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K-3 Literacy

EDITOR'S NOTE

K-3 Literacy is critical for long-term scholastic success. This Spotlight will help you identify what methods are useful to you; offer guidance on addressing learning gaps; take a closer look at 'Wonders' curriculum; share a review of two popular reading programs; give an update on state policies on literacy; examine the impact of teachers; and explore the role of healthy skepticism.

OPINION

Published March 13, 2020

'Decodable' Books: Boring, Useful, or Both?

By Sarah Schwartz

To really learn a new skill, you need to practice. That theory drives much of Katie Farrell's reading instruction.

In her 1st grade class at Bauer Elementary School in Hudsonville, Mich., Farrell teaches students phonics—how letters on the page represent the spoken sounds children hear.

But for some kids, the learning only really clicks once they practice these patterns in decodable books. These short texts are written with a high proportion of words that are phonetically regular—meaning they follow common sound-spelling rules—and mostly include words with phonics patterns that children have already learned.

"When you can make that match ... that's where the power lies," she said.

Research has long shown that teaching early elementary students phonics is the most reliable way to make sure that they learn how to read words. And much of the current debate around reading instruction has focused on phonics teaching, as many schools don't currently follow research-based best practice in this area.

But text plays a big role in the reading classroom, too. Decodable text, specifically, is a "crucial learning tool," said Wiley Blevins, who has written several books on phonics and currently works as a consultant training teachers.

Even so, teachers are divided when it comes to decodable books.

In Education Week's national survey of early reading teachers, only 23 percent said that beginning readers should be using these texts most often. The majority, 61 percent, said that students should be reading books with high-frequency words, predictable sentence structures, and pictures that emphasize meaning. Often called leveled books, these texts are rated on a difficulty scale. Teachers aim to match students with books at their level.

There's also a common criticism that decodable books, because of their inherent language constraints, are boring and stilted. Why subject students to these contrived stories, the argument goes, when they could be reading something more engaging?

But many experts agree that kids need that targeted practice. "When you are teaching phonics, the way to get that learning to stick is to apply it in connected text," said Blevins.

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> "When you are teaching phonics, the way to get that learning to stick is to apply it in connected text."
>
> **WILEY BLEVINS**
> Author of several books on phonics and currently works as a consultant training teachers

"It builds the right strategies," said Farrell. "They're not reading books that they're not ready for, and using the pictures to guess."

Still, decodables aren't the only books that young students should read. Most experts suggest a varied text diet. And, decodables are ultimately a stepping stone.

Eventually, Farrell says, "I want them in that authentic text using the strategies that they practiced when they're using the decodable books."

Building Strong Habits

Researchers agree that decodable text is meant to be used during a short window, when students are first learning to sound out words.

Studies have shown some benefits for early readers. When kids read decodable books, they're more likely to try to decode—to sound out the words. Some studies have found that they're also more likely to read words accurately.

But other research suggests that it may not matter what kind of text students read, as long as they're getting strong phonics instruction. In one 2004 study, two groups of struggling readers in 1st grade received one-on-one phonics tutoring. One group read books that were mostly decodable; the other read books that were mostly not decodable.

There wasn't any significant difference in the word reading or comprehension of the two groups at the end of the study.

Still, there's more research on decodable text than on other types of early reading materials, like leveled readers, said Heidi Anne E. Mesmer, a professor of reading at Virginia Tech.

She suggests that decodable books be used like "a set of training wheels on a bicycle."

"If you think about the amount of time that children learning to ride a bike use training wheels, it's not long," she wrote in an email to Education Week. "Also, not all children need training wheels."

These "training wheels" help students practice their phonics skills in a controlled environment. But just as importantly, they teach students to try to sound out words, Blevins said.

He pointed to a 1985 study by researchers Connie Juel and Diane Roper-Schneider, which found that the texts students were exposed to early on could affect how they tackled words.

In the study, students who read decodable text tried to sound out words more often than students who read text that prompted students to use other cues.

When students are mainly reading leveled text with predictable sentence structures, "they're undervaluing and underusing their phonics skills," Blevins said. "This creates a really bad habit. Every book they pick up, their first strategy is, try to look at patterns, look at pictures, memorize." Decodable books encourage the right strategy of sounding out the words, he said.

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'Boring and Stupid'?

In Claudia Margaroli's 1st grade class, decodable books help remind students that they should be focused on sounding out the words.

"I've been trying to be more specific with teaching sounds in a sequential order," said Margaroli, who teaches at Charlotte East Language Academy in Charlotte, N.C. She teaches sound-letter correspondences explicitly in her phonics lessons, and then students practice in decodable books.

"They know—and I make them say it and verbalize it—that these are sounds they've been working on, these are words they can read," Margaroli said.

Decodable books should follow the progression of a phonics program, focusing on new sound-spelling patterns and "folding in review and repetition," said Blevins.

But some teachers balk at the idea of using these books, even for practice of key skills, said Blevins, who does training with schools. Why? He remembers one group of teachers who were especially blunt about decodables: "They're boring and stupid," they told him.

Margaroli says it's true that some decodable books "just don't have a storyline." She looks for decodables "that you can actually use for comprehension," she says, "rather than a weird story about a cat and a mat, where at the end nothing happens except that cat is on the same mat."

How did we get "weird" stories about cats and mats, with thin plots and stilted language? Researchers trace the trend back to the late 1990s and early 2000s, when Texas and California both required decodable texts in their reading program adoptions. The states set decodability thresholds for texts: In Texas, 80 percent of the text had to be sound letter correspondences that students had already learned; in California, the number was 75 percent.

In response, publishers got competitive, each trying to make the book that was the highest percent decodable, Blevins said. Irregular words, like "the," often disappeared, even though they're highly common in the English language.

But there isn't evidence to suggest that a 90 percent decodable book is more effective than one that's 75 percent decodable, or 60 percent, said Timothy Shanahan, professor emeritus at the University of Illinois Chicago. There's no "magic level," he said.

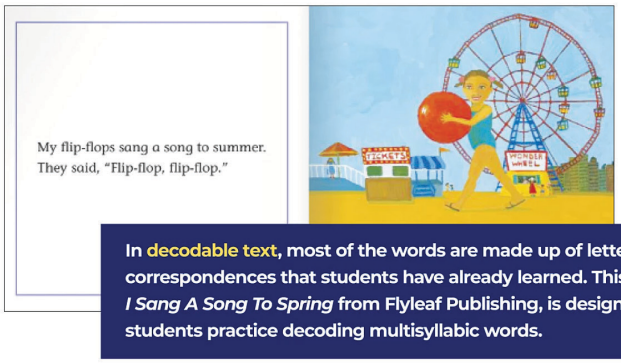
In the rush to fill texts with only decodable words, the number of unique words per hundred in these books also increased during this time, said Elfrieda H. Hiebert, a reading researcher and the president and CEO of Text-Project. So instead of seeing the same word multiple times throughout a story, students would see different words that all had the same spelling patterns.

To clear the high decodability bar, publishers started using sentences that English speakers wouldn't say or write under normal circumstances, said Blevins—like, "Let Lin dab a lip."

"The problem is, these stories made no sense," he said. "These books aren't Shakespeare, but they should be good stories that children enjoy reading."

There's also value in repeating some of the same words throughout the story, said Hiebert. Decoding the same word several times helps kids link the sound to the spelling in their minds, Hiebert said, and can lead to more fluent reading. "There has to be a really strong component of consistent data that kids are getting," she said.

Decodable vs. Leveled Books: A Comparison



In decodable text, most of the words are made up of letter-sound correspondences that students have already learned. This book, *I Sang A Song To Spring* from Flyleaf Publishing, is designed to help students practice decoding multisyllabic words.

Leveled readers are written with predictable sentence structures and include pictures that emphasize meaning. The words in the stories usually aren't constrained to specific letter-sound correspondences, and may or may not line up with the phonics patterns students have already learned. This leveled reader, Snap!, was published by Heinemann.

What Makes a Good Decodable?

Hiebert looks for a few criteria when she's evaluating decodable books.

She wants to know if they're exposing students to "highly consistent and prolific patterns" in the text, getting practice with letter-sound correspondences that they can apply to other texts.

She also wants to know if the texts make sense as stories, and are building student knowledge. What are they teaching students about the world? A lot of decodables still fall short in this category, she said.

But when a decodable book has a story, it doesn't have to be relegated just to sounding out practice, disconnected from the rest of the lesson, said Blevins. He suggests that teachers have rich conversations about the stories with students, asking comprehension questions to demonstrate that reading is about meaning. Students can also write about the books.

In Margaroli's class, students do just that, writing responses to questions about the text. Still, reading and writing about decodable text is only one part of Margaroli's literacy block.

Her students also listen to read-alouds, have conversations, and read books from their class library.

There are no research-based rules on how much time beginning readers should spend with decodable text, said Shanahan. It would be "very reasonable," though, to spend some portion of phonics instruction on practice,

he said. This includes decoding individual words, spelling words, and reading decodable books.

Shanahan, Blevins, and Mesmer all said that decodable books aren't the only kind of text that students should have access to in these early elementary years. And though Margaroli's students practice in decodables, they have other time in the day to read books of their choice from the class library.

This kind of diverse reading diet is important for students because it exposes them to a broader representation of the English language, said Shanahan. Decodable books are usually constrained to phonetically regular words. Letting kids read books without those constraints can give students some experience encountering words that don't follow normal patterns, and help them "figure out the statistical properties of the language," he said.

How can teachers know when students are ready to take the training wheels off, and stop practicing on decodables altogether?

Farrell, the 1st grade teacher in Michigan, watches how students are segmenting and blending words as they read.

Once they can consistently apply the skills they've learned in their phonics lessons, "that's my first clue that I think we're ready to move on," Farrell said. It shows her that, with her guidance, students could apply the same strategies when they read more authentic text, she said.

By the spring of 1st grade, "almost no one in the class is using decodable books," said Farrell. "I love them, and then we get to a point where we just don't need them anymore." ■

— Collage by Vanessa Solis/Education Week (Images: Getty)

Published June 22, 2021

The Tough Task Ahead For 1st Grade Teachers

By Madeline Will

Author Robert Fulghum famously wrote, "All I really need to know I learned in kindergarten." But the pandemic meant that many students missed that pivotal school year or experienced a more disrupted version. And now, 1st grade teachers will have to fill in the gaps.

Kindergarten is typically where 5- and 6-year-olds learn how to be students. They learn how to regulate their own behavior and their emotions; how to raise their hands and listen to the teacher's instructions; and how to take turns, share, and work together with their classmates.

They also learn the building blocks of reading, writing, and math. While standards vary by state, kindergartners are typically expected to learn how to count and compare sets of objects, how to write letters and punctuation, and how to read and write typical consonant-vowel-consonant words, like dog or cat. Kindergartners also begin to develop a more academic vocabulary—for example, being able to refer to a story's characters, title, main idea, and author.

But since the pandemic started, the school year has been different. Kindergarten was among the toughest grades to teach remotely, educators said, since those students aren't used to working independently or navigating the computer. And so much of kindergarten is rooted in hands-on instruction, including phonics lessons, where teachers demonstrate pronouncing specific sounds, and writing practice, where teachers monitor how kids are forming their letters and holding their pencils.

Also, kindergarten enrollment was down nationally. An EdWeek analysis found that almost 20 states lost 10 percent or more of their kindergartners during the pandemic, compared to the 2019-20 school year. While some of those children who stayed home may be in a kindergarten classroom, others will skip it entirely and head straight to 1st grade. Kindergarten is optional for children in 31 states.

That means 1st grade teachers will have a wide range of academic and social-emotional experiences to manage. Here's what a typical class might look like. (The students named are not real—they are composites based on interviews with 1st grade teachers, instructional coaches, and teacher-educators.)

- Noah is coming into 1st grade after spending most of kindergarten learning remotely. His parents were cautious about social distancing, and the only child he interacted with on a regular basis was his older sister. Noah developed strong computer skills, but he struggled learning how to read. His internet connection at home was unstable, so he occasionally had a hard time understanding his teacher during phonics lessons. As a result, he knows some letter sounds but not all.

- Emma also spent most of the year learning remotely, but her parents organized a kindergarten pod with two other families. The parents took turns

supervising the children's learning and did the best they could to keep them on track. Emma made friends with the two other children in her pod, but she struggled to follow "school rules" at home.

- Jayden attended in-person school all year. He did well academically, but over the summer, his grandmother died of COVID-19. He's now grieving and withdrawn going into 1st grade.

- Sofia's parents didn't feel like they would be able to monitor remote instruction and decided not to enroll her in kindergarten. Sofia is going straight to 1st grade without having experienced formal schooling.

"Teachers in 1st grade and kindergarten, we've always differentiated [instruction], but we're going to have to differentiate like never before," said Laura Chang, an elementary interventionist in the Vicksburg school district in southwest Michigan.

While teachers and experts stress that a year of disrupted kindergarten—or no kindergarten at all—isn't going to irreparably harm children's development or academic trajectory, educators will still have to catch kids up on the foundational and social-emotional skills that are typically taught in kindergarten. And they'll have to do it with a class of disparate groups of learners.

"The hardest part will be the variability," said Deborah Stipek, a professor of education at Stanford University who studies early childhood education. "Some of the kids will be gung-ho and ready for 1st grade curriculum as planned, and others, both academically and socially, are going to be clueless. ... We've got a huge gap in what children's experiences have been this year."

What 1st grade teachers can do

Education Week spoke to almost a dozen experts—scholars, researchers, instructional coaches, teachers, and parents—about how 1st grade teachers can prepare for an influx of students with a wide range of academic and social-development needs. Here's what they suggested teachers do:

Make sure students feel safe and supported. The pandemic has been difficult for children, and they might have experienced trauma—economic hardships, family violence, the sickness or death of a loved one. Experts say that children learn better when they feel secure, and teachers should incorporate trauma-informed teaching strategies.

"You can't assess the brain without first passing through the heart of a student," Chang said.

And strong teacher-student relationships can foster academic development, said Nell Duke, a professor of literacy, language, and culture at the University of Michigan School of Education. "We don't want to be so caught up in catching up that we don't take the time to develop those supportive relationships, which kids probably need more than ever," she said.

Spend time building interpersonal and non-academic skills. Experts are expecting many 1st graders to be a little behind when it comes to classroom social skills. Behavioral expectations normally taught in kindergarten, like sharing, working in groups, taking turns, and raising hands, weren't always a priority in remote learning.

Jolie Brouttier, a 1st grade teacher at Downtown Elementary in Bakersfield, Calif., said she's planning to spend the first couple weeks getting students accustomed to being in a physical classroom. After learning remotely, students might come to 1st grade not knowing how to work with manipulatives for math lessons, handle scissors safely, or even properly hold a pencil.

"I'm expecting to have to teach them the how-to before I can teach them the lesson," Brouttier said. "These kids are so used to having a parent or guardian right next to them to help them. They've kind of had a crutch [this past year]."

Find out what students know, and what they don't know. Teachers will need to take stock of what gaps students have coming into 1st grade. For reading, teachers can administer an informal decoding inventory, which will tell them which phonics skills and sequences students have mastered and which ones they still need to practice. They should also assess the strength of students' number sense, meaning to what extent they understand quantities and recognize numerals.

Teachers should not assume that students didn't learn valuable skills, even if they weren't enrolled in kindergarten, the educators stressed. Students might have done more cooking with their parents this year, and learned about numbers that way. They might have learned about the world around them through family walks or outside play. Or they might have learned vocabulary or other skills from watching educational TV programs, like "Sesame Street."

"There's an opportunity to build on what kids did learn and to build on the interests that they may have developed that are not necessarily part of school learning," Duke said.

Create lessons that serve a dual purpose. Teachers should "take every opportunity to build world knowledge and build vocabulary," Duke said. For instance, when students practice reading, they should be looking at texts that connect to what students are learning about in science or social studies.

And experts recommend creating as many opportunities as possible for students to work and talk through their thinking with their peers. That's especially important for English-language learners, said Martha Hernandez, the executive director of the advocacy group Californians Together. They might not have heard much English during the pandemic, so language-rich activities should be woven into the school day, she said.

What teachers should expect...

- A wide range in behavior: Some students might not know how to raise their hands, sit still, or take turns
- Gaps in knowledge: Some students might not have mastered phonics or math skills typically taught in kindergarten
- Difficulties with hands-on tasks: Some students might not have practiced holding a pencil or handling scissors

Monitor for any disabilities. It has been a "missed opportunity" of intervention for many students with disabilities, experts warn. If a student was learning remotely or not enrolled in kindergarten, a learning disability or other condition might have gone undetected. And this has likely led to an equity gap, Stipek at Stanford said: More affluent, educated parents are more likely to have noticed any problems and have had their child screened.

If teachers suspect a disability, they should work with counselors, special education teachers, specialists, and parents to get the "clearest picture possible," said Carrie Gillispie, a senior P-12 research associate at the Education Trust, a national nonprofit. It's important to differentiate a true delay or disability from a child coping with trauma or stress, she said.

Also, Gillispie warned that teachers should be careful not to misinterpret behavioral challenges with a need for special education. Students may be acting out because they aren't yet used to sitting still and listening for large periods of time. Already, children of color—particularly Black boys—are disproportionately identified for special education services.

How districts can help their 1st graders

First grade teachers have a daunting task ahead of them, but they shouldn't have to do this work on their own, experts said. Districts should use their federal relief money to provide support for all students and teachers, including incoming 1st graders and their teachers. Here are some of the interventions experts suggested:

- **Offer robust summer school programming.** Summer school could help address some of the biggest gaps in students' learning, and also help students acclimate to a physical classroom.
- **Beef up teacher professional development.** First grade teachers may need more training on teaching concepts that are typically taught in kindergarten, formatively assessing students, and practicing trauma-informed teaching. Instructional coaching might be a particularly helpful form of PD, since the coaches can be teammates to teachers as they analyze student data and plan differentiated lessons.
- **Give teachers time to collaborate.** Schools should offer teachers release time from their classroom responsibilities so they can collaborate with other teachers in their grade level. Schools could also create opportunities for 1st grade teachers to work with and learn from kindergarten teachers.
- **Provide intensive tutoring.** High-dosage tutoring is generally defined as one-on-one tutoring or tutoring in small groups at least three times a week, or for about 50 hours over a semester. Research shows that it's an effective way to help address content or skills gaps, and it can also boost students' confidence.
- **Shrink class sizes.** Smaller class sizes will make it easier for teachers to differentiate instruction for a wide range of skill levels. Still, class size reduction is expensive, and research shows that any effects on student achievement are usually small. Experts say this tactic is less of a priority than professional development and time for collaboration.

If done right, educators say, there will be an opportunity to engage young children who have had an unusual start to their schooling career. In Chicago, Adam Arents said his 5-year-old son has learned and progressed over a year of mostly virtual kindergarten, but he's gotten in the habit of "passively observing information" through a computer screen. He's hopeful that in-person 1st grade will be more active and creative.

"I'm looking forward to him having a little more joy in his learning and not being so stuck with the limitations he's been under," Arents said. ■

What teachers should focus on...

- Supporting students' social and emotional well-being
- Taking stock of what students don't know, and building on what they do know
- Creating rich, hands-on lessons that build world knowledge and vocabulary

SOURCE: Education Week reporting
Collage by Vanessa Solis/Education Week (Images: Getty)

> "Students may be acting out because they aren't yet used to sitting still and listening for large periods of time. Already, children of color—particularly Black boys—are disproportionately identified for special education services.
>
> **CARRIE GILLISPIE**
> A senior P-12 research associate at the Education Trust, a national nonprofit

Impacting Reading Proficiency

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IMPACT

To powerfully affect or influence someone or something.

As educators, we are interested in positively impacting students' lives (present and future), their families' lives, and our communities. We know one of the best indicators to improve the trajectory for our K–3 students is reading proficiency. When students are proficient readers by the end of third grade, their opportunities to learn and engage in classrooms increase significantly.

Our country has been tracking reading proficiency for decades. These statistics come to life for us as we are keenly reminded of them every day in our classrooms: 64 percent of students are not reading proficiently by the end of third grade, and 76 percent of those students will never catch up. This represents over 1.7 million third-grade students every year. Recent studies show these numbers will likely increase due to the pandemic. The reasons include, but are not limited to, unfinished learning, a decline in kindergarten reading readiness, and social-emotional conditions for both educators and students.

As educators, we feel these numbers at our core because they represent students in our lives today. We have witnessed students' excitement as they read independently for the first time and become confident and proficient readers. The fact that there are students who cannot experience excitement or confidence from reading troubles us immensely. The inability to read well limits how our students will live, work, and serve their families and communities in the future.

Collectively, we can have a powerful influence on these statistics and, most importantly, on the lives of the students they represent.

64%

of students do not read proficiently by the end of third grade

76%

of these students will never catch up

1.7 million

These statistics represent 1.7 million third grade students each year.

*www.aecf.org/resources/double-jeopardy

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At Reading Horizons, where reading momentum begins, we value and recognize the positive impact the science of reading has had and will continue to have on reading instruction and proficiency. Much is being done today to help ensure students receive instruction aligned with what is known about how the brain learns to read. Many states have new legislation requiring that the science of reading be reflected in the curriculum. In addition, an increasing number of preservice teachers are learning the science of reading in their colleges of education, and funding has been made available for in-service teachers to receive professional development focused on the research and how to apply it in their classrooms. They learn about things like The Simple View of Reading, Scarborough's Reading Rope, and Ehri's Phases of Word Reading.

If we want reading proficiency to increase, we need to support the implementation of research-based reading instruction in every K–3 classroom. Research has been conclusive that explicit phonics instruction is an essential component of reading for all students, especially striving readers. Empowering educators with training and materials that are based in the science of reading will help improve third-grade reading proficiency.

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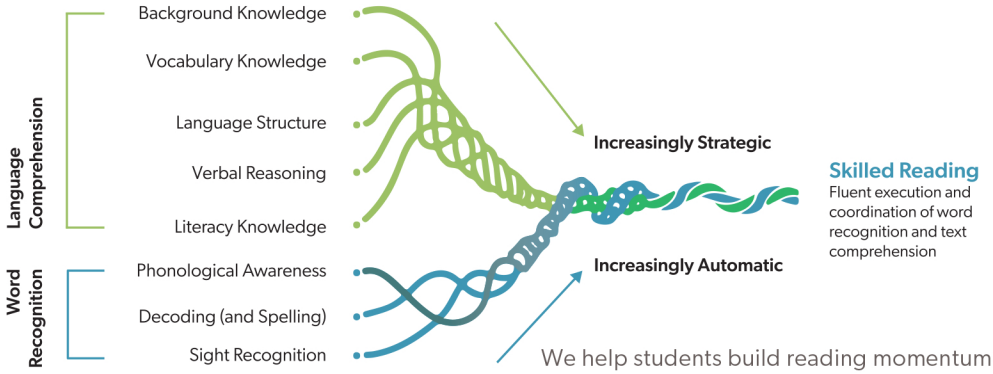

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Maritza A. Martinez-Estrada

Teacher, Grades K-3

Los Angeles Unified School District

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- Teachers are confident in their instructional practices and have the resources they need to support all of their students in the classroom.
- Teachers have the necessary knowledge and support they need so they can be more effective and responsive to students' needs.
- Teachers have a more equitable teaching experience and feel valued, capable, prepared, and have the momentum to make instructional decisions to help ensure all of their students are reading proficiently by the end of third grade.

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— **JULIE HARVIN**, K–3 TEACHER, DOTHAN CITY, AL

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Popular 'Wonders' Curriculum Shows Gaps in Alignment To Reading Research

By Sarah Schwartz

A review of one of the top 10 most popular reading programs claims that the curriculum has gaps in its alignment to reading research, and doesn't offer enough supports for teachers.

The analysis comes from Student Achievement Partners, a nonprofit educational consulting group that started tapping teams of researchers to evaluate popular reading programs.

The organization made waves with its first review, published in January 2020, of the Units of Study for Teaching Reading in grades K-5—perhaps the most well-known workshop-style reading program. The researchers said it was "unlikely to lead to literacy success for all of America's public schoolchildren."

A 2021 review is more mixed. The curriculum in question is Wonders, a basal reading program published by McGraw Hill. It's one of the top 10 most popular reading programs, according to an Education Week Research Center survey: 15 percent of early reading teachers surveyed used Wonders in their classrooms.

Because Student Achievement Partners conducted its review before they could access the 2020 version of Wonders, the group evaluated the 2017 California edition. Reviewers found many positives: foundational skills components, lots of English-language learner support, complex texts, and some evidence of knowledge building.

But the reviewers also said the program was "overwhelming" and bulky, "a significant issue that dilutes its many strengths." There's more content than teachers could reasonably get through, they wrote, allowing for teacher choice in designing units—but the reviewers cautioned that this design puts a lot of onus on teachers.

"Teachers could easily shortchange research-based elements," the report reads. "The 'make-your-own-adventure-because-one-cannot-possibly-teach-all-that-is-offered' design of Wonders left reviewers skeptical that crucial aspects of reading acquisition would get the time and attention required to enable all students to become secure in their reading ability."

In an email, Tyler Reed, the senior director of communications for McGraw Hill, wrote that Wonders—and other basals—"include many resources by design." The programs are meant to be comprehensive and address all state standards.

"While we recognize the SAP concerns over the amount of material in California Wonders ©2017, it is also true that the wealth of additional activities, texts, and choices provide an effective way to meet a wider range of students' instructional needs," Reed wrote. He also noted that the company works with district leaders on implementation and training plans.

Review seeks to evaluate alignment to research

These findings don't entirely line up with the Wonders evaluation from the well-known curriculum reviewer EdReports, a nonprofit that enlists teams of teacher reviewers to examine math, English/language arts, and science materials for alignment to the Common Core State Standards. (Most states still use these standards, or similar state variations.)

According to EdReports, the Wonders 2020 edition meets expectations across all domains—the highest rating that the organization gives. The 2017 edition met expectations for text quality, but only partially met expectations for building knowledge.

But the authors of the Student Achievement Partners report claim that their review and EdReports' review don't necessarily contradict each other—they're just measuring different things.

EdReports measures alignment to standards—what the SAP review calls the "what" of curriculum. But SAP says it's evaluating the "how" of curriculum: whether the methods outlined in these materials are evidence-based. "Standards are an outcome. They're not what you do to hit the target," said SAP reviewer David Paige, a professor of literacy and the director of the Jerry L. Johns Literacy Clinic at Northern Illinois University-DeKalb.

Student Achievement Partners' review looked at Wonders in five areas, each evaluated by a different reading researcher:

1. Foundational reading skills
2. Text complexity
3. Knowledge building
4. Support for English-language learners
5. Historically and culturally responsive instruction and representation

The group also consulted five educators who had worked with the curriculum in the Long Beach Unified school district for their opinion on ease of use and reflections on the five above categories.

The program's positives, according to SAP: It has a coherent scope and sequence for letter-feature instruction, includes direct and explicit instruction, and focuses on reading prosody—reading out loud with appropriate expression. Text selections are var-

ied and complex, and there is a full range of English-learner supports throughout the program. There's also racial and ethnic diversity among the characters in the passages that children read.

Still, the reviewers identified what they felt were shortcomings, including pacing that was too slow or too fast in some foundational skills instruction, not enough time spent on each text, and little guidance on which ELL supports and supplements to use in different situations.

The section on equity and cultural responsiveness found that representations of characters of color were "often myopic, shallow, and stereotypical," and that the program included few selections from authors of color.

In his email to Education Week, Reed of McGraw Hill said that changes have been made in some of these areas in the 2020 edition of Wonders, giving students in grades 2-5 more time with individual text sets, increasing some practice opportunities for foundational skills, updating ELL supports, and developing supplemental culturally responsive lessons.

The review also looked at how well the curriculum built student knowledge about social studies and science topics through literacy lessons. It does partially, said Sonia Cabell, an assistant professor of reading education at Florida State University, who reviewed knowledge building for the SAP report. Social studies and science content is covered every week, but the curriculum itself is not organized around these topics, nor designed to systematically build students' knowledge—rather, the curriculum is organized around themes.

What should teachers and schools take away from this analysis?

It's not as simple as a recommendation for—or a warning against—using Wonders, the researchers said.

Schools need to decide what they want their ELA program to do, Cabell said. Wonders may not systematically build knowledge in social studies and science. But, she said, "I think that is a judgment call on whether you want a curriculum that does that."

If a school has strong elementary social studies and science programs, teachers and instructional leaders could look at Wonders, figure out where lessons could reinforce these programs, and then think about where they might want to bring in supplemental resources. But if a content-rich ELA curriculum is a priority, then maybe a school might want to compare Wonders against some of the programs that are specifically designed to meet this goal.

"I don't think anyone English/language arts curriculum is the key to building knowledge," Cabell said.

When it comes to teacher support, the review argues that Wonders doesn't provide enough direction. On the one hand, "I'm not sure if it's fair to expect any reading program to be able to do all that," said Paige. A curriculum is "kind of like a set of tools in the hands of a carpenter," and relies on teacher knowledge, too.

On the other hand, Paige said, it can take a lot of time and effort to figure out how to use those tools effectively.

One of the teachers interviewed for the review said that it took her two years to become comfortable with the program.

And survey results from the Education Week Research Center have found that, in general, only about 1 in 10 teachers feel that their preservice training "completely prepared" them to teach reading.

A school or district using Wonders should be providing a lot of support, especially around pacing, Paige said. ■

Published November 09, 2021

New Curriculum Review Gives Failing Marks To Two Popular Reading Programs

By Sarah Schwartz

Two of the nation's most popular early literacy programs that have been at the center of a debate over how to best teach reading both faced more critiques, receiving bottom marks on an outside evaluation of their materials.

EdReports—a nonprofit organization that reviews K-12 instructional materials in English/language arts, math, and science—published its evaluation of Fountas and Pinnell Classroom, finding that the program didn't meet expectations for text quality or alignment to standards. The release comes on the heels of the group's negative evaluation of the Units of Study from the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project, another popular early reading program.

—iStock/Getty Images Plus

Together, the two reports received the lowest ratings EdReports has given for K-2 curricula in English/language arts, and they're among the three lowest for ELA in grades 3-8.

"The materials don't reflect the shifts—text quality and complexity—especially in K-2," said Stephanie Stephens, EdReports' ELA content specialist for early literacy, referencing key components of the Common Core State Standards—a big part of the organization's review criteria.

These two literacy brands, both published by Heinemann, command large shares of the early reading market.

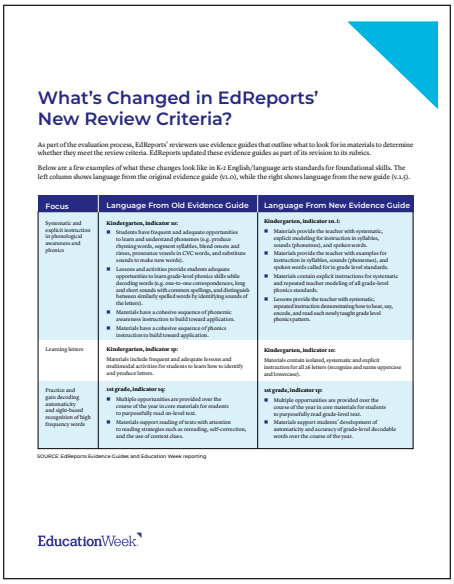
In 2019, a nationally representative EdWeek Research Center survey found that 44 percent of K-2 early reading and special education teachers use Fountas and Pinnell's Leveled Literacy Intervention, the intervention companion to Fountas and Pinnell Classroom. The same survey found that 16 percent of teachers used the Units of Study for Teaching Reading.

These programs have faced criticism from educators and researchers that the instructional methods they use don't align with, or in some cases contradict, the research on how to develop strong readers. Fountas and Pinnell has pushed back against these characterizations. Lucy Calkins, the director of the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project, has announced an upcoming revision to the Units of Study, set to be released in summer 2022. (EdReports reviewed the current version of the materials.)

How these programs attend to foundational skills—teaching students to recognize and manipulate the sounds in words, and then matching those sounds to written letters—is one of the main focuses of the critique. It's also something that EdReports turned a renewed attention toward.

Fountas and Pinnell Classroom and Units of Study are two of the three K-2 reading programs to have gone through EdReports' updated review tools for English/language arts, which "dig deeper" into the sequencing of foundational skills teaching. These evaluation criteria also look for what EdReports calls "bloat," whether all of the content in a set of materials can be taught in one year. Open Court, the third program evaluated with these new tools, partially met expectations.

In its two responses to the reviews on the EdReports website, Heinemann wrote that the EdReports' rubrics aren't a good fit for programs like Fountas and Pinnell Classroom and Units of Study.



What's Changed in EdReports' New Review Criteria?

As part of the evaluation process, EdReports' reviewers use evidence guides that outline what to look for in materials to determine whether they meet the review criteria. EdReports updated these evidence guides as part of its revision to its rubrics.

Below are a few examples of what these changes look like in K-2 English/language arts standards for foundational skills. The left column shows language from the original evidence guide (v1.0), while the right shows language from the new guide (v.1.5).

Focus	Language From Old Evidence Guide	Language From New Evidence Guide
Systematic and explicit instruction in phonological awareness and phonics	**Kindergarten, indicator 1a:** ■ Students have frequent and adequate opportunities to learn and understand phonemes (e.g. produce rhyming words, segment syllables, blend onsets and rimes, pronounce vowels in CVC words, and substitute sounds to make new words). ■ Lessons and activities provide students adequate opportunities to learn grade-level phonics skills while decoding words (e.g. one-to-one correspondence, long and short sounds with common spellings, and distinguish between similarly spelled words by identifying sounds of the letters).	**Kindergarten, indicator 1a. i:** ■ Materials provide the teacher with systematic, explicit modeling for instruction in syllables, sounds (phonemes), and spoken words. ■ Materials provide the teacher with examples for instruction in syllables, sounds (phonemes), and spoken words called for in grade level standards. ■ Materials contain explicit instructions for systematic and repeated teacher modeling of all grade-level phonics standards. ■ Lessons provide the teacher with systematic, repeated instruction demonstrating how to hear, say, encode, and read each newly taught grade level phonics pattern.
Learning letters	**Kindergarten, indicator 1p:** Materials include frequent and adequate lessons and multimodal activities for students to learn how to identify and produce letters.	**Kindergarten, indicator 1o:** Materials contain isolated, systematic and explicit instruction for all 26 letters (to recognize and name uppercase and lowercase).
Practice and gain decoding automaticity and sight-based recognition of high frequency words	**1st grade, indicator 1q:** ■ Multiple opportunities are provided over the course of the year in core materials for students to purposefully read on-level text. ■ Materials support reading of texts with attention to reading strategies such as rereading, self-correction, and the use of context clues.	**1st grade, indicator 1p:** ■ Multiple opportunities are provided over the course of the year in core materials for students to purposefully read grade-level text. ■ Materials support students' development of automaticity and accuracy of grade-level decodable words over the course of the year.

SOURCE: EdReports Evidence Guides and Education Week reporting

EducationWeek

"FPC greatly values the importance of responsive teaching and the teacher agency required to adjust, extend, and enrich learning based on individual student needs," reads one response. "The EdReports rubric provides no way to measure these deeply valuable components of an effective literacy system."

This ethos of teacher agency is one of the reasons that Fountas and Pinnell and the Units of Study are so popular with educators. Both give teachers, and oftentimes students, choice over materials and activities. Still, the EdReports reviews could affect whether schools continue to use them, said Morgan Polikoff, an associate professor of education at USC Rossier who studies K-12 curriculum and standards.

The reviews may influence state-level recommendations, or district leaders might reference them the next time they have to choose curriculum, Polikoff said. It's also possible that parent advocates, like those in Minnesota who have petitioned their school board for better reading instruction, could use these reviews. "A bad EdReports rating could be another piece of evidence that those parents could potentially bring to bear" in attempts to jettison these programs, he said.

Kareem Weaver, a member of the Oakland NAACP Education Committee and the co-founder of FULCRUM, an Oakland group that advocates for evidence-based literacy instruction, said that the reviews could provide the impetus for school districts to reconsider the use of programs that he says don't work for all kids.

"I'm really hoping it will make people do a double take," he said.

Reviews critique text complexity, foundational skills

Since its launch in 2015, EdReports has recruited educators—teachers and other instructional leaders—to conduct its reviews, and to develop the rubrics used to judge materials. These rubrics measure alignment to the Common Core State Standards, usability in a classroom setting, and other indicators of quality, such as text complexity.

The company is one of the few organizations that provides external evaluations of curricula, and its reviews have a wide reach: As of 2020, EdReports said that at least 1,084 districts use its reviews, including 89 of the 200 largest districts in the country. (There are about 13,400 school districts in the United States.)

Still, not everyone agrees with EdReports' conclusions. Publishers have critiqued the group's methodology and rating system in the past, claiming that reviewers failed to consider supplemental materials and taking issue with the organization's "gateway" system, which requires that a program meet the standards set for alignment before it can be evaluated on other features. EdReports made a few changes to its process after publishers pushed back on its first set of math reviews, though the gateway system remains.

Fountas and Pinnell Classroom failed to pass the first gateway. In K-2, reviewers said that core texts didn't meet standards for quality or complexity, and that speaking and writing assignments didn't require students to use evidence from the texts they read. EdReports also critiqued Fountas and Pinnell's text leveling system, which it said was "not accompanied by an accurate text complexity analysis and a rationale for educational purpose and placement in the grade level." The group gave a similar evaluation for the program in grades 3-8.

While the K-2 program's word study lessons teach phonics, "the program does not present a research-based or evidence-based explanation for the sequence" of instruction, reviewers found. The report also claims that the program doesn't consistently devote enough time to systematic instruction in phonological awareness, phonics, and fluency.

Units of Study also didn't pass EdReports' first gateway, which measures alignment to the common core. For grades K-2, reviewers said that texts featured in the materials "are not appropriately complex for the grade level and do not build in complexity over the course of the year." They also noted that the program focused mostly on reading skills instruction, rather than "questions and tasks aligned to grade-level stan-

dards," like asking students to use information from the text to support opinions.

Instruction in foundational reading skills like phonological awareness and phonics, they said, "lacks a cohesive and intentional scope and sequence." The review also notes that the materials rely on cueing strategies for word identification: prompting students to draw on pictures, context, and sentence structure—along with letters—to figure out what words say. But research has shown that pulling students' attention away from the letters can lower the chances that they'll use their knowledge of letter-sound correspondences to read through a word, making it less likely that they'll be able to map the spelling to the spoken word in their memory.

Reviewers found text complexity lacking in grades 3-8, as well, and they said that the program lacks "a variety of regular, standards-aligned, text-based listening and speaking opportunities," as well as opportunities for on-demand writing and systematic vocabulary development.

Not every program reviewed against EdReports' rubric received low marks. Open Court, the third program reviewed with the tools, fared better. It partially met expectations at the first gateway, and also at the second gateway, which measures knowledge building. In grades K-2, reviewers reported a research-based approach to foundational skills instruction, but noted that there wasn't enough practice with encoding—hearing sounds and converting them into written language.

Reviewers said that only some texts were "appropriately complex for the grade level," and also said that the program missed opportunities for standards-aligned activities. They had the same critique for the grades 3-5 materials.

Publishers claim that EdReports tool is mismatched to their approach

As part of the review process, EdReports solicits publisher responses to its evaluations, posted publicly on its website. McGraw Hill, which publishes Open Court, and Heinemann both critiqued the review process in their responses.

The McGraw Hill response claimed that EdReports had overlooked end-of-unit opportunities for students to demonstrate knowledge, citing the curriculum's unit-long "Inquiry" process.

Heinemann criticized the EdReports review process for omitting texts that students read outside of whole-group instruction.

In Units of Study, students only spend limited time in a whole-group "minilesson," before moving on to the reading workshop, during which they apply the skills taught in the minilesson to independent reading, reading with a partner, or working with the teacher one-on-one or in small groups. FPC is structured similarly, with whole-class minilessons but also guided reading, independent reading, and student book clubs.

Heinemann's responses argue that EdReports' review design prioritizes textbook-style reading curricula, and fails to capture the quality of texts that students might read on their own or in small groups. The publisher did not respond to EdReports' critiques of foundational skills instruction.

Stephens, of EdReports, said the group is not discriminating based on design and approach, but rather evaluating whether students have guaranteed access to grade-level text. "If they're using independent reading at their level, there's not a guarantee that's at grade level," she said.

Separately, Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell, the program's namesakes and founding authors, have begun to publish a 10-part blog series rebutting claims that their program is not aligned to reading science.

In the series, the authors defend their program's use of cueing and other strategies that are central to their materials but which studies have shown are ineffective, like leveled reading groups.

"If a reader says 'pony' for 'horse' because of information from the pictures, that tells the teacher that the reader is using meaning information from the pictures, as well as the structure of the language, but is neglecting to use the visual information of the print," one of the blogs reads. "His response is partially correct, but the teacher needs to guide him to stop and work for accuracy." This idea is in direct contrast to what most cognitive scientists say about how strong readers process new words.

The Teachers College Reading and Writing Project, which writes the Units of Study, has also separately responded to the EdReports reviews. A post on the group's website argues that the program has a different approach to meeting common-core standards than EdReports does. "At a fundamental level, ours is a paradigm where choice matters, where agency matters. EdReports uses a rubric that does not value those things." TCRWP cited, for example, that when teachers were provided with a choice to assign on-demand writing, EdReports didn't award full marks because the writing was not a requirement.

"This is always the challenge of applying a rubric to things that differ in a lot of ways. It's an imperfect science," said Polikoff, of USC Rossier. "The question is, is it better than not having it? And to me, the answer is yes."

> "At a fundamental level, ours is a paradigm where choice matters, where agency matters. EdReports uses a rubric that does not value those things."
>
> **THE TEACHERS COLLEGE READING AND WRITING PROJECT**

EdReports is working with one set of criteria, and can give teachers information about how programs line up according to that criteria—information that is often hard to come by, Polikoff said. There aren't many avenues for teachers to find third-party evaluations of materials, he added.

Matthew Alexander, the director of elementary literacy and numeracy for Hall County Schools in Gainesville, Ga., said his district relies both on outside evaluation and internal data in making decisions about what programs to use.

Hall County uses one piece of Fountas and Pinnell Classroom—the Phonics, Spelling, and Word Study component—across its 20 elementary schools. The district also use its Benchmark Assessment System.

Alexander plans to discuss the review with other leaders in the school system, as it relates to their phonics instruction. But he's hesitant to make any quick changes, because Hall County only started using Phonics, Spelling, and Word Study in the 2019-20 school year, right before the pandemic hit.

"If we were seeing that in our schools, that our kids were not making gains as readers, we would certainly look to see if we would shift our resources in a different direction. But with just three years of non-typical data, it's hard to make that statement," Alexander said.

Review tool changes address foundational skills, program 'bloat'

The low ratings on some indicators in these reviews stem from changes to EdReports' review tools.

In 2020, EdReports announced its first revision to its criteria and its evidence guides—a sort of handbook for reviewers that helps them identify evidence that programs meet, or don't meet, the criteria. Part of this update are two key changes to how reviewers evaluate English/language arts materials.

One has to do with how reviewers approach foundational skills instruction in K-5. Criteria and evidence guides are more specific about when and how these skills should be taught.

For example, criteria that require systematic and explicit teaching in the alphabetic principle, phonemic awareness, phonics, and other skills has now been split into four subcategories, each with its own grade-by-grade breakdown of what students should be able to do in the evidence guide.

EdReports has also cut guidance that says programs "should instruct the teacher to employ syntactic or semantic cueing systems when the phonics patterns do not work or to confirm a word choice." These changes have come as reporting and the work of reading researchers have turned increased public scrutiny toward cueing over the past few years.

The revision brings the comprehensive ELA reviews more in line with the stricter criteria in stand-alone reviews of foundational skills, which EdReports launched in 2019, said Stephens. This way, she said, comprehensive reading programs will be judged as rigorously on their foundational skills components.

Still, Stephens thinks that the programs reviewed under the revised tools would have fared similarly under the originals. The revision provided "clarity," she said, rather than an entire new scoring system.

The other change to the review process concerns what EdReports calls program "bloat."

If a program says, for example, take 15 minutes a day for reading and 20 minutes for foundational skills, is that actually doable with the materials provided? Or is there too much content to feasibly get through? The program should offer a "clear and concise" pathway through the standards, Stephens said.

EdReports has also made some changes to its math review process, and has updated its criteria for gateway 3, which measures usability, across all subjects.

Louisa Moats, an early literacy expert and the lead writer of LETRS, a professional development program for reading teachers, has critiqued EdReports' criteria in the past. She said that the new review tools are more closely aligned with research-based practice in reading instruction.

"These standards are much better for identifying practices in programs that are wildly off base. They're a pretty good firewall in recognizing the programs that are wildly misaligned with reading science and with practices that have been shown to be ineffective with most kids. ... That's really good," she said.

Still, she said, even if a program passes the review, its success or failure is going to come down to how the skills are taught in the classroom.

Weaver, in Oakland, said that the field needs more information about the effectiveness of popular reading materials. "What [EdReports] doesn't do is it doesn't talk about student achievement results. It doesn't talk about how kids do with the program. And that's fine, because they don't claim to do that. But a lot of districts think they do," he said.

"Alignment with the standards is the bare minimum that we should be able to expect from the curriculum," Weaver said. ■

Published October 13, 2021

More States Are Making the 'Science Of Reading' a Policy Priority

By Sarah Schwartz

As states have crafted plans for addressing the academic disruptions caused by the coronavirus pandemic, one area has emerged as a policy priority: early reading instruction.

At least 18 states and the District of Columbia have said that they plan to use COVID-19 relief funding through the American Rescue Plan or previous aid packages to support teacher training or instruction in evidence-based approaches to early literacy. At least four states have passed new laws or enacted regulations that mandate teachers be taught, and use, techniques that are grounded in the large body of research on how children learn to read.

While some of these developments are designed to support students with pandemic-interrupted education, they're also part of years-long legislative momentum on expanding research-based reading instruction that started pre-COVID, said Kymyona Burk, the policy director for early literacy at ExcelinEd, an advocacy group founded by Jeb Bush, Florida's former governor. Burk was previously the Mississippi Department of Education's state literacy director, leading the implementation of Mississippi's Literacy-Based Promotion Act.

In early 2020, Education Week reported that at least 11 states had enacted laws aimed at expanding evidence-based early instruction in grades K-3 over the past three years.

There's a large, established body of research in psychology, human development, and cognitive science focused on how people learn to read. This literature spans many processes, from vocabulary acquisition to comprehension to the role of background knowl-

"While some of these developments are designed to support students with pandemic-interrupted education, they're also part of years-long legislative momentum on expanding research-based reading instruction that started pre-COVID.

KYMYONA BURK
Policy director for early literacy at ExcelinEd

edge. One of the key findings in this research, though, relates to foundational reading skills, which allow children to decipher print.

Decades of studies have shown that explicitly and systematically teaching students which sounds represent which letters—teaching them phonics—is the most effective way to get them reading words. But as reporting from Education Week and other outlets has demonstrated, many teacher preparation programs don't teach their students how to deliver this kind of instruction.

North Carolina's new law, passed in April of 2021, requires teacher training in the "science of reading," while in Pennsylvania, teacher preparation programs are now mandated to teach "structured literacy"—defined as a "strong core" of foundational skills integrated alongside instruction in listening, speaking, reading, writing, and spelling.

Also, Arkansas banned three-cueing, a practice of word identification that encourages students to rely on pictures and context to decipher words, not just letters. Connecticut passed a law requiring schools to use "evidence-based" reading materials, to be selected from an approved list drawn up by a department of education committee.

While many reading researchers agree that many teachers could benefit from more training in evidence-based methods, some also voiced concerns about the unintended consequences of using legislation as a lever for change.

"Legal remedies are a clumsy, heavy-handed tool. If you write a law saying you can't use three-cueing approaches, that's easy to evade and difficult to enforce," said Mark Seidenberg, a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison who studies reading.

On the other hand, he said: "Nothing else was working. And the laws are having some impact."

Legislation makes promises but has limits

Mandating that teachers use "evidence-based" methods isn't a new phenomenon, said P. David Pearson, a reading researcher and emeritus faculty member at the University of California, Berkeley, Graduate School of Education.

Reading First, the George W. Bush-era grant program authorized under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, required schools to use "scientifically based reading research" to receive grant funding.

But critics of the program argued that its implementation put too much focus on one area of the science—foundational skills instruction—leaving teachers without enough time to work with young students on other key components of literacy instruction, like building vocabulary and background knowledge and developing comprehension skills.

With these new policies, states and districts should take care not to repeat this pattern, said Claude Goldenberg, a professor emeritus at Stanford University who studies early literacy development in English-language learners. "We need to learn from things that don't work out, even if experiments say they should," he said.

But Burk, of ExcelinEd, said it's crucial to help teachers develop a common understanding of how children learn the foundations of reading—an understanding that often isn't taught in their preparation programs or in professional development.

"With legislation, we can ensure that these things are happening everywhere," she said. Some new laws, like North Carolina's, write in this support for teachers through professional development, and detail how the state will hold teacher preparation programs accountable for conveying this information.

Fostering teacher buy-in will be crucial, said Pearson. "Programs that engage the teachers and help them develop ownership of it, [that] make them responsible for implementation and monitoring one another, create a system that becomes self-monitoring. Reform efforts that don't take into account the social and cultural facets of learning are, I think, never going to be effective."

Laws like the one in Arkansas, which bans three-cueing, also put pressure on curriculum publishers to align to evidence-based practice, said Seidenberg: "If they want to continue selling their products in those markets, they are going to have to change enough to satisfy the stipulations in those laws."

Aligning materials will be the next task for these states, Burk said. "We are teaching teachers how to teach reading, and then they're going back into their classrooms and looking at their materials and saying, 'This doesn't line up.'" ■

State Laws or Actions on 'Science of Reading'

State	Description
Pennsylvania	In September, the Pennsylvania state board of education required that teacher preparation programs in the state include instruction in "structured literacy" for all certification programs in early childhood, elementary/middle, special education, English as a second language, and reading specialist. The board also required that in-service teachers in these areas be trained in "structured literacy." The term is defined by the board as "systemic, explicit instruction that provides a strong core of foundational skills in the language systems of English," and integrates listening, speaking, reading, writing, and spelling.
Arkansas	The state made three-cueing illegal in April, with the passage of a law that banned schools from using the "three-cueing system model of reading based on meaning, structure and syntax, and visual, which is also known as 'MSV.'" The law also banned schools from using instruction that relies on "visual memory as the primary basis for teaching word recognition." Schools that violate the law could lose 10 percent of their state funding.
Connecticut	A law passed in June required the state department of education to develop a research-based reading plan to improve performance for struggling students, and to establish a Center for Literacy Research and Reading Success. By July 2022, the Center has to approve at least five evidence-based reading curriculum models or programs, and at least five assessments. Starting in the 2023-24 school year, districts have to use approved curricula and assessments.
North Carolina	Passed in April, North Carolina's new reading law requires educator preparation programs in the state to train elementary teachers in the science of reading, and it requires continuing education credits in courses "grounded in the science of reading" for teacher license renewal. The law also mandates that schools design "Individual Reading Plans" for struggling students in K-3.

SOURCE: Education Week

A Flourish data visualization

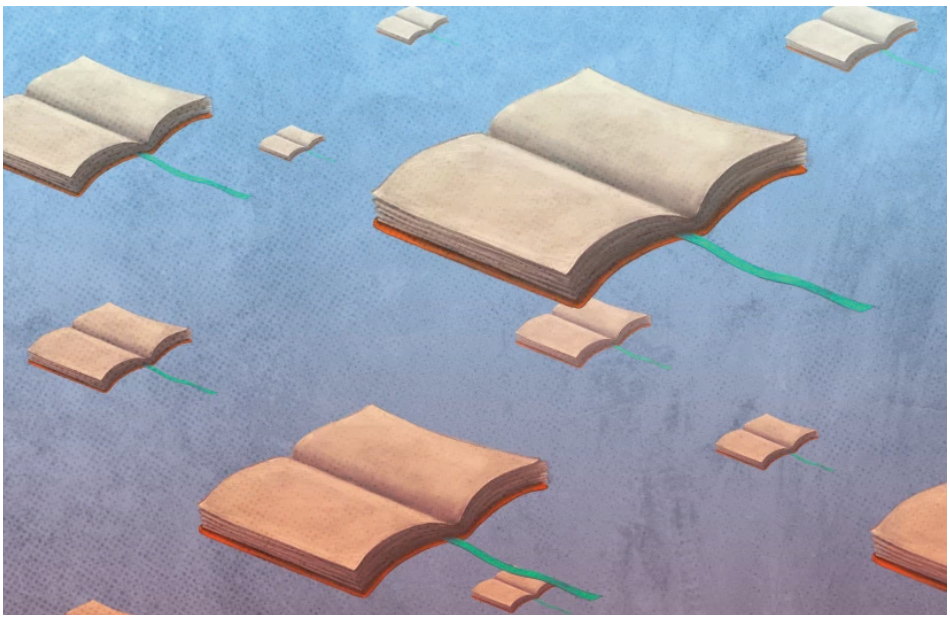
Additional Resource
Click here and scroll through by state How Schools Are Using COVID Relief Funds.

OPINION

Published September 23, 2021

The Science of Reading Should Make Room For Skepticism (Just Not for Ignorance)

By Claude Goldenberg



—Jorm Sangsorn/iStock

The COVID-19 pandemic has provided front row seats to an underappreciated truth about science. I'm not referring to white coats and spinning test tubes. I'm referring to the part of science dealing with uncertainty.

Those who tout the science of teaching—particularly the science of reading—should take note.

In the beginning of the pandemic, uncertainty was all there was. What's this new virus? How do we stay safe?

Since then, masking and social-distancing regulations have undergone continual changes as variants emerge and data are collected and analyzed. Data and understanding have increased. So have frustration, confusion, distrust, and cynicism.

But—as President Joe Biden might say—here's the thing: Data offer no guarantee, don't answer all questions, and are often contradictory.

There are now some well-established facts about the coronavirus. Most importantly, the vaccines are extremely effective in preventing serious disease and death. Masks and social distancing also contribute to slowing the spread of the virus. But there are no guarantees, as the rise of the Delta variant and waning of vaccine efficacy have shown.

Responsible medical professionals say two things: First, they emphasize what we know minimizes the disease's spread. Second, they acknowledge what we still don't know and don't overpromise.

This is what gives science its credibility: the systematic search for answers coupled with a willingness to acknowledge uncertainty.

"All science has uncertainty," scholars Baruch Fischhoff and Alex L. Davis wrote in the journal Proceedings of the National Academic of Sciences. "A healthy scientific community rewards members who raise problems before their critics and penalizes those who overstate results."

Which brings me back to reading science. In contrast to what we've generally heard during the pandemic, the unknowns around the science of reading are rarely acknowledged adequately by reading-science advocates. This can give the "science" part of the "science of reading" a bad name.

In 2004—at a time when laboratory scientists were slowly chipping at the mRNA research that would lay the foundation for the COVID-19 vaccine—education researcher Joseph Torgesen laid out these reading-science knowns and unknowns. Unfortunately, his contribution has not had nearly the impact on the science of reading that mRNA has had in creating life-saving vaccines.

Torgesen and a network of researchers quantified the extent to which early reading failure could be prevented if beginning and early reading instruction focused on "foundational skills." Most people know these, a bit simplistically, as "phonics" or "decoding."

Here is what Torgesen said we know or can claim with reasonable certainty:

Early reading failure could be reduced if instruction focused on the foundations of word recognition—letters and sounds, phonemic awareness, and knowing how to use letters and sounds to read words. Children who begin school without good phonological skills and understanding of the alphabetic principle are at risk of developing reading difficulties.

But just how much foundational-skills instruction is needed, how intensely and explicitly, varies. All children benefit from at least some explicit instruction in foundational skills. Some will require very little; some will require a great deal.

Children who are poor readers at the end of 1st grade rarely become at least average-level readers by the time they finish elementary school. Early intervention focusing on foundational skills with children at risk for or experiencing reading difficulties in K-2 will increase the likelihood that they become at least low-average readers by the end of 2nd grade.

In six experimental studies that Torgesen reviewed, interventions with either the poorest readers or children at risk for reading failure brought most of the students (56 percent to 92 percent) to at least the 30th percentile (the beginning of the "low average" range) in word-reading skills. If the procedures and conditions used in these studies were implemented nationwide, the failure rate in early reading—the percentage of students who would not reach the 30th percentile on basic word-reading skills by the end of 2nd grade—could theoretically be

reduced to between 2 percent and 6 percent.

Finally, much more than foundational skills (language, knowledge, experience) are required if we are to prevent reading failure after 2nd grade.

Here is what Torgesen said were the uncertainties:

- How effective are early interventions in the absence of solid classroom instruction (i.e., Tier 1) that effectively taught foundational skills to most students in the studies?
- What conditions need to be in place so that virtually every child can acquire adequate word-level reading skills in early-elementary school?
- How effective are early interventions in preventing reading failure from 3rd grade on?

Torgesen acknowledged that the standard he used to judge success—the 30th percentile on basic word-reading skills—is very limited. The criterion for success at preventing early reading failure, he wrote, must include reading comprehension at the end of 3rd grade.

Torgesen noted that such studies did not exist. The significance of attaining near-average word-reading skills lies in the expectation that doing so will promote reading development and help prevent reading failure beyond 2nd grade. But there remains an urgent need for research looking into the role of language, comprehension, knowledge, and experience in preventing reading failure.

The science of reading is not as clear on fundamental facts as is the science of COVID-19 immunology. Phonics, decoding, and associated skills provide no immunizations against poor reading outcomes. But they do provide a foundation upon which we must build.

More so than vaccine skeptics, "phonics skeptics" have some reason to be skeptical. There is more to reading than recognizing words.

Most important, there's still a great deal we don't know about how to assure virtually all children become successful readers. As researchers Sharon Vaughn and Jack Fletcher point out, "There are some rather large holes in our collective knowledge."

Skepticism is an important part of science. As the Delta variant began spreading, a once-skeptical Arkansan who had been avoiding the shots due to false reports that they cause infertility, learned through online research that vaccination was the way to go. She told The Washington Post, "Skepticism is a good thing. But to be ignorant is a different issue."

Spoken like a true scientist. ■

Claude Goldenberg is the Nomellini & Olivier Professor of Education, emeritus, at Stanford University and a former elementary and middle school teacher.

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