read aloud, and the benefits of making it happen.

The benefits of being read to from a very young age

The single act of reading aloud to children can provide multiple benefits; perhaps most significantly, it can develop a lifelong interest in pleasure reading, according to multiple literacy experts and studies on the subject. It also comes with the ancillary benefits of increasing children's vocabulary and background knowledge. One recent study found that parents reading to their children as young as 1 to 2.5 years of age strongly predicted later vocabulary, reading comprehension, and reading motivation.

In another study, researchers tracked the impact on children whose parents read to them a minimum of five books daily from a very young age; these children entered kindergarten with exposure to around 1.4 million more words than children who were never read to. Variations in this daily reading practice, referred to as the “million word gap,” may explain later differences in children's vocabulary and reading development, suggested the study’s authors.

Despite the multiple proven benefits of being read to early and often, teachers can’t assume that this is happening at home. In a nationally representative sample of nearly 10,000 4-year-old children, 25 percent were never read to, and another estimated 25 percent were read to only once or twice weekly, according to data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study Birth Cohort. Those rates were in spite of widespread campaigns to increase awareness of the importance of reading to children. For instance, the American Academy of Pediatrics has formally recommended the practice begin in early childhood, noting that it “builds language, literacy, and social-emotional skills that last a lifetime.”

Teachers value reading aloud, but don’t always do it

Children generally come to school eager to learn and, regardless of their reading exposure at home, teachers can make up a lot of lost ground by prioritizing reading aloud to children on a routine basis. Further, most elementary classroom teachers see the value in it. In a 2019 study examining attitudes of 1st- through 4th-grade teachers about read-alouds, 100 percent deemed it important; 45 percent agreed that it was very important; and more than half considered it indispensable. Whether it’s happening widely is unclear.

There’s no reliable way to measure how frequently teachers actually read aloud to students during the school day. But data on time spent in class allowing students to read on their own could suggest that teacher read-alouds aren’t prioritized either. For instance, 82 percent of teachers surveyed recently by the International Literacy Association agreed that students should read independently for at least 20 minutes a day, but only 35 percent said their schedule permitted them to block off that amount of time during class.

When teachers do find the time to read to their students, they report positive results. Longtime elementary teacher Deloris Fowler’s efforts to instill in her students the joy of reading were captured in a 2020 article in The Atlantic. She observed that her 3rd grade students were far more engaged when she read chapter books to them than content from the basal readers that came with required literacy curriculum; she reported that they begged her to keep reading when the allotted reading time was over.

Teachers who read to students beyond elementary school report similar findings. In an opinion piece for Education Week, 8th grade teacher Christina Torres described her “read-along” strategy, in which she would read from a book and her students would follow along in their own copy, as hugely beneficial. She said it increased student enjoyment and engagement in addition to building community within the class.

Torres, a teacher at Honolulu’s Punahou School, described the reaction of her English students when she would read books aloud to them. “Should we stop for today?” Torres would ask, after reading aloud for a period, to which they would collectively respond: “Nooool!”
Students Need to Make Sense of What They Read. Here Are Ways to Support Them

By Larry Ferlazzo

Verbal Reasoning and Making Inferences

When it comes to understanding text, some students find themselves between a rock and a hard place. They may be able to decode the words, but they’re still in over their heads, struggling to answer comprehension questions. This is the next installment of a series dedicated to supporting adolescent readers. In this post, our focus is on verbal reasoning, which is the ability to understand what you see, hear, and make sense of the heaps of implied messages, figurative language, and multiple-meaning words in the English language.

Like any cognitive skill, verbal reasoning can be improved through instruction. It’s vital that teachers in all content areas plan opportunities for students to ponder language, then explain and justify their thinking. Activities that prompt students to verbalize their thoughts foster speakers and listeners with chances to revise their thinking while gaining knowledge because of the act of processing out loud.

Teachers who provide experiences where students must negotiate and construct meaning together may get a kick out of how much fun word play and detecting meaning with tweens and teens can be. Below are five strategies that we’ve found to work well with our students.

1. Infer by Reading an Image. They say a picture is worth a thousand words, so asking students to describe an interesting image can provoke meaningful discussion and different perspectives. Much like the close reading of a text, students can close read an image and respond to questions posed by the teacher and peers. Instruct students to pretend they are looking at the image with a magnifying glass and write down all the details they notice. Time.com offers a free “photo of the day” that students find interesting. A graphic organizer can assist students to make inferences and draw conclusions based on details found in an image.

2. Infer by Reading Amazon Reviews. Another way for students to practice reading between the lines is to read real reviews from Amazon. Choose a product that students are into, such as the latest video game, eyelash extensions, or another current fad. The trick is to provide students with three written reviews of one product but not the accompanying stars. Ask students to infer the quality of the product based on the clues in the writing. A graphic organizer can assist students to make note of the clues in the textual information, inferences that stem from the clues, and their rationale for recommending or not recommending the product. Here is a link to the latest Madden NFL video game as a start.

3. Infer by Watching a Wordless Film. As a whole class, in groups, or in partners, students watch a short film, pausing at designated stopping points to infer what the character(s) is thinking at that moment. Through discussion, students can collaborate to determine the character’s inner dialogue based on what is happening in the clip. The short film Soar, at 4:50 in length, is a great place for students to get the hang of making inferences.

4. Class Discussion: Paraphrasing. Prompting students to paraphrase a statement encourages them to listen carefully and not just repeat what was heard. For example, if we ask students to repeat what their partner says, we miss an opportunity for students to practice the skill of paraphrasing. Repeating that parrots the
Speaker requires little thought and can bore students, discouraging their participation. Instead, teach students the purpose and skill of paraphrasing and develop language frames with them. Post these frames so students can refer to them throughout the year.

5. Class Discussion: Reasoning. As students become skilled at paraphrasing, teachers can also prompt for evidence that supports their ideas. Asking “why?” or “how do you know that?” encourages students to provide reasons and evidence for their thinking, which decreases guesswork while simultaneously teaching peers. As students engage in these types of discussions regularly, they also practice making inferences in the company of their teacher and peers. The classroom should be a safe place for students to dig into thoughts and inferences, both exploring and explaining them.

Conclusion: Developing students’ verbal reasoning skills is mission critical—they’re essential for success in school and in life. While wide, independent reading will certainly expose students to a range of figurative language and multiple-meaning words, it’s important that we provide students with guided practice activities in which they make inferences based on the clues they identify. In other words, they step up their games, their verbal reasoning games.

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