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# Enhancing K-5 Literacy Skills

## EDITOR'S NOTE

Improving literacy instruction can help young readers build strong foundational skills. This Spotlight will help you understand 'encoding' and its essential role to literacy; learn about the push for more nonfiction materials in classrooms; examine new findings suggesting students' early literacy skills are rebounding; dig deeper into supports for struggling readers; evaluate the costs of ignoring research-backed literacy instruction methods; and more.

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Published January 17, 2023

# ‘Encoding’ Explained: What It Is And Why It’s Essential to Literacy

Often overlooked, it deserves equal attention to its counterpart, decoding

By Elizabeth Heubeck

**A**sk an early-elementary teacher what the recently popularized term “science-based reading instruction” means, and the response is likely to include something about decoding—the process of translating words from print to speech by matching letters and their combinations to the sounds they make.

This makes sense, as decoding is an undisputed hallmark of early literacy. So, too, is encoding, decoding’s opposite, whereby a spoken word is broken down into its individual sounds in the act of spelling and writing.

But encoding doesn’t get nearly the attention that decoding does, despite evidence that, from the earliest grades on, writing practice is a powerful aid and complement to reading instruction. As a result, say some literacy experts, students suffer.

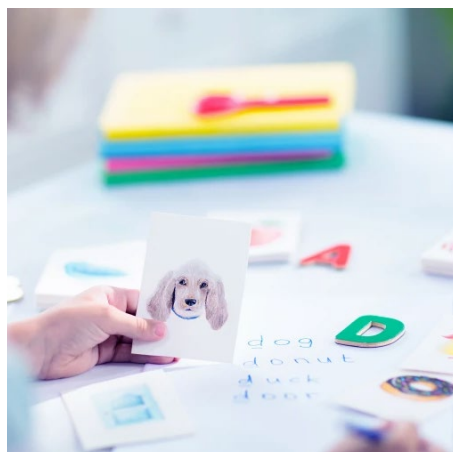
“Encoding and decoding go hand in hand; they’re like two sides of a coin,” said Crystal Whitman, an instructional coach at Rosman Elementary School in North Carolina’s Transylvania County. “Our hands have been heavier on the decoding side, so we have some weak spellers, weak writers.”

As literacy experts strongly suggest, encoding is often underrepresented in early literacy instruction, even in programs that claim to be steeped in evidence-based practices.

Education Week spoke to literacy experts, researchers, and educators to find out why and what students miss when their exposure to encoding is irregular or minimal. We also culled strategies from structured-literacy advocates on how to embed encoding into daily classroom instruction.

## How did encoding get overlooked?

Literacy consultant Steve Graham has spent more than four decades studying the “hows” of writing: how it develops, how to teach it effectively, and how writing can be used to support reading and learning. The lack of emphasis on teaching writing, he points out, is nothing new.



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“  
Our hands have been heavier on the decoding side, so we have some weak spellers, weak writers.”

**CRYSTAL WHITMAN**

Instructional Coach,  
North Carolina

“In pre-revolutionary days, you could teach someone how to read. But without additional instruction, they didn’t necessarily learn how to write,” said Graham, a professor at Arizona State University’s teachers college.

In many of today’s early-literacy programs, the weight of the pendulum remains firmly rooted on the side of teaching reading over writing. Inadvertently, the recent rise of evidence-based literacy programs based on the 2000 results of the congressional Nation-

al Reading Panel may be partly to blame.

Heavily publicized nationwide, the panel recommends combining the following techniques for teaching children to read: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, guided oral reading, teaching vocabulary words, and reading-comprehension strategy.

The report does reference writing, particularly in the context of phonemic awareness and phonics, as students are learning how to manipulate sounds and letters. But it does not specifically mention encoding—or other granular aspects of writing. And even today, there is much less published research on the elements of effective writing instruction.

“I’ve done a number of national surveys,” Graham said. “Writing and encoding see much less emphasis in the curriculum than reading does.”

Other literacy experts share similar experiences. “Most phonics instruction is heavily focused on decoding. They want kids to learn how to read words. They might do some encoding, but it’s often an afterthought,” said Margie Gillis, a nationally recognized literacy expert and the president of Connecticut-based Literacy How, Inc., a company that creates professional-development curricula for pre-K through middle school.

Reading professor Amy Murdoch says she’s seen schools “plop in” phonological-awareness programs that are disconnected to the other important elements of early literacy like spelling and writing.

## Why encoding matters, and what it looks like in the classroom

“You can’t separate the different strategies of language,” said Murdoch, an assistant dean and associate professor in the School of Education at Mount St. Joseph University in Cincinnati.

That’s particularly true for encoding and decoding. “We really drive home the point that [decoding and encoding] are reciprocal, and they bootstrap each other,” Gillis said.

The brush strokes that, ideally, children begin practicing even before kindergarten form the essential building blocks of encod-

ing: letters and, subsequently, words and sentences. Teaching proper letter formation through repetition breeds automaticity, which is critical for the writing process, say literacy experts.

“I’m a stickler for letter formations. If our kids are not forming letters correctly to automaticity, that impedes them in spelling and writing, because they’re having to then think of how to form those letters,” said literacy expert Casey Harrison.

When students develop letter automaticity, they can shift their focus to whatever it is they’re writing, points out Harrison, an Austin, Texas-based licensed dyslexia therapist and founder of The Dyslexia Classroom, which provides resources for dyslexic learners as well as online courses for educators, parents, and therapists.

Carrie Norris, the director of K-8 curriculum and instruction for the Transylvania County schools in North Carolina, has witnessed firsthand the advantages that come with a focus on early letter formation among her district’s kindergartners. “They learn how to do strokes first—students doing horizontal, vertical, diagonal, and circle strokes,” said Norris, who added that she’s seen a significant improvement in students’ ability to form letters correctly when given consistent and step-by-step practice opportunities in kindergarten.

But even the earliest stages of encoding should not be happening in a vacuum, the experts explain. “We are tying muscle movement and tactile kinetic letter formation with hearing the sound and associating it with its name,” said Gillis.

### Spelling assignments often miss the mark

Very young students just beginning to connect their understanding of phonetic awareness to writing letters and words may struggle with the fine motor skills these tasks require. Making it fun can help. Gillis suggests having students write on a plate of shaving cream. Colored sand is another favorite, as are grooved surfaces that feel good on students’ fingertips. “It doesn’t have to be ‘drill and kill,’” she said.

Despite ample evidence of the reciprocal and necessary relationship between decoding and encoding, some traditional assignments continue to miss the mark. Take spelling lists, for instance.

“I still see spelling instruction whereby lists of [spelling] words are sent home that

may or may not have some spelling patterns in there,” Harrison said. “It makes me realize the deep connection between sound-spelling for reading and sound-spelling for writing is not fully understood.”

She doesn’t suggest getting rid of the age-old spelling list, rather, revising how it’s used. “Spelling instruction should be part of daily literacy lessons,” Harrison said. “But we want students drawing on their sound-symbol knowledge and connections to reading instruction.”

Harrison explains her version of the spelling test. As a former classroom teacher, and now as a licensed dyslexia therapist, she’ll make a video of the spelling concept of the week (for example, spelling with the final /k/ sound or vowel-consonant-e pattern) and use it all week in class as the students focus on decoding and encoding words containing the rule. On Friday, students have their spelling test. Harrison picks 10 to 20 words containing the rule and has the students write the words using the concept they’d learned that week.

When students spell the words correctly, Harrison knows they haven’t simply memorized a list of words they were apt to forget later. Rather, they’ve mastered a phonetic rule of the English language that they could apply to other words they attempt to read or spell.

“I tell them: I can’t teach you every word in the English language. But I can give you the tools to apply to new, unknown words for reading and spelling,” Harrison said.

The science of reading movement has been largely led by advocates of students with language disabilities. And as with decoding, teaching encoding in a systematic, explicit manner can benefit all kids but is particularly critical to those with processing disorders.

“These are our students who are struggling in accessing the phonological code,” Harrison said, referring to students with dyslexia. “They really need it broken down into a very systematic approach, where things are explicitly taught.”

Students who are unable to spell words experience cascading effects like lower scores on assignments and a disconnect between oral and written language, which can lead to poor self-esteem and a negative outlook on schoolwork, Harrison observes. When students become proficient readers and spellers, the opposite can occur.

“I want to empower students,” Harrison said. “We do that by connecting the reading and the spelling.” ■

# Close the Gap in Early Literacy Curriculum with a Research-Based Approach



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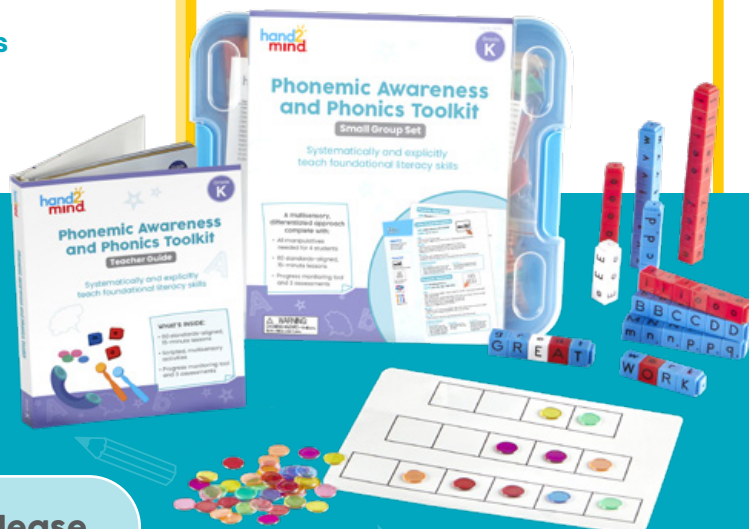
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Published January 19, 2023

# English Teachers Should Teach More Nonfiction, National Group Says. Here's How

By Madeline Will

**N**onfiction is too often underrepresented in English/language arts classrooms, even though it's "never been more vibrant or vital" for young people.

That's according to a new position statement by the National Council of Teachers of English. The professional organization brought together 10 people—including teacher educators, teachers, and nonfiction authors—to write the statement, which was released Thursday and includes a list of recommendations to expand the use of nonfiction in ELA instruction.

The statement proposes a "paradigm shift" for reading and writing instruction, which often prioritizes fiction. When nonfiction is taught, it often is presented through basic online texts and basal readers—volumes of selected texts used to teach reading—both of which, the NCTE statement argues, lack the richness of nonfiction literature.

"When you hear nonfiction, you think of an article," said Kari Johnston, a 5th grade dual language teacher at Perez Elementary School in Austin, Texas, and an author of the position statement. "And that's one version, but I've come to see the different ways and modals and styles nonfiction can take."

The NCTE statement posits that teachers are unaware of the vast body of nonfiction literature—which can encompass memoirs, essays, informational texts, literary or narrative journalism, and more—because many states don't require prospective teachers to take courses in children's and young adult literature in their teacher-preparation programs. Awards and lists for notable fiction are more prominent and publicized than their nonfiction counterparts. (NCTE has an annual award for outstanding nonfiction for children.)

Also, the increasing lack of school librarians and media specialists, especially in under-resourced schools, makes it harder for teachers to access high-quality nonfiction.

The point of the position statement is "not to advocate for the use of nonfiction at the exclusion of others," said Xenia Hadjioannou,



—E+/Getty

an associate professor of language and literacy education at Penn State Berks and a lead author of the position statement.

"Ideally," she added, nonfiction "should be part of text sets, where you explore a topic through diverse texts that are structured and presented in a way that makes sense, that guides student thinking forward; ... [in a way] that follows their interests and the nuances of a topic that are important to different students."

## A perennial debate with a complex history

How to expand the use of nonfiction in the classroom has long been a debate in the literacy community, the position statement authors said.

"There was a call through the common core to more than double [the amount of nonfiction taught] in particular grades more than a decade ago, yet the practice still lags," said Emily Kirkpatrick, the executive director of NCTE. "So what is going on?"

The Common Core Standard Standards, unveiled in 2010 and at one point used in more than 40 states, said in elementary school, half of what students read should be literature and the other half should be infor-

mational texts, such as essays and nonfiction books. The balance should gradually skew toward informational texts, and by 12th grade, 70 percent of what students read should be nonfiction.

During implementation, some ELA teachers complained that they had to drop beloved works of literature from their curricula to make room for nonfiction. While advocates of the standards argued that fiction was still a bulwark of the common core, the reality on the ground was messier.

The authors of the NCTE position statement insist they have no interest in rehashing that debate. Mary Ann Cappiello, a professor of language and literacy at Lesley University's graduate school of education and a lead author of the statement, said she doesn't want to perpetuate a "false dichotomy" between fiction and nonfiction because ultimately, "young people need a rich diet of all genres."

Rather than prescribing a certain ratio, Cappiello said she'd rather teachers be aware of high-quality nonfiction texts and know when and how to incorporate them into their curricula.

Added Hadjioannou: "It's not an either/or, it's not, 'This is better than fiction, so you shouldn't be doing fiction,' but it's more

about expanding the repertoire and the understanding of what spaces could be found within the day” to introduce nonfiction.

## 6 ways to incorporate more nonfiction

NCTE’s position statement includes six recommendations for teachers to expand the use of nonfiction in the classroom. They are:

### 1. Support and encourage students to choose nonfiction books during independent reading.

Johnston said that when she first started teaching, her classroom library had a giant selection of fiction—and a single box of informational texts.

“But then as I’ve known my students, I realized you have to have a library that’s robust with tons of different interests,” she said. “My students are multifaceted; they have a million different interests—we have to have books that make them want to read.”

### 2. Use nonfiction literature in reading instruction.

Nonfiction books help students build content knowledge, expand their vocabulary, and experience different perspectives, making it “ideal” for teaching reading, NCTE says.

Other reading experts have recommended nonfiction books for struggling older readers. Those texts can strike a good balance between having sophisticated, high-interest content and relatively simple sentences.

### 3. Incorporate nonfiction in writing instruction.

ELA teachers should consider using nonfiction as their mentor texts, as they can also provide examples of strong writing and figurative language, Hadjioannou and Cappiello said.

Also, early-grade teachers often assign memoir-type writing that focuses on student’s personal experiences and feeling. But having them write about the content they’re learning or the world around them is an effective way to boost both students’ performance in writing and in other subjects.

The NCTE authors said assigning nonfiction expository writing in early grades helps improve students’ research skills and capitalizes on their interests. For example, Johnston said one of her students is obsessed with dinosaurs and willingly writes “pages and pages of information” about paleontology.

“Children are humans with interests, with

fascinations,” Hadjioannou said. “They’re very curious about the world, and they’re eager to share that knowledge.”

### 4. Use nonfiction books to teach media literacy and research skills.

These types of texts can help students develop the critical thinking skills needed to evaluate sources, the NCTE authors said.

“It really allows for deep thinking in really developmentally appropriate ways,” Cappiello said.

### 5. Use nonfiction books to support ‘visual literacy.’

These days, many nonfiction books are beautifully illustrated or feature powerful photographs. Johnston said she also loves introducing students to graphic memoirs, like *When Stars Are Scattered*, the story of two Somali boys growing up in a refugee camp in Kenya.

The NCTE statement says that teachers can use texts like these to teach students how images can “frame information, shape perspectives, and represent points of view.”

### 6. Diversify the curriculum with nonfiction books.

Teachers can use nonfiction literature to provide students with multiple perspectives and worldviews, the NCTE statement says. Rather than positioning one text as a single source of information, teaching multiple books on the same topic can help students ask questions about whose story is being told—and whose is missing.

Also, “books that show people as children who become adults who make changes” can be really powerful, Cappiello said.

Hadjioannou said those types of biographies can help students recognize that influential people are “not superhumans”—they’re people who make mistakes and face obstacles, just like children today. ■

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Latasha Johnson teaches reading skills to a kindergarten classroom at Walnut Creek Elementary School in Raleigh, N.C., last May.

Published February 27, 2023

## Students' Early Literacy Skills Are Rebounding. See What the Data Show

By Sarah D. Sparks

**A**fter years of academic interventions, more young students are reading on track than at any time since the pandemic began, according to new data from 43 states.

For the first time since 2019-20, the majority of students in every grade, from K-3, are on track to tackle grade-level reading by the end of the year—though no grade has yet matched its pre-pandemic performance levels, according to data from the curriculum and assessment group Amplify.

The new data also show that Black and Hispanic students in many grades are improving faster than average, shrinking the academic gaps that had widened during school disruptions.

“We know that there’s been a lot of time and effort, blood, sweat, and tears put into trying to help these kids who are impacted as well as kids that have come along later who are less impacted,” said Paul Gazzero, the director of data analysis for Amplify, “and it does seem like some of those efforts are starting to pay off.”

Amplify researchers tracked the perfor-

mance of more than 300,000 students in 43 states. All of the students participated in mC-LASS, an assessment and intervention system based on the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), a commonly used observational test conducted by teachers in live or video sessions with individual students. The researchers compared data from the mid-year tests taken from 2018-19 through 2022-23.

The results are the latest evidence that elementary students who started school during the pandemic continue to recover academically, but that many students still show holes in foundational skills that become evident as they move to more advanced work.

For example, only 3rd graders, who were in kindergarten at the start of 2020, showed no overall improvement in the number of students on track for reading since last year. Hispanic 3rd graders held steady since last year, but there were 1 percent fewer Asian, Black, and white 3rd graders on track in reading this year than last.

“In 3rd grade, we sort of have this expectation that kids have mastered phonemic awareness and then are getting really good at that word-level reading,” said Susan Lambert, Amplify’s chief academic officer. “My

guess is that a lot of what’s happening here in the 2nd and 3rd grade data is that they really missed working with sounds and understanding how the discrete sounds of the language work, because that would have come in kindergarten and 1st [grades].”

By contrast, since last year in K-2, the share of students on track in reading rose 4-5 percentage points for all students, as well as 4-9 percentage points for Black students and 5-7 percentage points for Hispanic students.

“It’s not great news in the sense that it’s not that [Black and Hispanic students] are doing better than they were before the pandemic,” Gazzero said. “But at least we’re not seeing this achievement gap continue to get amplified in the classroom. It’s not a have/have not story as much as it was before, where all the gains are coming amongst the most advantaged students. It does seem like those less advantaged students who have been hit hardest from the pandemic are bouncing back a bit more.”

### Intensive interventions still needed

While more students overall seem ready for grade-level reading, the data also suggest about a third of students continue to read “far behind” where they should be at this point in the school year.

“In practical terms that means that ... these are students that need small group intervention in order to catch up. They’re not really ready to function in the classroom without additional assistance that goes beyond a little strategic support,” Gazzero said. “We’re identifying those students that need intensive support.”

Fewer students of any demographic group or grade were identified as being far behind this year compared to last, though 2 percent more Asian and Black 3rd graders were far behind in 2022-23 than during the prior year.

“At least we are now on that path where there’s hope that we’re going to meet or exceed pre-pandemic levels,” Lambert said. “The only caveat I would add is that pre-pandemic levels aren’t our target goal.” Hopefully,” she added, “we can buckle down and say, ‘look, what we’re doing is making an impact. Let’s keep applying that over time so that we can actually exceed those pre-pandemic levels.’” ■

### Additional Resource

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



Published March 6, 2023

# What Can Schools Do When Older Students Can't Read?

By Sarah Schwartz

Austin, Texas -

**P**rogression through elementary school is based on the expectation that children will learn the basic foundations of reading in the early grades: kindergarten, 1st, and 2nd.

After 3rd grade, teachers are asking students to read more complex texts, and reading is central to learning across subjects—not just English/language arts, but science, social studies, and math.

What happens if kids don't master these foundational skills by then? And what can schools do to make sure they do?

These questions were at the heart of a March 6 panel conversation at SXSW EDU. The annual education conference, happening in Austin this week, has a host of reading-related programming on the schedule.

Often, when older elementary school students can't read, it's because they're having trouble with a foundational skill, said Brandy Nelson, the academic director for the Reading Reimagined program at the Advanced Education Research and Development Fund, and the panel's moderator.

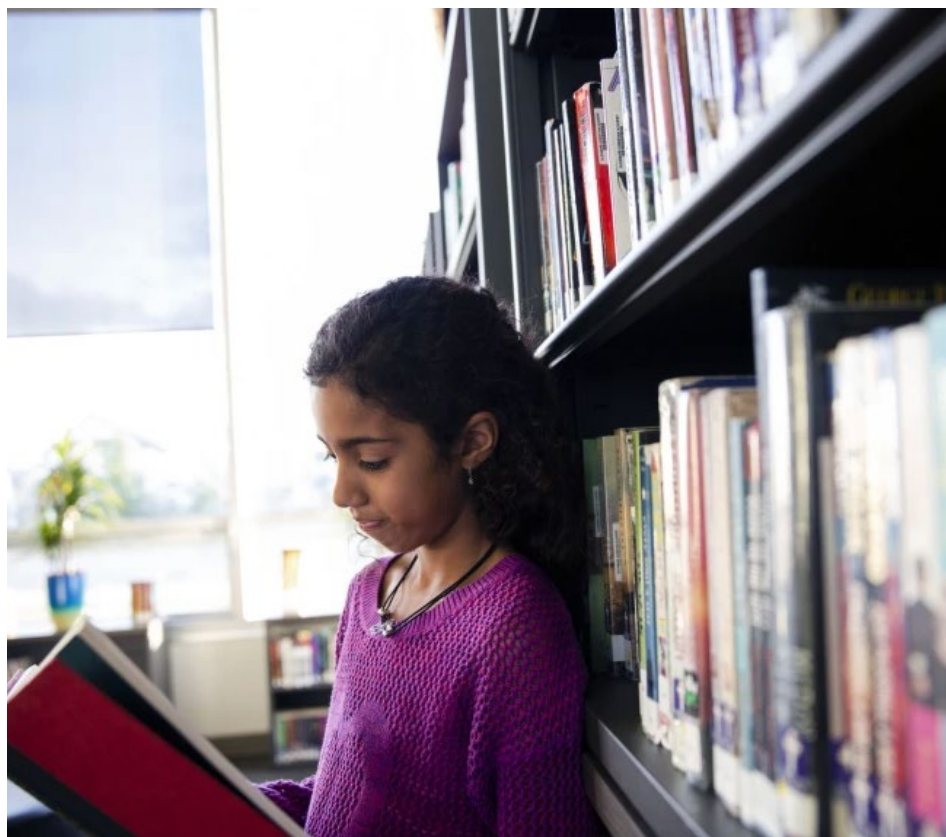
"What is probably happening is the student has a decoding challenge," she said.

Decoding is the process of lifting words off the page—connecting the written letters to spoken sounds, and then blending those sounds together. Research has shown that it's the foundation of skilled reading, and that teaching students how to do it—teaching them phonics—is the most effective way to help them learn to read words.

This research, and the ensuing implications, has become a cornerstone in the movement known as the "science of reading."

On this panel, two researchers and a parent advocate joined Nelson to discuss what school systems need to do to support older students who have reading difficulties.

The panelists included Kathy Rhodes, an assistant professor of education at the University of California Irvine, Sonya Thomas, the executive director of parent activist organization Nashville PROPEL, and Jason Yeatman, an assistant professor of psychology at Stanford University's Graduate School of Education.



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“  
School systems and the educators who work in them have to start with the assumption that all children can learn to read, and that all children have the right to learn to read.”

**SONYA THOMAS**  
PROPEL Executive Director,  
Nashville, TN

They talked about identifying and intervening with students who have decoding challenges, but also the broader social and cultural context that determines the shape of reading difficulties in this country. Reading scores are lower for students of color and students experiencing poverty.

Teaching reading well is an “issue of justice,” said Rhodes.

Read on for three takeaways from the conversation.

## 1. Educators need to believe that all children can learn

When it comes to students in the upper elementary and middle grades, “there’s a huge belief gap,” said Thomas.

School systems and the educators who work in them have to start with the assumption that all children can learn to read, and that all children have the right to learn to read, she said.

Instead of labeling children with foun-



dational skills gaps as generally “behind” and lumping them together in one category, schools should instead pinpoint what skills they have and haven’t achieved mastery in, said Yeatman.

## **2. School districts need to know the extent and shape of the problem**

Not all older elementary students who struggle with reading have foundational skills deficits. But for those who do, schools need reliable assessments that teachers know how to use and interpret.

Schools need to figure out what students are struggling with exactly, before they start “executing on solutions,” said Nelson.

At Stanford, Yeatman’s lab is building a free library of effective decoding assessments. They’ve also created their own open-access set of assessments, called the Rapid Online Assessment of Reading, or ROAR.

Choosing assessments shouldn’t be treated like a run-of-the-mill procurement process, Yeatman said. Instead, it should be informed by the ways that students are struggling, he said.

## **3. Teachers need the right tools to address reading difficulties in a culturally responsive way**

Older elementary teachers often don’t have the training to teach foundational skills. Even if they did, finding time within the school day to address phonics or phonemic awareness can feel all but impossible with a tight schedule of grade-level content to get through. Experts say that students who have foundational skills gaps should still have access to the same core instruction that their peers are getting.

But it’s not just logistics. Schools also need to make sure that they’re meeting kids’ diverse cultural and linguistic needs.

Many Black children use a dialect of English, often referred to as African American Vernacular English, said Rhodes. “It has really profound and rule-governed, predictable, morphological and syntactical features,” she said. Schools often plan targeted reading support for young English learners, for example, who are using two different languages, Rhodes said. But bidialectal students need these supports too, she said. ■

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**K-2**

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**3-5**

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**K-5**

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## Differentiation

K–5

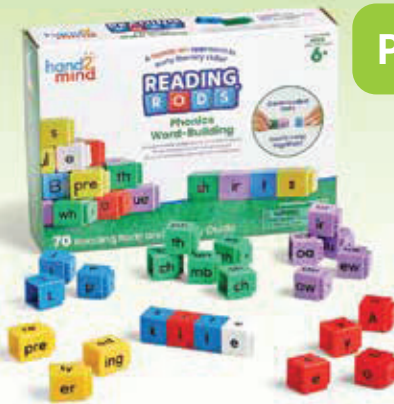


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K–6



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Multisensory	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Standards-Aligned	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Systematic Scope and Sequence	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	
Embedded Differentiation	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Additional Language Support	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Assessments and Progress Monitoring	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	
Focus on Phonics, Phonemic Awareness, and Decoding	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓



Small Group Instruction



Targeted Intervention



Differentiation



Skills Practice

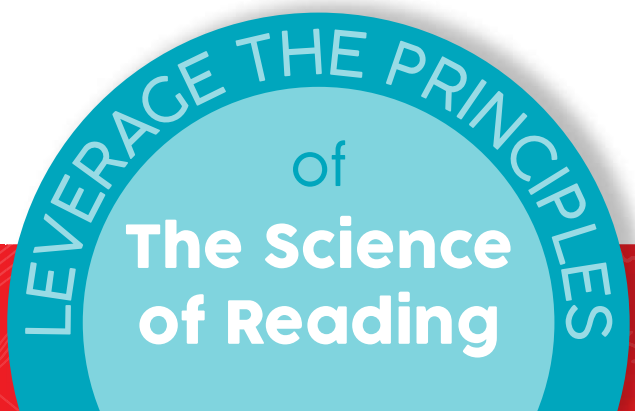
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Published October 25, 2022

# As Revised Lucy Calkins Curriculum Launches, Educators Debate If Changes Are Sufficient

The overhauled materials drop the ‘cueing’ methods, but preserve a workshop format

By Sarah Schwartz

**L**ast year, one of the biggest figures in U.S. literacy instruction announced plans to revise her curriculum program that would mark a significant shift in how the materials guide teachers to approach early reading.

Now, the new version of the program is here. And while the materials have undergone large-scale changes, reading researchers and educators who have reviewed excerpts offer mixed reviews on their potential to shift classroom instruction.

The literacy leader in question is Lucy Calkins, the Teachers College, Columbia University professor whose well-known Units of Study for Teaching Reading are used by about 16 percent of K-2 teachers.

Critics had claimed the reading program did not align to the “science of reading,” or the body of evidence that underpins how children learn to comprehend text. Several reviews from education organizations found that it did not explicitly and systematically teach children how to decode words, and instead taught other, disproven strategies for word-reading largely based on context clues.

Calkins initially pushed back on these claims, but later pledged changes to her reading program in grades K-2. This week, the curriculum’s publisher, Heinemann, made the first few units of the program available for purchase.

Overview documents for the new units promise that the revisions “represent whole-sale changes” that incorporate reading research across domains.

“[T]here are some strategies that the field—university courses, professional books, intervention programs, and yes, the last edition of Units of Study—has taught that no longer represent the latest and most current thinking,” Calkins wrote, in a statement to Education Week. “Progress is made when people are willing to rethink, and I hope that every educator out there, at every level, embraces opportunities to be a continual learner.”

David Paige, a professor of literacy edu-



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## LUCY CALKINS

Professor,  
Teachers College, Columbia University

cation at Northern Illinois University, said that these revisions mark an inflection point for balanced literacy—the philosophy underpinning Calkins’ prior work and that of many

other popular series that emphasize the context methods.

“When they change, that’s going to leave all the other folks in the camp with one of two resources—they either choose to change with her, or they have to go find a new camp,” he said.

Nevertheless, some other educators worry that the new version doesn’t explicitly distance itself enough from disproven practices.

When asked whether the new version of the units is a corrective, Matthew Mugo Fields, the president of Heinemann, said that the units have been “highly effective.”

“We stand by the quality of the program,” he said. “Like anything else in modern life, we are continuously improving, continuously enhancing, trying to find new and better ways to do things. We are not unique in that regard.”

## What’s in the new Units of Study reading program

The Units of Study for Teaching Reading aren’t, on their own, a core curriculum. They’re designed to be used in connection with the organization’s phonics and writing programs, or other, outside curricula that would cover the same ground.

Still, one of the biggest changes in the new

units is their approach to how children identify words when they're reading text. Reviews of previous versions of the program noted that it relied heavily on a method commonly known as three-cueing.

In this approach to word reading, teachers are told to use a host of strategies to help students figure out words that they don't recognize. Children might look at the first letter and think about what word would make sense in the space, or look to the picture for context clues. Sounding the word out is just one strategy among several that they could choose from.

Researchers say the approach encourages students to take their eyes off of the letters on the page and lowers the likelihood that they will be able to transfer their knowledge of letter-sound correspondences—their phonics skills—to reading books.

In samples of the new units provided to Education Week, the materials have abandoned these cueing strategies. Instead, they offer teachers new prompts, such as encouraging students to use their “slider power” to slide through all of the sounds in a word, or tackle multisyllabic words part by part.

The materials also include a scope and sequence for the phonics skills that students should master in each unit as well as short assessments that teachers can use to periodically check on students' progress. A series of decodable books—short practice texts that include many words with phonics patterns that students have learned—are also available for purchase. The lessons include discussion prompts designed to build vocabulary around the stories.

Melissa Spada, a 1st grade teacher at Forest Elementary School in Williamsville, N.Y., whose school piloted the new units, said that the phonological awareness and phonics additions supported her students.

“Our kids were able to read more difficult books, and they were also able to use all of that phonics knowledge in their writing. The transfer between reading and writing was really very clear,” she said.

Beyond foundational skills, the units cover strategies to build comprehension via exposure to content and lessons on text structure. Excerpts from the program provided to Education Week included nonfiction lessons on natural phenomena.

Calkins also highlighted increased focus on diversity and inclusion in the materials, noting that the decodable books were written and illustrated to reflect the lives and experiences of the children in U.S. classrooms.

Cultural responsiveness has been a flash-

point in the development of these new units. Publication was delayed this summer after educator focus groups suggested some edits might run afoul of new state laws limiting how teachers can discuss race, sex, and gender. The publisher and the Teachers College team began another revision process to address some of these concerns, but abandoned that rewrite after protests from other Heinemann authors, the New York Times reported in July.

When asked whether the portions flagged by focus groups made it into the final version, Fields said that representing students of different ethnicities and backgrounds was a key part of Heinemann's equity, inclusion, and diversity guidelines. “There are families of all different types that are represented in the new units,” he said.

### How significant are the changes?

The revisions in the new units demonstrate some major changes, said Paige. He participated in an external review of the program published in 2020, and viewed samples of the new material provided to Education Week.

“They've done a 180 on this thing,” he said. “This is quite different than the Units of Study that we reviewed a couple of years ago.”

Samples of the kindergarten materials spend a lot of time on phonemic awareness and letter-sound correspondence—and they incorporate more explicit, direct instruction that can help students learn how to blend sounds and read through words, Paige said.

Even so, he said, the materials move through letter features at a pace that might be too fast for most students.

Calkins disputed that characterization, saying that the Units of Study in Reading are designed to complement phonics instruction—not be its sole source.

But Margaret Goldberg, a school-based literacy coach in California and the co-founder of the Right to Read Project, worries that students still may have trouble getting this initial instruction from TCRWP's other materials. A previous review of the Units of Study in Phonics, the foundational skills program from the group, found that it had only limited explicit instruction.

She also questioned whether the units featured systematic instruction in other areas—like a scope and sequence for the vocabulary words taught in each unit and grade, or the grammar skills.

Some of this comes down to a fundamental difference in approach. Many curricula promoted by science of reading advocates

feature a lot of direct instruction. By contrast, Calkins' units are built on a “workshop” model. Teachers give “mini-lessons,” and then students spend a large chunk of their time independently applying those skills, with support from their teachers.

The units still follow this workshop framework, said Melissa Johnson, the English/language arts instruction coach in the Williamsville district.

“While kids are working on their reading, a lot of what teachers are doing is coaching,” Calkins said, in a video tour of the units provided to Education Week.

### Are new prompts for teachers specific enough?

The program now suggests that teachers make different kinds of coaching comments. Instead of a “huge array” of different prompts, Calkins said, the units “make very careful choices so that we get teachers making the same coaching comments repeatedly—so that kids internalize those comments and coach themselves.”

But a lot of students will need more specific guidance, said Claude Goldenberg, a professor emeritus at Stanford University who studies early literacy development in English-language learners. “This won't be systematic and explicit enough for many kids and many teachers,” said Goldenberg, who was part of the same external review team as Paige in 2020.

Still, in Williamsville, the new materials are prompting some discussions.

“We've started to reevaluate how we use MSV,” said Johnson, using the acronym for meaning, structure, and visual information—the three “cues” that the units previously encouraged students to use to read words.

Educators are talking about how to use visual information—letters—as a “starting place” for students, Johnson said.

Goldberg, the California literacy coach, worries that other schools might not make the same changes.

Districts now have a choice, she said. They can keep using the previous version of the materials, or they can pay for the new ones.

And because Heinemann is promoting these updates as a revision, rather than a correction, Goldberg thinks it's harder for schools to justify shelling out the cost.

“When you think of it as just an update—the way a publisher puts out new things all the time—then you think, ‘Do you really have to buy that?’” ■



## OPINION

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# The Heavy Cost of Ignoring the Science of Reading For Teachers and Students

Teachers are struggling, students are the casualties

By Elise Lovejoy

**T**he reading wars are back in full swing in the form of a very public battle that gives lots of attention to people and opinions instead of *facts*. An important fact, not opinion, is that children are struggling to read. To be exact, two-thirds of American 4th graders cannot read proficiently, according to the 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress. People fighting to keep their positions of power or assert their dominance in the reading field are causing a mess for our teachers to wade through.

The people with the most prestigious professional associations get their voices heard. The people with the most expensive degrees get their advice translated as truths. And the people with the biggest followings continue to have the final say even after their words have proved to be untruthful.

When I was a young K-2 teacher myself, I, too, listened to all the biggest voices in the reading field, assuming they had done their research on reading and knew the best ways to support students. I had graduated from college with a degree in elementary education, received a glossy curriculum in my first school district, and read the pedagogy manuals as if they contained absolute laws.

What I didn't understand in all my naiveté is that I had learned about reading programs, not reading methods, and that my first district bought a reading program based on a sales pitch without the assertion that it taught reading in the way that children learned. Instead of focusing on phonics, the students and I huddled in guided-reading groups and did picture walks. I facilitated guessing words based on the sentence, the first letter sound, or the picture provided.

It wasn't until I watched other teachers focus on sounds and sound spellings in my next district that I even knew there was a problem with how I had been teaching reading. All of a sudden, words began to make sense to me, and my students could read books and text without



Jorm Sangsom/Stock/Getty

pictures or predictable sentence cues.

But even with my new understanding, the materials, resources, and support I needed were scarce. I spent my nights and weekends on the internet gathering decodable books and activities that required students to practice sound-based skills, not whole-language memorization. In my subsequent districts, I felt tension with my colleagues who did not question their curriculum or the sources they were derived from. I bumped up against administrators who encouraged methods that pushed children to guess at words.

When I began my own in-depth research on the cognitive science behind reading instruction, I threw myself into developing my own curriculum and resources. As I talk to colleagues who have traveled a similar path for reading instruction, as I fight my own sons' school district to see the disparity in reading scores, and as I read emails and posts by other literacy teachers, there is a shattering theme: Teachers are struggling.

Teachers are forced to find best practices,

training, and resources for literacy during their personal time and often on their own dime.

Teachers are finding that they did not learn the correct skills or knowledge in their own education programs to systematically teach reading.

Teachers are working in communities filled with infighting because some of their colleagues cling to the failing methods.

Teachers are angry that former "experts," mentors, professors, and administrators pushed methods that were most effective for children of privilege who had supplemental resources and support at home—an approach that left countless students behind.

Teachers are mired with guilt for those students they left behind by following shoddy reading curricula.

Teachers are going against their districts' outdated reading methods to ensure all their kids can read, even at the risk of retaliation or punishment.

Teachers are fighting their way through the noise, all while trying to do the million other jobs we have given them.

I was one of many teachers who once taught balanced literacy but struggled to learn the correct way—reading methods founded and based on sounds and sound-spellings supported by reliable research on how children learn to read. I am just one of many other teachers living in the ruins of the reading wars, often blamed for the failures even as we fought to find the solutions to help children.

As that teacher, I am still trying to forgive myself for the students I once taught to guess their way through books with pictures and predictable sentences until the books lost the pictures and became too hard to guess accurately. The children whose families do not have the financial means to support them when my districts' chosen reading program couldn't meet their needs. The students who never learned to read and now struggle academically. The students who felt stupid because I never taught them *how* to read.

I, too, am one of the countless parents of a struggling reader. As a mom, I want both my sons to feel supported so that one day they can find the joy in a good book.

I am one in a growing village of science of reading advocates speaking at school board meetings in our district about the inequity that comes from not teaching reading in a structured, scientific, and systematic way. As a community member, I want my district administrators to do their jobs, the research, and their due diligence instead of making excuses for low reading scores.

The reading wars have become a battlefield for influential adults to fight for their own reputations, personal feelings, and egos. Education should be grounded in science about how our children learn and how we can support that learning process as effectively as possible. The people who count most—the reason we became teachers and the ones who hold our hearts as parents—are the children, and we can't afford to keep letting them down in service of the comfort of adults.

Our children need teachers who feel prepared, educated, and supported in methods based on the cognitive way children learn to read, before any more of them become collateral damage in this public battle. They need us to keep our focus on children, not the well-funded adults who are defending outdated and unfounded reading methods with their opinions. ■

*Elise Lovejoy, a former K-2 teacher, is the founder of Express Readers, a K-2 foundational skills and reading program. She is an advocate for evidence-based literacy instruction and the mother of two boys who are both learning to read.*

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