EDUCATION WEEK
2020

SPOTLIGHT

—Rogelio V. Solis/AP-File

Elize'a Scott, a 3rd grade student at Key Elementary School in Jackson, Miss., reads under the watchful eyes of teacher Crystal McKinnis in April 2019. Mississippi has become a national leader in requiring teachers to know research-based strategies for teaching reading. Many other states are following suit, passing a flurry of laws in the last three years.

EARLY CHILDHOOD LITERACY

EDITOR'S NOTE

Educators are continually seeking out the most effective ways to teach early reading instruction. In this Spotlight, learn how teachers are boosting reading comprehension, discover how school closures are affecting early reading instruction, and catch up on new state laws regarding early reading.

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OPINION

New York City educator Lauren Olivieri teaches a reading lesson in an episode of Let's Learn NYC! The episodes, designed for students ages 3-8 and broadcast on public television, each include read-alouds and work on foundational reading skills.

Published on June 1, 2020, in Education Week

Early Reading Instruction Takes a Hit During COVID-19

By Sarah Schwartz

For Claudia Margaroli, teaching reading during the coronavirus school shutdowns has looked nothing like what she used to do in the classroom.

Instead of small group work, the 1st grade teacher at Charlotte East Language Academy in Charlotte, N.C., sees all her students in a whole-class Google Meet video chat twice a week.

She tries to answer the questions that students have in their district-issued packets, but keeping more than 30 wiggly 1st graders on task remotely is a challenge. When the video freezes, it's hard to write words on her whiteboard for students to sound out, or decode.

She worries most about her students who were already struggling with foundational reading skills, like phonemic awareness—identifying and manipulating the sounds in spoken words—and phonics, the relationship between spoken sounds and written letters.

"Is this increasing the gap?" Margaroli asked. "Because the kids who are spending the most time on learning right now are kids whose parents are home, who can understand this reading packet in English."

While remote learning has presented challenges in every subject and grade level, some teachers and researchers say that early reading instruction is especially problematic.

Teaching young students how to read and write often requires hands-on activities, like manipulating letter tiles, or learning how to form their shapes. And before they can sound out words, children rely on read-alouds, interactive play, and conversations to learn vocabulary and build knowledge about the world. They can't read a complex informational text on their own.

Researchers for the Northwest Evaluation Association project that coronavirus closures could lead to much greater learning loss in reading than usually occurs during the traditional "summer slide."

But with the stress and trauma that many students are experiencing during the shutdowns, it's possible that the effects could be even greater, said Emily Solari, a professor of reading education at the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education and Human Development. And it's hard to say how foundational skills development, specifically, will be affected, she added.

Teaching students how to read words is always critical, she said, because they have to be able to read to succeed in every subject. But this fall, the stakes will be higher.

"Now that we have kids that have lost access to critical face-to-face instruction in reading … this becomes even more urgent as we bring them back," she said.

Ed Tech 'For Better or Worse'

Researchers say there isn't much information about what kind of remote teaching works best for early reading.

"Educational technology is often looked at with skepticism, but for better or worse in this era when there aren't a lot of other choices … adaptive ed tech might have a place," said Fumiko Hoeft, a psychology professor at the University of Connecticut.

Hoeft and UConn professor Kenneth Pugh are currently conducting a study to test the effectiveness of GraphoLearn, a foundational skills reading app, in a distance learning environment. Hoeft also plans to use data from the study to "quantify the COVID slide," and see how much it deviates from estimates.

"It's hard to predict, in many ways, what the outcomes will be," she said. It's possible that they might find differences in learning loss by zip code, she said, or even by what distance learning approach different schools used.

Nell K. Duke, a professor of literacy, language, and culture at the University of Michigan's School of Education, has created two instructional videos for reading teachers who are teaching over Zoom: One demonstrating how to teach phonemic awareness, phonics, and vocabulary lessons, and the other showcasing two small group lessons—one in phonics instruction, and one designed to build students' knowledge about food chains.

"Those are all things we would do in a face to face environment in a classroom, and things that we can do—provided we have high-speed internet and devices—in a virtual environment," Duke said.

Some teachers have taken this approach, transferring their lessons almost wholesale from the classroom to the screen.

Brittany Reeves, a 1st grade teacher in Mountain Home, Ark., meets for one-on-

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> Now that we have kids that have lost access to critical face-to-face instruction in reading ... this becomes even more urgent as we bring them back."
>
> **EMILY SOLAR**
> PROFESSOR OF READING EDUCATION, UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA'S CURRY SCHOOL OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

one, half-hour Zoom sessions with most of her students once a week. She said she's able to touch on every aspect of a lesson she would have done in the classroom, though in a slightly abbreviated way.

'Crash Course' in Reading for Parents

For students who don't have internet or devices at home, Reeves had to come up with other options. At school, students use beads to represent the individual phonemes, or smallest units of sound, in words. She's explained to parents how to do the activity using whatever small objects they have at home—grains of rice can work, she said.

Giving parents this kind of explicit instruction can be helpful, said Duke. Without parent or teacher support, early elementary students may not get far in paper-and-pencil exercises on their own, Duke said. "I'm not aware of any research showing that young children can be provided with a packet and have that provide a measurable positive impact on their literacy development," she said.

Some reading researchers have started developing resources for this purpose. The Florida Center for Reading Research at Florida State University put out a series of videos on its YouTube channel, demonstrating foundational skills activities and comprehension lessons that parents can do at home with their children at different grade levels.

Margaroli, the teacher in North Carolina, tries to support parents as they work with their children on the district-provided packets. But she also feels guilty because she can only help those who she's in contact with, and she hasn't been able to consistently reach all of her families.

Coaching parents comes with its own set of challenges, too. While students are with her on Zoom, Margaroli sometimes overhears parents sounding out words incorrectly, using letter names, rather than letter sounds, for example. But she's so grateful that families are devoting time to lessons at all that she hesitates to correct them. "It's difficult to teach the parents during this time as well," Margaroli said. "[It's] a crash course in how to teach reading."

Some states and districts have turned to an older technology: public television.

In New York City, the local public broadcasting channel runs hourlong episodes of Let's Learn NYC!, a supplement to schools' remote learning, every weekday. The lessons, designed for students ages 3-8 and delivered by New York City educators, each include read-alouds and work on foundational reading skills, such as phonemic awareness and phonics.

"We are trying to follow what the science of reading tells us as much as possible, given that these are 12- to 14-minute segments," said Andrew Fletcher, the senior executive director of early literacy at the New York City Department of Education.

Starting in June, Let's Learn NYC! is expanding to two hours each day—one for preschool and and kindergarten students, and the other for grades 1-2. The expanded programming will allow for more differentiation, Fletcher said, but the episodes can't match the individualized attention kids could get in a classroom. "It's still a huge developmental continuum, where we're attempting to meet thousands of children's needs," he said.

Balancing Instruction and Safety

Figuring out where students need support, in foundational skills and content knowledge, will be many schools' top instructional priority when classes are back in session this fall.

"Teachers are really going to have to be masters of data analysis," said Zanovia Curtis, the supervisor of elementary education and federal programs for the West Feliciana Parish Schools in Francisville, La. Her district is planning to start the year with diagnostic assessments administered in person if safety guidelines allow, or online if not.

Curtis hopes that small groups of students could come in for intervention instruction, as broadband access continues to be a barrier to live lessons in their rural community, she said. "There's just a lot of variables in the air that we're trying to hammer down right now," she said.

Such logistical and safety concerns can have a big effect on early reading instruction, said Penny Schwinn, Tennessee's education commissioner. For example: How can teachers deliver phonemic awareness and phonics lessons with masks on?

"In order to learn to read, you actually need to be able to see each other's mouths," she said.

The state is thinking about challenges like this as it develops guidance for next year, Schwinn said.

Earlier this year, before schools closed in response to the pandemic, the Tennessee education department proposed major legislation requiring all K-3 teachers to know about evidence-based reading instruction. The department is still "firmly committed" to these goals, Schwinn said.

In June, the department plans to release a free, digital foundational skills supplement for pre-K-2, for teachers to use as a resource whether classes are in person or online next year. Districts' plans for 2020-21 will include dedicated sections for early literacy development, Schwinn said.

> We are trying to follow what the science of reading tells us as much as possible, given that these are 12- to 14-minute segments."
>
> **ANDREW FLETCHER**
> SENIOR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, EARLY LITERACY, NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

In Arkansas, the state department of education assembled teams of teachers to create an "Academic Playbook" for the beginning of next school year, which includes optional unit plans for essential

standards that they weren't able to cover before the shutdowns.

In early grades English/language arts, the current-year teachers developed lessons for the next grade for the 2020-21 school year. For example, 2nd grade teachers created catch-up lessons for 3rd graders in the fall to cover 2nd grade standards they missed in the spring, said Missy Walley, the director of special projects in the Arkansas Department of Education's division of elementary and secondary education.

"Some of the anxiety is 'I'm a 3rd grade teacher and I know my standards, but now you're asking me to teach second grade standards?'" Walley said.

Margaroli, the 1st grade teacher in North Carolina, worries about this: Will she be expected to teach end-of-year kindergarten skills next year?

But she's even more concerned about how social distancing restrictions might affect her teaching.

In her reading classroom, students switch from whole-group lessons to different small groups several times a day, so that they can get more individualized support. Will that kind of movement be allowed next year, she wonders?

She's trying to wrap her mind around that idea that being student-centered might mean putting safety above best practice in the fall. "[It] isn't just about instruction, it's also about wellbeing," she said. "Shifting that focus is hard." ■

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States to Schools: Teach Reading the Right Way

By Catherine Gewertz

Worried that far too many students have weak reading skills, states are passing new laws that require aspiring teachers—and, increasingly, teachers who are already in the classroom—to master reading instruction that's solidly grounded in research.

In the past three years alone, at least 11 states have enacted laws designed to expand evidence-based reading instruction in grades K-3. Legislative analysts and activists who monitor the issue have noticed a flurry of recent state action on it.

"There is an absolute buzz around the science of reading. There's no question that states are getting on board with this," said Laura Stewart, the director of the Reading League, a group that works to build understanding of what research says about good reading instruction.

The "science of reading" generally refers to the body of research that's piled up over decades on how children learn to read. The National Reading Panel Report, in 2000, articulated what have come to be known as the "big five" essential components of effective reading instruction for young children. The federally funded panel found that most children will become better readers with explicit, systematic phonemic awareness and phonics instruction, as well as instruction in fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension.

Those findings have been reaffirmed in so many studies that they're widely considered settled science. But many elementary schools and teacher-preparation programs still favor a balanced-literacy approach, which draws from the "whole language" movement popular in the '90s, and is based on the idea that children learn to read if they're given good books and the right supports and strategies. Some phonics instruction is generally included, but it's not necessarily systematic.

—Rogelio V. Solis/AP-File

> "There is an absolute buzz around the science of reading. There's no question that states are getting on board with this."
>
> **LAURA STEWART**
> DIRECTOR, THE READING LEAGUE

Balanced literacy is increasingly coming under attack, however, as educators notice stubborn reading problems, mirrored in national reading scores. The 2019 National Assessment for Educational Progress showed that 4th and 8th grade students have made no progress in reading in the past decade, and between 2017 and 2019, reading performance actually declined. Barely one-third of those students are proficient readers.

A Sharper Focus

Those results added new urgency to what was already a mushrooming cloud of legislative activity on reading. Passing laws to improve reading is nothing new; many states have ambitious reading-improvement programs enshrined in law, and some don't let 3rd graders move to 4th grade unless they read proficiently. In 2015, the Education Commission of the States found that requiring aspiring

teachers to pass a test in reading instruction was an "emerging trend."

But what distinguishes the newer crop of laws in the last few years is their sharpened focus. Many are spelling out the elements of research-proven reading instruction, specifying the big-five components of reading from the National Reading Panel report, or citing other foundational skills known to be important to reading, such as building students' base of content knowledge.

Recent laws also put the entire pipeline of reading instruction directly in their crosshairs, imposing new requirements not only on aspiring teachers but also on district leaders, principals, and classroom teachers. Most target K-3 teachers, but some laws impose new requirements on all K-6 teachers, and some even reach into high school.

States are working together on this new breed of requirements. State superintendents organized a national convening last month, where they brainstormed about how to hold teacher-prep programs accountable for new teachers' competency in reading instruction; how to press for high-quality, research-based curriculum; and how to work with districts to ensure that current teachers are skilled reading teachers.

States are sharing strategies in other ways, too. The Foundation for Excellence in Education, a policy group, drafted model legislation on the science of reading in 2018, and 18 states have requested it, according to foundation spokesman Joe Follick.

A Comprehensive Approach: Arkansas

A recent batch of laws in Arkansas illustrates the comprehensive approach that states are increasingly taking as they codify new expectations for reading instruction. Starting with the 2017 Right to Read Act, which grew out of the state's major literacy campaign, a half-dozen laws there have imposed new requirements on all parts of the state's reading-instruction pipeline.

Colleges of education must teach "scientific reading instruction" and administer a stand-alone reading test on it, and new teachers must pass it to get a license. School districts must provide training in evidence-based reading instruction and can choose one of a dozen "pathways" by which K-6 teachers can demonstrate proficiency, including taking a test or being observed by an administrator trained to evaluate their reading-instruction skill.

> "I was the least knowledgeable person at the table in those sessions. I had to swallow my pride and just get in there and start learning how kids learn to read."
>
> **BRUCE ORR**
> ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENT, ARKANSAS' LAKESIDE DISTRICT

Teachers in all other grades and subjects, as well as all administrators, are also affected: They must demonstrate "awareness" of the science of reading. The state must also prepare a list of literacy-curriculum materials that reflect evidence-based reading instruction, and after 2021, districts must buy from that list.

It's a massive lift to comply with all the new laws' requirements, including shepherding all 33,000 of the state's certified teachers through training, said Stacy Smith, Arkansas' assistant commissioner for learning services. The K-6 trainings are moving forward, powered in part by a $1 million annual allotment from the governor's rainy-day fund that helps pay for 45 to 50 literacy specialists around the state, Smith said.

About 75 percent of teacher-candidates passed the most recent reading test, she said, a rate she expects will improve. The other 25 percent can work with provisional licenses for a year while they try again to pass it.

Some of the work is about changing attitudes. When the state's science-based reading push kicked off in 2017, Smith said she encountered no shortage of skepticism.

"For 20 years, all our PD had been whole-language-based, balanced literacy," she said. "[We] spent a lot of time figuring out how to turn that ship around for all these literacy specialists who were supposedly the experts. There were a lot of crossed arms, a lot of tough meetings. But we never wavered. We said, 'Either you're on our ship or you're not.'"

Being on that ship is no simple matter for district leaders, even if they believe in the mission. Bruce Orr, the assistant superintendent in the Arkansas' Lakeside district, chose the face-to-face training route for his 90-plus K-6 teachers, with a skilled observation that unfolds over time, rather than letting them take a test to show proficiency in reading instruction.

To lead that process effectively, Orr joined the six-day training his K-2 teachers took. His principals are taking two-day "assessor academy" training to become observers and evaluators of teachers' reading instruction.

'I Had to Swallow My Pride'

"I was the least knowledgeable person at the table in those sessions," he said. "I had to swallow my pride and just get in there and start learning how kids learn to read."

The district's academic coach, its principals, and assistant principals are now taking their training into classrooms to provide feedback to teachers, Orr said. And he's using his new knowledge on the district's language-arts-curriculum committee, which is choosing new reading materials aligned to evidence-based practices.

Orr worries a little that all his staff members might not meet the proficiency bar when the rubber meets the road. And it's been tough for teachers to find time to accommodate the expanded blocks of reading instruction.

But he sees signs for optimism: Student scores on DIBELS, an early-literacy test, have improved "drastically," Orr said.

He's eager to build on those gains in all his classrooms. As the state's literacy campaign took off three years ago, Orr knew his district had profound academic problems he couldn't pinpoint. Its average ACT scores were high, and its schools routinely got A and B grades from the state. But state test scores showed fewer than 6 in 10 3rd and 4th graders reading pro-

ficiently. In middle and high school, it's barely half or less.

His teachers knew there was a problem and were "hungry" for a solution, Orr said. "We didn't have to waste time with them fighting us or saying I don't believe in this."

Tennessee, too, is taking a broad-based approach to tackle reading instruction. Legislation filed Feb. 3, proposed by the department of education and backed by the governor, would provide a free, evidence-based early-literacy curriculum to districts, and they'd be required to use it or show that their own curricula is evidence-based. Districts would also have to use approved curricula designed to build students' content knowledge. All K-3 teachers would be trained in research-based foundational reading instruction, and teacher- and principal-preparation programs would have to teach evidence-based reading instruction.

"If you are in an educator-prep program in the state of Tennessee, you will teach teachers to teach reading in the right way," Commissioner Penny Schwinn said in an interview hours before the bill was filed. A comprehensive approach that touches all parts of the teacher pipeline is necessary, she said. Tackling only teacher prep, or only professional development, results in a "game of Whac-A-Mole" that won't address the roots of students' poor reading skills.

Mississippi Eyes Ed. School Faculty

The roots of many new reading laws trace back to Mississippi, which has emerged as a leader in science-based reading instruction since 2003, when it started requiring colleges of education to teach two courses focused on the key components of good reading instruction. Later, it added more requirements: Teacher-candidates must pass a test in reading science, and elementary schools must certify that their curricula address the key components of reading. The state appropriates $15 million each year to pay for professional development, literacy coaches—the state has 74 this year—and other supports.

Mississippi's work has paid off in ways that have drawn national notice: It was the only state to improve 4th grade reading scores on the 2019 NAEP. Only 21 percent of Mississippi's 4th graders scored "proficient" in reading on NAEP in 2013; by 2019, 32 percent did. Scores on the state's own 3rd grade reading test—which students must pass to move to 4th grade—have risen, too.

Leaders of the science-based-reading movement in Mississippi now have a new target in their sights: the faculty of educator-prep programs. Sparked by studies showing persistent deficiencies in research-based reading instruction in colleges of education, a governor's task force recommended requiring faculty who teach reading instruction to pass a test in the science of reading, said Kelly Butler, the CEO of the Barksdale Reading Institute, which conducted those studies and is a key player in the work to improve reading instruction in Mississippi.

Education school deans have opposed that proposal, so no new rule has been implemented yet, said Kymyona Burk, who oversaw Mississippi's literacy work from 2013 to 2019 and is now the early-literacy policy director for the Foundation for Excellence in Education.

Even as momentum builds for a sharper focus on evidence-based reading instruction, however, support is hardly universal. In schools, some teachers resist moving away from the methods they're used to. One activist in Tennessee said she anticipates pushback from "some board members [who] would die on the hill for balanced literacy."

P. David Pearson, a widely respected literacy expert, is skeptical of the new movement for "evidence-based" reading instruction. Teaching literacy for more than 50 years, he's seen these cycles unfold before.

"With remarkable regularity, every 10 to 12 years, we've had movements to reinfuse phonics and foundational skills into reading," said Pearson, a professor emeritus of education at the University of California, Berkeley.

More Training, More Support, More Coaching

He pointed to Jean Chall's 1967 book, *Learning To Read: The Great Debate*, which emphasized the importance of decoding skills; a "back to basics" movement in the 1990s in response to whole-language instruction; and the early 2000s, when the National Reading Panel and the No Child Left Behind Act produced a renewed focus on reading skills.

This latest cycle, he said, is based on research citations that rely too heavily on brain imaging and not enough on "careful experimental studies" of which instructional approaches produce achievement results. The new push for reading is "obsessed with decoding" at the expense of other crucial skills, such as the development of children's oral language and knowledge base, and "rich discussions of text with the guidance of a teacher."

> "With remarkable regularity, every 10 to 12 years, we've had movements to reinfuse phonics and foundational skills into reading."
>
> **P. DAVID PEARSON**
> PROFESSOR EMERITUS OF EDUCATION, THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY

Even the most ardent backers of good reading instruction say that while state laws can be powerful levers for change, they're not enough. Passing a 2013 law that required 3rd graders to be proficient readers, was a crucial "wakeup call" in Mississippi, Butler said. Also key was the state department of education's control of state funding to supply training and coaching, she said.

Steven Dykstra, who monitors state action on reading as an adviser for the International Foundation for Effective Reading Instruction, said that teachers work hard and want the best for their students, but "giving them a little information or dropping a new reading curriculum into their classrooms isn't going to be enough."

"They're going to need more training, more support, more coaching than people ever imagine will be necessary," Dysktra said. "Passing a state law is just a first step. If you're not prepared to take on the rest of it, you're not going to get where you want to go." ■

—Getty

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Reading Instruction: A Flurry of New State Laws

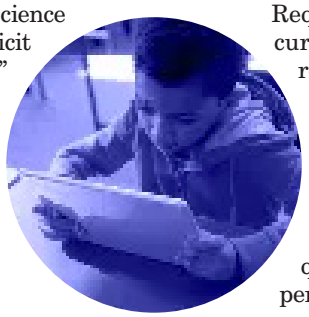
By Catherine Gewertz

Many states have recently enacted laws or rules designed to ensure that teachers are well versed in evidence-based reading instruction. Here are some highlights.

ALABAMA

(2019)

Requires districts to provide core curriculum, professional development, and coaching based on the science of reading. Requires "explicit and systematic instruction" in skills including oral-language development, phonological awareness, decoding, fluency, and comprehension. Preservice teachers must pass a "foundational reading assessment."



ARIZONA

(2018)

Requires districts to provide ongoing training in evidence-based reading, and schools to conduct curriculum evaluations and adopt evidence-based reading curricula that include the essential components of reading. Spells out the "essential components" of reading instruction and specifies "explicit and systematic instruction" of those skills.

ARKANSAS

(2017-2019)

Requires K-6 teachers to demonstrate proficiency in scientific reading instruction and all other teachers, and administrators, to demonstrate "awareness" of it. Requires preservice teachers to take a test in the science of reading for licensure.

COLORADO

(2019)

Requires districts to provide curriculum and instruction in reading that is based on science and evidence and focused on phonemic awareness; phonics; vocabulary development; reading fluency, including oral skills; and reading comprehension. Requires districts that receive per-pupil funds for intervention or early-literacy grants to ensure that K-3 teachers complete evidence-based training in teaching reading.

FLORIDA

(2019, proposed)

Would require that evidence-based reading strategies become part of the rules to establish uniform core curricula for state-approved teacher-preparation programs.

KENTUCKY

(2019)

Requires teacher-preparation programs in elementary education to provide reading instruction on phonetic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. Requires new elementary teachers to pass an approved reading-instruction test.

MISSOURI

(2018)

Requires K-3 teacher-candidates to complete at least six semester hours of reading instruction on the "explicit and systematic" teaching of language acquisition, phonemic and phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension.

NORTH CAROLINA

(2017)

Requires that teacher-prep courses impart a "substantive understanding of reading as a process involving oral language, phonological and phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension." For licensure, K-6 teachers must pass a test on "scientifically-based" reading instruction.

OKLAHOMA

(2019)

Requires that teacher candidates study phonemic awareness, phonics, reading fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, and strategies including "explicitly taught, sequenced" instruction in reading.

RHODE ISLAND

(2019)

Requires teachers seeking elementary licensure to show proficiency in the best practices of scientific reading instruction, and those seeking licensure for other grade levels must show an "awareness" of those practices. Requires districts to provide professional development in science-based reading instruction, and current elementary teachers to demonstrate proficiency in scientific reading instruction and may choose from several pathways to meet that requirement.

TENNESSEE

(2020, proposed)

Would require districts to provide K-2

literacy instruction that includes systematic, evidence-based instruction in phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary development, fluency, oral reading, and reading comprehension. K-3 teachers would have to take two weeks of professional development in evidence-based reading instruction and demonstrate mastery. Teacher- and principal-preparation programs would have to teach evidence-based reading, and candidates would have to pass a test on it.

TEXAS

(2019)

Requires K-6 teacher-candidates to take a certification exam to demonstrate proficiency in the science of teaching reading. Requires all K-3 teachers and principals to complete "reading academies," and districts to provide a phonics curriculum in K-3 that uses "systematic direct instruction."

WEST VIRGINIA

(2019)

Requires elementary teacher-candidates to take nine credit hours of reading instruction that focuses on five essential components of reading. ■

Sources: Education Week, Education Commission of the States, National Conference of State Legislatures

Published on December 3, 2019, in Education Week's Special Report: Getting Reading Right

How Teachers Are Making Phonics Fun

By Sarah D. Sparks

Want to know if it's time for phonics in Belinda Williams's kindergarten classroom? Stand in the hall and listen.

"I love phonics because it's something that's so easy to make fun," Williams said. "We're always doing something very active and very musical."

Williams said her Franklin Community Schools in Franklin, Ind., uses a 90-minute reading block each day, of which 55 minutes cover phonics instruction and practice. Yet she said she usually also dedicates her personal flex time later in the day to phonics, too, with different games everyday, using magnets and Slinkies, among other activities.

There's something to be learned from teachers who end a lesson with singing and dancing students, especially when covering skills some bemoan as the most boring part of early literacy.

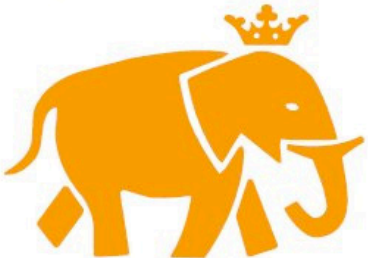
"Early reading instruction needs new thinking. Phonics instruction needs to change as well," said Jeannine Herron, a research neuropsychologist and reading coach in San Rafael, Calif. "Traditional instruction usually presents the skills needed for good reading as isolated skills. First comes phoneme awareness, then phonics, then comprehension and fluency. However, the brain needs to link new learning to something it already knows."

Herron argues a traditional emphasis on worksheet practice and drills of

For older struggling readers, "the material may be targeted for younger kids, but it makes no difference as far as it seeming to be too trivial or lacking the 'wow' factor. ... [W]hen they recognize that they're being given a lesson on how to read, learning how to read becomes a motivator in itself."

J. Lee,
literacy special education teacher,
Bosier City, La.

"Vowels! E, i, and u, are the most difficult to learn, across the board, every year. We'll do chants: 'I-ih-igloo, e-eh-elephant.' ... And I also try to give them the visual with the sound of the word, so 'eh, elephant,' with the 'e' like the elephant's trunk turning in, or 'elbow.'"



Belinda Williams,
kindergarten teacher,
Franklin Community School,
Franklin, Ind.

isolated sounds that are still common in many early reading classrooms turns off teachers and students. She and other educators favor a faster, brighter approach. While research suggests early readers benefit from learning phonics in a structured, systemic way, young students in particular have been shown to remember more when given frequent activity.

Only 1 in 20 teachers reported learning most of what they know about reading instruction before they started teaching, according to a nationally representative survey by the Education Week Research Center. One-third of teachers reported learning it from professional development or coaches in their district.

When Janiel Wagstaff, the English/language arts coordinator for Windridge Elementary in the Davis, Utah, school district first started teaching, "I felt like it was a worksheet factory," she said. Every new sound or concept called for practice worksheets, and it was a grind.

"So the kids are working hard, you know, but I was basically doing back flips and handing out M&M's to get them motivated. 'Cause if you're sitting in your seat by yourself doing a worksheet, how fun and motivating is that?" she said.

Worse, Wagstaff said, "What I found was that what [students] did on the worksheets didn't transfer to real reading and writing, because it was simplified. Kids can do a lot of those worksheets without much actual deep thinking or ... any real application of what they'd just learned. ... It's gotten better, but that's still a rampant problem. Look at [the online marketplace] Teachers Pay Teachers; they are selling massive amounts of [worksheets]."

Wagstaff said she now keeps silent, solitary work to a minimum, instead incorporating chants, nursery rhymes, and partner reading, and encouraging students to play with the patterns of sounds in words.

Herron, who works with the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development on literacy programs including one called "Talking Fingers," recommended that teachers move beyond having students visually identify elements like blends and diagraphs—for example, underlining them—to focus more on feeling the movements their mouths make as they say the sounds.

Over time, these sound analyses can turn into games, said Herron, said Herron. "If the teacher starts with a simple rhyme like /at/, she can play with different sounds to start the word—'What would you add to make this word say 'cat,' 'fat,' 'hat,' 'sat'? In a few lessons [the student] has learned to segment four words, identify six speech sounds, and link the appropriate shapes (letters) to the sounds." ■

62% of teachers say they explicitly test their students on all the letter sounds several times a year in order to find out which ones they've mastered.

SOURCE: Education Week Research Center

Published December 3, 2019, in Education Week's Special Report: Getting Reading Right

The Keys to Comprehension? Vocabulary and Knowledge

By Sarah Schwartz

MATTHEWS, MO.

What do you do when hear a word you don't know? In Ashley Palmer's kindergarten class, you stop. And you talk about it.

Palmer, a teacher at Matthews Elementary School in Missouri's New Madrid district, was telling a story about a family of toy lions during one morning lesson when she got to the word "lass."

"That's one of our vocabulary words," she told the group of children sitting cross-legged on the rug. Then she led the students in clapping out its one syllable, then segmenting the sounds: /l/, /a/, /s/.

—Houston Cofield for Education Week

Ashley Palmer, a kindergarten teacher in Matthews, Mo., works with students on letter names using flashcards.

"It's another word for 'girl,'" Palmer said. "Sometimes when I line you up for bathroom break, instead of saying girls, or ladies, I can say, 'If you are a—'"

"Lass!" the students shouted out, as some sat up on their knees. "'If you are a—lass—you can line up,'" Palmer finished.

The whole process is deceptively simple—it took less than 60 seconds—but this kind of embedded vocabulary instruction is a key piece of Matthews' overhauled early reading program. Just five years ago, only about 14 percent of the school scored proficient on the state's annual assessment. The numbers have grown steadily to the point where this year, 80 percent of the students met the standard. In 3rd grade, the numbers reached 95 percent.

In the literacy world, there's a perennial concern that focusing on foundational skills will come at the expense of giving kids opportunities to practice language and enjoy stories. But researchers and educators say that it's not only possible to teach useful vocabulary and meaningful content knowledge to young children—it's necessary.

A body of research has shown that once students can decode, their reading

comprehension is largely dependent on their language comprehension—or the background and vocabulary knowledge that they bring to a text, and their ability to follow the structure of a story and think about it analytically.

Before students can glean this kind of information from print, experts say, they can do it through oral language: by having conversations about the meaning of words, telling stories, and reading books aloud.

At Matthews, an explicit, systematic approach to phonics instruction has helped drive the big jumps in student achievement—but it's only one part of the equation, said Angie Hanlin, the school's principal. The school took on a complete restructuring of its reading program, which included changing the way teachers planned and taught vocabulary and reading comprehension.

"Putting a phonics patch on a reading program or on a school is not going to teach all students to read," Hanlin said. "It is not going to fix it, and it's not going to drive up the data."

This is the premise behind the Simple View of Reading, a framework for comprehension first proposed by researchers Philip B. Gough and William E. Tunmer in 1986, and confirmed by later studies.

The simple view holds that reading comprehension is the product of decoding ability and language comprehension. Kids who can't decode words won't be able to read, no matter how much vocabulary they know, or how much they know about the world. But the opposite is also true: If they don't have this background knowledge, children won't be able to understand the words that they can read off the page.

Engaging With Rich Content

"Decoding has a really outsized role on reading comprehension in the early grades," said Gina Cervetti, an associate professor of education at the University of Michigan, who studies the role of content-area knowledge in literacy. "But as students consolidate their decoding, very quickly that equation shifts."

As students progress into 2nd, 3rd, and 4th grades, texts become more challenging—there are bigger words, harder concepts, and more assumptions about what students already know about the world.

Kids need to start engaging with rich content early on, so that once they are expected to read it on the page, they understand what's going on. If they haven't developed that foundation, it's hard to catch up quickly, said Cervetti.

—Houston Cofield for Education Week

Ava Newton, a student in Ashley Palmer's kindergarten class, points at the projector screen during a reading comprehension lesson.

"To learn words well, you need to encounter them again and again," said Margaret McKeown, a senior scientist at the Learning Research and Development Center at the University of Pittsburgh, and an expert in vocabulary instruction. As very young children learn words, they start to form connections in the brain—links that join synonyms together, or relate words that are used in similar situations. This gives bigger, harder words a place to land when students learn them, McKeown said. "The concepts aren't new," she said. "They're just more sophisticated or refined ways to describe similar things."

At Matthews Elementary, teachers meet once a week to go through their foundational skills lessons and read-aloud books. The curriculum they use identifies vocabulary words that can be embedded in lessons. But the teachers also look for words in the text that their students specifically might struggle with.

In this week's kindergarten class, one of those words was "living room." Palmer had introduced the word earlier that week—a lot of her students didn't have a space in their homes that they called by that name. In this day's lesson, she asked students to recall it, asking questions: What kind of room has a couch? A chair?

Matthews is in a small, rural county, where the majority of students receive free and reduced-price lunch. Hanlin said that a lot of books, even for young readers, assume life experience her students don't have. So teachers build on the knowledge that students do have. For example, Hanlin said, students might not know the word "cathedral." But they do know the word "church."

It's important to do this kind of planning ahead, said Tanya Wright, an associate professor of education at Michigan State University, who studies oral language, vocabulary, and knowledge development.

Before a teacher reads a text to or with students, she needs to read it herself, Wright said. "You're going to know where you need to stop, where you need to explain." Ahead of time, teachers should plan child-friendly definitions, or figure out how they might use props or movements to demonstrate the word.

But this kind of planned vocabulary instruction may not be happening in most schools. In a study published in 2014, Wright and her colleagues observed the way teachers discussed vocabulary in 55 kindergarten classrooms. They found a general lack of planned and purposeful instruction—most teachers weren't talking about a word more than once or selecting words in any systematic way.

There are ways to draw out more conversation about vocabulary words, McKeown said. One strategy comes from an unlikely place: improv comedy groups.

In improv, comedians are taught to

say, "Yes, and … " to build off of the scenario that their fellow performers create. The same framework can help kids build related vocabulary. Take the word "cautious," McKeown said.

A student asked to use the word might say that he had to be cautious, because someone was riding a bike fast near him. The teacher can agree, and then expand on that same idea: "You had to be careful because it might be dangerous if someone hit you with their bike."

"You're always adding more words that are associated with the [main] word, demonstrating a greater context for words," McKeown said.

In a read-aloud that afternoon, Palmer's kindergarten class heard another story about a lion—this time, one that had escaped from the zoo and befriended a little girl. As the lion curled up for a nap in the girl's house, Palmer paused on the words "lions sleep a lot." She turned to give the students on the rug a puzzled look.

"Is that true?" she asked. She referenced a nonfiction book the class had read the day before, about lions in the wild. "They like to sleep and lie around 20 out of the 24 hours!" Palmer said.

As she continued to read, she made more links back to the nonfiction text, explaining as she went what was real and what was make-believe, adding in extra details that the nonfiction book hadn't covered. She made these implicit connections explicit for her students.

Building Knowledge

Still other schools are turning to curricula that are purposefully structured to build knowledge—diving deeply into specific content areas, even in the very early grades. These curricula are based on the theory that all students need a similar foundation in core domains—like literature, the arts, science, social studies, and history—so that they have the knowledge base to support comprehension.

Educational theorist E.D. Hirsch is widely credited as the originator of this idea. His 1987 book, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, argued that schools need to expose students to the body of knowledge that authors and speakers will expect them to have. This idea has seen a resurgence in popular conversation more recently through author Natalie Wexler's 2019 book, *The Knowledge Gap: The Hidden Cause of America's Broken Education System—and How to Fix It*, which criticizes U.S. schools for prioritizing skills-based instruction over the teaching of content.

The notion that background knowledge informs understanding isn't very controversial. But proposals about exactly what knowledge schools should prioritize definitely are. Many teachers reject the idea of a shared literary canon, for example, arguing that it upholds a Eurocentric approach to American education that privileges the knowledge and histories of white Westerners at the expense of people of color.

> "If we're telling kids to think quietly and only be listeners and not participants in the read-aloud, then that's not optimal for their learning."
>
> **TANYA WRIGHT**
> ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF EDUCATION, MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

But Jared Myracle, the chief academic officer in Jackson-Madison County schools in Tennessee, sees providing this kind of background knowledge as an equity issue.

Students from low-income families often don't come into school with the same depth of academic language that students from higher-income families do, limiting their ability to make meaning from what they read, he said. In Jackson-Madison county, the data bore out this divide: Schools where the vast majority of students received free and reduced-price lunch were trailing the district when Myracle started there in 2017.

Now, students spend an hour every day doing basic skills instruction—like naming and writing letters, practicing phonological awareness, and learning phonics—and an hour on what's called "listening and learning." These lessons teach topics through conversation and read-alouds—in kindergarten, they learn about plants, 1st grade is early civilizations, and 2nd graders cover systems of the human body.

Kristin Peachey, an instructional coach at Pope Elementary School in the district, said that talking about complex topics lets students engage at a higher level than they would through text at this early age.

A coherent unit of study also provides opportunities for teaching comprehension, said Cervetti, the University of Michigan professor. "You can't really reason about things in very sophisticated ways unless you know something about them," she said.

Students should have the opportunity to discuss questions that are open-ended, without a single answer, during read-alouds, said Wright. "If we're telling kids to think quietly and only be listeners and not participants in the read-aloud, then that's not optimal for their learning."

At Pope Elementary, teachers plan and talk through the questions they'll ask during read-alouds, said Peachey. Take a recent 2nd grade lesson about Greek mythology, she said. After teachers read the story "Atalanta and the Golden Apples," students were asked to reflect on characters' motivations: Why would Atalanta only marry someone who could beat her in a footrace?

Imparting a deep understanding of subject matter, and teaching children to think analytically—that takes time, said Myracle. "It's pretty easy to see gains on the foundational skills side, once you implement a systematic [phonics] program," he said. Knowledge-building is a longer process.

Myracle believes that the payoff will be worth it. But he worries that some districts will try on a content knowledge focus like a passing fad, dismissing it before they have the opportunity to see any effects.

"My biggest fear is that districts that are starting to do some of this work to build knowledge in early grades, that they won't stick with it," Myracle said. "The gains are going to be longer in coming." ■

How multisensory learning motivates young readers

Q&A with Vera Blau-McCandliss, Ph.D., Vice President of Education and Research, Square Panda

Why is it important that young students learn in a multisensory environment?
Humans naturally perceive their environments in a multisensory way. As we grow, develop, and learn, we make use of these multisensory inputs to confirm and influence our behavior. When you try to cross the street, you both see and hear if a car is coming, for example. To apply that in a school setting and how students learn, there's a similar principle at work. For example, when a student first learns how to read, they learn to match letters to sounds and written words to spoken words. That's a multisensory task because they are connecting the visual and language areas of the brain at multiple levels. Having more than one sense involved helps students to reinforce connections, enhance perceptions, and maximize their learning.

How does early phonics instruction impact young students?
In its most basic form, learning to read is mapping a sound system onto a symbol system. Early phonics instruction helps children crack that alphabetic code. Once they can fluently match letters to sounds, they are well on their way to becoming good readers. Most adults tend to take reading for granted and think that it's easy to learn. But from a neuroscience perspective, it's a huge accomplishment.

What does it mean for a learning game to be adaptive, and how can that motivate and engage students?
Decades of research have supported the idea that kids are more motivated to learn when the content is just right for them in terms of difficulty and pacing. Adaptive games can present the right amount of information at the right time, walking students down a learning path. Students need to be challenged, but the content needs to be in a zone where it is not overly challenging (which causes frustration), and it is not too easy (which causes boredom). Having content in that zone has been shown to be optimal for learning. This is why we make sure that our products are adaptive.

> **"From a neuroscience perspective, learning to read is a huge accomplishment."**

How can school districts support parents as they try to keep their child's education on track at home during COVID-19 school closures?
I have so much admiration for how school administrators are adapting to this situation. Communication is so important. It's crucial to make sure parents have the information they need to be good facilitators and understand the learning goals. Parents are asking, what exactly does my child need to know and by when? How do I know if they are on track?

Most parents understand there is so much to figure out and want to be supportive. Administrators are being so creative in this situation.

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District seeing significant gains from supplemental early literacy program

square panda™

Mountain View Whisman School District expanding use of Square Panda after successful pilot

Situated outside of San Francisco, the Mountain View Whisman School District (MVWSD) has a highly diverse socioeconomic student population. Of the district's 5,344 students, 35 percent are socioeconomically disadvantaged and 24 percent are English language learners, with some 50 languages represented. Academically, early literacy had been one of the district's most significant challenges.

In 2018, MVWSD Chief Academic Officer Cathy Baur was introduced to Square Panda, a multisensory, phonics-based early literacy tool that builds foundational reading skills. "I'm always careful when introducing new technology in our schools, but when I saw how it worked up close, I thought simply, 'I wish I'd had this when I was teaching,'" Baur says.

Neuroscience-based, multisensory system

Square Panda is a research-based, multisensory phonics learning system inspired by the science of reading. The Square Panda Literacy System enhances any classroom tablet with a library of learning games, digital and print books, and a set of 46 physical Smart Letters that works with a Bluetooth playset to add a kinesthetic element to literacy learning. Each student's gaming journey can be different, driven by an adaptive learning engine that provides the right level of challenges. Teachers can monitor progress and identify instructional opportunities.

"Square Panda is a great tactile, multisensory way for our youngest students to build their letter and word recognition skills. Students gain skills at a faster rate."

Pilot program shows promising results

MVWSD administrators first tested Square Panda in a pilot with kindergarten classes across five different schools, with 136 students in the test group using Square Panda playsets and another 204 serving as a control group. All students were tested on letter sounds immediately before and after a 12-week intervention period.

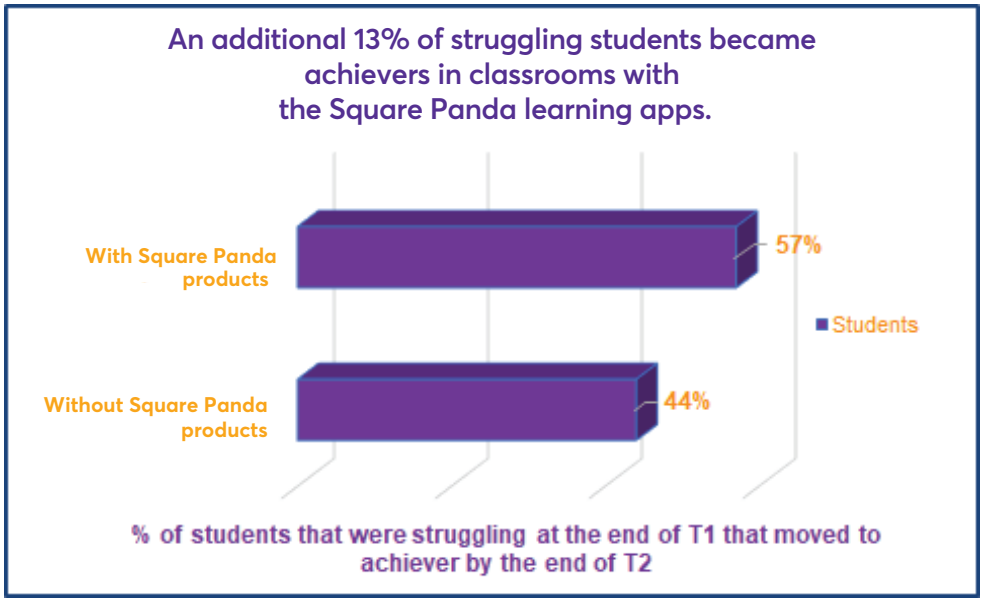
When it came to the 60 students identified as "struggling" prior to the pilot, there was a 13 percent gain in the number of students who moved up to "standards met" status. Of the 280 students who tested at grade level or higher prior to the pilot, an additional 7 percent moved up to "exceeding standards."

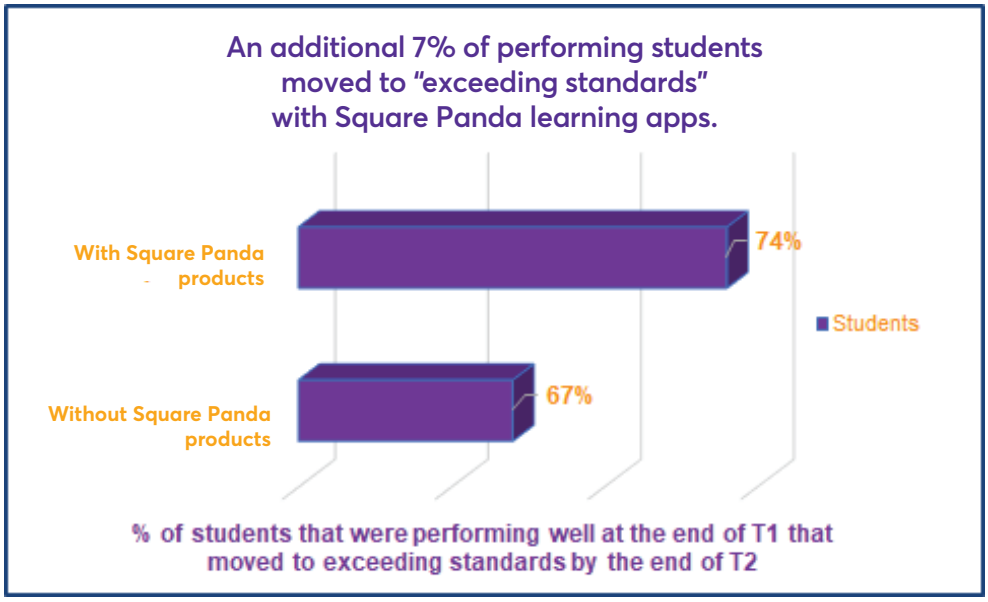
"Seeing improvements in these scores correlated with the use of Square Panda, in addition to other classroom efforts, was obviously very exciting," says Baur. "In addition, we noticed other positive impacts. Some teachers used the games to help build social-emotional skills, by allowing students to trade letters as they played," Baur says. "Highly distracted students could focus at length on the games. Teachers discovered they could use Square Panda as an incentive for other classroom activities."

Looking to the future

MVWSD Superintendent Ayinde Rudolph Ed.D. says he was impressed by the results after the pilot program, and by how quickly students advanced. "Square Panda is a great tactile, multisensory way for our youngest students to build their letter and word recognition skills. Students gain skills at a faster rate," Rudolph says.

MVWSD is now in the second year of a three-year research partnership with Square Panda, and is expanding to all kindergarten classes district-wide, while also beginning to use it in pre-K and special education classes. "We are highly encouraged by the first year's results," Baur says. "Our partnership has been very fruitful."





The research trial showed encouraging trends to support the efficacy and use of the Square Panda Literacy System for Kindergarten students struggling with early literacy skills.
In addition, advanced Kindergarten students showed greater improvement.

The data specifically shows a correlation between utilization of the Square Panda products and higher test scores.

To learn more about the Square Panda Literacy System, visit squarepanda.com

OPINION

Published on January 23, 2020, in Education Week

There Are Four Foundational Reading Skills. Why Do We Only Talk About Phonics?

We must teach the integrated set of foundational skills completely

By Heidi Anne E. Mesmer

—Vanessa Solis/Education Week. Source image: SireAnko/Getty

Here's the good news: Most educators have gotten the message that K-5 students need to learn the foundational reading skills outlined in the common core and other college and career-ready standards: print concepts, phonological awareness, phonics and word recognition, and fluency. The bad news? The foundational skills instruction that students receive is too often incomplete and ineffective. Districts are "checking" the foundational skills box but are using practices of questionable quality and not addressing all of the foundational skills. It's not enough to just do foundational skills. They must be taught completely—yet efficiently—with quality materials to build capacity for comprehending lengthy, advanced literary, and informational texts.

Literacy is livelihood. If you can't read words, many aspects of your life will be impacted. Take this question on a cosmetology licensing exam: "Which of the following refers to the deepest layer of epidermis—stratum spinosum, stratum granulosum, stratum germinativum, stratum lucidum?" It requires understanding complex Latin vocabulary as well as decoding multisyllabic words.

That's why foundational reading skills must work together—it is the integration of the skills that provide an entry point to complex literacy. As students increase in their abilities to automatically recognize words, they also increase in the amounts of mental energy they can devote to understanding complex ideas and vocabulary. No one can concentrate on Newton's laws, plot development, or electrical circuits if they are struggling to decode every fifth word.

A common misconception is that "foundational skills" only means "phonics." The truth is that the four areas are an integrated gestalt, greater than the sum of their parts. Often emphasized in K-2, *phonics* is teaching students the correspondence between visual symbols (graphemes made of letters) and speech sounds (phonemes). But to access phonics, children must have certain insights, or the system will make no sense.

Students often learn letters but don't know, for example, that print runs left-to-right or that words are groups of letters separated by space—insights called *print concepts*. Similarly, students learn letter names but do not understand the alphabetic principle—that symbols represent speech sounds ("cat" equals 3 symbols, 3 sounds). Kindergarteners learn the alphabetic principle and print concepts when their teachers model reading and writing. We are putting the cart before the horse if we drill letter/sounds without also teaching print concepts and the alphabetic principle.

Some educators think phonological awareness is synonymous with phonics, but this is another misconception. In fact, when I recently observed foundational skills lessons in more than 10 K-2 classrooms, I only saw one phonological awareness lesson. *Phonological awareness* is the ability to orally identify and manipulate the sound units of language such as words, syllables, and speech. Research tells us

that if students do not consciously attend to and distinguish these units, they are unlikely to benefit from phonics. Similarly, instruction in print concepts primes students to learn phonics. Can you imagine going to a job where you learn all about the different types of buttons, threads, fabrics, and zippers but no one tells you that you are manufacturing jeans? Yet that's often how reading instruction can feel for children.

Phonics and word recognition skills include analyzing multisyllabic words into morphemes, the smallest meaning units (e.g., pre-treat-ing). Many schools stop instruction after students can decode single syllable words, but multisyllabic words outnumber single syllable words 4-to-1 in advanced texts. To complete foundational skills instruction, we need systematic instruction in morphology through the 5th grade and beyond.

The last foundational skill, *fluency*, closes the deal. It is the ability to read connected text automatically (with little conscious effort), accurately, and with proper expression using volume, phrasing, smoothness, and pace to convey the meaning. Addressed in 1st through 5th grade, fluency enhances—and is affected by—meaning making. Without requisite fluency, students will have little cognitive energy to devote to complex ideas.

It can be exhausting to hear about research-based this and research-based that—but there are well-established findings regarding foundational skills instruction. Simply put: Foundational skills cannot be separated. Print concepts and phonological awareness support phonics instruction, morphological instruction extends students' word recognition, and fluency automatizes word reading. Here are truths educators should focus on:

1. Systematic instruction is effective. It is driven by a scope and sequence, a guide specifying the content to be taught and its order. Let *one* scope and sequence drive instruction. I often see districts using two to three foundational skills plans, an overkill approach that is bound to confuse students.

2. Students need to learn all the foundational skills. I see approaches that heavily emphasize just one or two skills, such as phonics, but completely miss others. These skills are complementary and need to be consistently taught, in response to development, through grade 5.

3. Instructional language should be explicit. Teachers should clearly and directly tell students the grapheme/phoneme relationships, word roots, or syllable patterns being taught. I recently tested more than 150 kindergarteners who knew about 90 percent of their letter/sounds but could not decode simple words. Most young children must be taught explicitly how to decode words.

4. Solid foundational skills instruction is assessment-guided and responsive. All students do not need the same thing. In a 2014 study, one researcher found that entering kindergarteners ranged from knowing zero letter names to knowing all of them. Teachers must use simple diagnostic assessments that inform cumulative review and instruction and often must use small group instruction.

5. Instructional materials must be aligned to the standards. A recent analysis from the RAND Corporation found that only 7 percent of elementary school teachers used at least one high-quality English/language arts material. Thoroughly vet materials to ensure full coverage of all foundational skills. EdReports.org provides a rigorously developed tool that give leaders a road map. (I recently sat on an advisory panel for the organization's inaugural review of Foundational Skills curriculum.) With focused planning even small or underresourced districts can find research-based, standards-aligned materials.

Moreover, all four foundational skills deserve our full attention as they provide an entry point to complex literacy. Decisionmakers must fully understand what the foundational skills are and apply the robust research that informs best practices. These foundational reading skills are truly foundational—an essential ingredient but not the full recipe. Comprehension and writing instruction, which requires a wide range of instructional targets such as vocabulary and world knowledge, the focus of the other standards, round out the complete recipe. Millions of students are looking to their schools to provide them with the essential knowledge they need to succeed in college and career—it is imperative that we get these skills right. ■

Heidi Anne E. Mesmer is a professor in literacy in the school of education at Virginia Tech. Her latest book is Letter Lessons and First Words: Phonics Foundations That Work *(Heinemann, 2019).*

—Getty

OPINION

Published on October 26, 2018, in Education Week

Why Doesn't Every Teacher Know the Research on Reading Instruction?

Three recommendations for greater reading proficiency

By Susan Pimentel

Almost two decades ago, the National Reading Panel reviewed more than 100,000 studies and arrived at recommendations for how students should receive daily, explicit, systematic phonics instruction in the early grades. Why is this literacy research not more widely known? Why is the fact that reading skills need to be taught, and that there is a well-documented way to do it, not something highlighted in many teacher-preparation programs (or par-

enting books, for that matter)?

Recently, a remarkable audio-documentary by Emily Hanford went viral, shining a spotlight on such crucial literacy research—none of which is new, but much of which is unknown to today's teachers. Like many in the literacy community, I worry about our failure to bring research into classroom practice. My concern is greatest for teachers who are being sent into classrooms without the tools they need to succeed. I'm hopeful this renewed interest will serve as a catalyst for overhauling reading instruction in our teacher-preparation programs. However, relying solely on better preparation for the next generation of teachers is a slow delivery system to children. The stakes are too high. We need more immediate solutions.

Only roughly one-third of our nation's 4th and 8th graders can demonstrate proficiency on national tests, with students from low-income families and students of color faring the worst. When students can't read, they have trouble learning; the great majority of students who fail to master reading by 3rd grade either drop out or finish high school with dismal lifetime earning potentials.

I'd like to build on the momentum Hanford's piece has sparked to call attention to additional research-based practices that go hand-in-hand with the importance of phonics. As educators experience 'aha' moments about the need for stronger phonics instruction, let's talk about some other literacy practices that need fixing in elementary classrooms. Here's my short list of practices and resources to add to the conversation:

1. Let all kids read the good stuff. The pervasive practice of putting kids into reading groups according to their "just right" reading level has meant that large numbers of students receive a steady diet of below-grade-level instruction. The texts they're reading don't require them to decipher unfamiliar vocabulary, confront challenging concepts, or parse new and complicated language. Noted literacy researcher Timothy Shanahan has written extensively about why this is the wrong approach, documenting that "after 70 years there still isn't any research supporting the idea of matching kids to just-right texts" after 1st grade—yet still the practice persists. This, despite research showing that the ability to handle complex text is the distinguishing characteristic between students who go on to do well in college and work and those who don't.

Why would we deprive our youngsters of the opportunity to build this muscle in elementary school, when all that's standing in the way of their doing so is the opportunity and the support that close reading can provide?

The Council of Chief State School Officers offers a host of resources to help teachers guide students with complex texts.

2. Build students' general content knowledge. Some of the most profoundly important, yet under-recognized, reading research shows that students' reading comprehension depends heavily on their background knowledge about the world—knowledge that comes largely from learning about science and social studies topics. When students know something about a topic, they are better able to read a text in which that topic is discussed, even when the sentence structure is complex or the words are unfamiliar. Cognitive science expert Daniel Willingham explains this principle clearly, and the Knowledge Matters Campaign expands on it further.

The implications for literacy instruction are enormous because young children are receiving less time with science and social studies content in their school day. According to a 2007 study, instructional time spent on these subjects dropped by an hour and a half per week since the 1990s. The diminished attention to these knowledge-building topics creates less fertile ground for reading comprehension to flourish and is a significant culprit in our stagnant national reading outcomes. Given that time is a scarce commodity in most schools, the takeaway for school leaders is to incorporate rich content, organized around conceptually-related topics, into the reading curriculum so that students learn new information about the world while they develop as readers. Student Achievement Partners has ready-made resources that teachers can pull into their classrooms.

3. Let quality English/language arts curriculum do some of the heavy-lifting. Poor-quality curriculum is at the root of reading problems in many schools. It is not an overstatement to say that a school that doesn't have a phonics program is doing its students a huge disservice. Increasingly, the same can be said about the lack of intentionality for building students' knowledge of the world and access to complex text. The current lack of educator know-how can be remedied by curriculum that points the way.

Fortunately, bolstered by emerging research about the "curriculum effect," we're in the midst of a curriculum renaissance. In recent years, a number of respected organizations have developed curricula that are tailor-built to both state standards and the latest research. Educator reviews conducted by organizations such as the nonprofit EdReports or Louisiana Believes can help schools easily identify the best curriculum for their context. No longer should classroom teachers need to scour the internet for materials. Instead, educators can spend their time focusing on how to become the best possible deliverers of thoughtfully arranged, comprehensive, sequential curriculum that embeds standards, the science of reading, and the instructional shifts described above.

I have great empathy for teachers who have labored under the weight of misdirected teacher preparation, insufficient curriculum, ever-shifting educational fads, and ever-increasing professional demands—and welcome the attention of journalists who are shining a light on the opportunity represented by the convergence of science and a new class of high-quality curriculum materials. Based on my own experiences with educators taking this improvement journey, significant reading gains are possible with the right support. Our students' reading future can be bright—if we seize the moment. ■

Susan Pimentel is a co-founder of StandardsWork and a founding partner of Student Achievement Partners, both nonprofits dedicated to improving K-12 student achievement through evidence-based action. She was the lead author of the Common Core State Standards for English/language arts literacy.

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