2025

Innovative Ways to Support Teaching and Learning

Jack Hollingsworth/Getty

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Sonia Pulido for Education Week

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OPINION

EDITOR'S NOTE

Teaching and learning in today's schools has become increasingly complex by the year, and ensuring K-12 leaders provide the guidance and support needed for success is essential. This Spotlight focuses on the challenges and some solutions shared by fellow educators. Discover strategies to **help readers grappling with challenging texts, utilize AI to support struggling readers, reduce course failures,** and more.

Education Week + Getty

Published June 24, 2025

This Intervention Cut Course Failures by a Third. How It Works

By Caitlynn Peetz Stephens

Schools saw significant improvements in students' absenteeism and course failure rates after two years working intentionally building robust student success systems that get at-risk students back on track early, according to a new report that analyzes data from more than 50 schools.

Participating schools saw a 32% drop in course failures and a 28% decrease in chronic absenteeism, according to the report.

In 2023, dozens of schools piloted retooled, relationship-centered strategies for supporting students as part of a program through the GRAD Partnership, a coalition of 12 organizations that partner with schools to carry out the implementation of student-success systems.

The progress schools have made in implementing these efforts and their impact on students' academics and attendance have been monitored and reported annually. With two full years of data in hand, project leaders say the results are "encouraging": Students are missing fewer days of school and failing fewer classes. And those positive results continue to grow each year, as the schools deepen their work, said Robert Balfanz, the director of the Everyone Graduates Center at the Johns Hopkins University School of Education, who has

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worked with schools on connectedness strategies through the GRAD Partnership.

"We've seen schools are able to see benefits in the first year, and then they see added benefits by working on it longer and adding more components," Balfanz said. "That's important, too, to show they're not hitting their ceiling right away—the benefits continue to grow the more they invest."

These efforts, known as "student-success systems," represent the "next generation" of earlier interventions like multitiered systems of support and early-warning systems, Balfanz said. They use data points such as academics and attendance to identify at-risk students and target increasingly extensive interventions depending on individual levels of need.

Unlike those earlier approaches, student-success systems also incorporate information about school climate, social-emotional learning, and students' sense of connectedness—measured by simple, recurring surveys that ask whether students feel known and supported by adults and classmates.

Student-support teams regularly review the data to flag classroom- and building-level concerns and to identify students who need targeted attention.

"Historically, we've been pretty reactive in our student supports and we wait for something pretty major to happen before we do something," Balfanz said. "We wait for kids to fail a class or get suspended or become truant, because either the data to monitor the progression to those points didn't exist or it existed in silos and wasn't examined holistically. If you pay attention, schools can organize themselves to identify students' needs sooner rather than later, and that's good for everybody."

Streamlined monitoring shows promising results

In addition to traditional supports, like academic tutoring, student-success teams may take new approaches to building school connectedness, such as encouraging involvement of at-risk students in extracurricular activities or pairing students with peers who share similar interests.

The work is built around research that suggests students have better results in school if they believe that there is an adult who cares about them, their work has value, and they feel welcome.

Participating schools are seeing the payoff, according to the report.

Schools found, on average, a two-year decline in chronic absenteeism of 8 percentage

points (a 28% decline) for grades in which they implemented student-success systems with GRAD Partnership support.

In implementing schools' middle and high school grades, the chronic absenteeism rate—defined as missing 10% of school days or more in a year—declined, on average, from 34% to 30%, a 4 percentage point and 12% decline, according to the report.

Those findings build on a report after the first year of the partnership.

In the first year, the 41 pilot schools that reported academic data saw rates of students failing one or more courses drop from 25.5% in 2021–22 to 20.5% in 2022–23. Rates of chronic absenteeism dropped from 27.5% to 21.4% in pilot schools.

"With the proper support, schools can implement student success systems that ensure students not only stay on-track through high school completion, but thrive throughout, and are propelled into post-secondary and adult success," the report continues.

The results also show the benefits of streamlining student-support teams, Balfanz said. Many schools have a hodgepodge of different teams to monitor various aspects of students' performance and behavior, like attendance-monitoring teams, mental health teams, and academics teams, he said. Each is tasked with a small part of the students' experiences, and it is harder to catch patterns of behavior that might serve as a warning the child could use an intervention, before their problems become larger, he said.

"That's a lot of teams and a lot of meetings, and oftentimes, kids' challenges are more holistic than just one piece that these teams are looking it," Balfanz said. "So, this is making the case that if you bring all of these little teams together into one big student-success team, you could probably get more done." ■

October 17, 2022

3 Big Mistakes to Avoid When Helping Readers Grapple With Challenging Texts

By Sarah D. Sparks

Students progress faster when they are challenged to read difficult texts—but doing so may be a daunting task for teachers working with students who are struggling to read.

In a recent online discussion with the nonprofit Read Washington, Tim Shanahan, the founding director of the University of Illinois at Chicago's Center for Literacy, and a distinguished professor emeritus, highlighted tactics to avoid and offered better alternatives for teachers to support students as they tackle difficult texts.
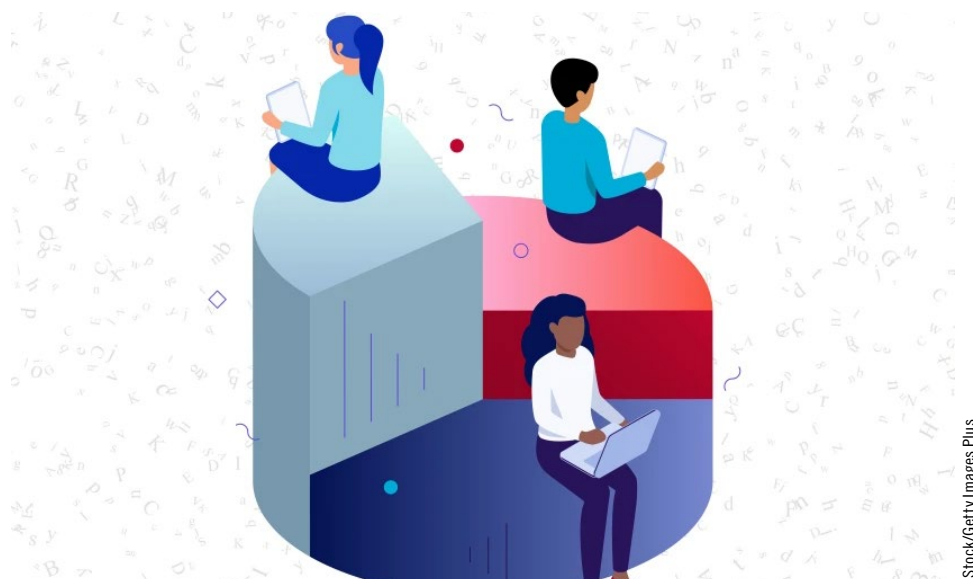
1. Don't focus on meeting a students 'at their level'

Beginning readers in the earliest grades benefit from repetition and easy to sound-out words—think of Dr. Seuss's Green Eggs and Ham or Eric Carle's, Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?—but research suggests students who have mastered basic decoding make faster progress if they grapple with more complex texts.

Research suggests students learn more with more difficult texts, as long as they have instructional support. For example, one 2017 study found 3rd graders who started as weak readers outscored even proficient readers when they used texts written two to four grade levels above their initial reading level as part of paired-reading exercises.

More-difficult texts may have more academic vocabulary and syntax, or require more understanding of literary devices and practices in different genres. Shanahan noted that it is more helpful in the long run—even for struggling readers—to learn tools to break down difficult texts rather than using more simplified reading passages. These might include asking students to paraphrase each sentence in a difficult text to check meaning; or to rewrite a passage that includes sentences with multiple clauses, phrases, or parentheticals.

2. 'Don't get ahead of the author'

The better a student understands the subject of a text, the easier it is to read it—even when the text itself is difficult. In fact, studies suggest a poor reader who is well-versed in a particular subject often can make up for low comprehension simply by relying on their own background knowledge.

Supporting information can exacerbate students' tendency to use their background knowledge to replace their comprehension, especially if it ends up repeating the text instead of simply providing context. For example, Shanahan recalled working with a high school teacher in Illinois who was preparing her class to read works by William Shakespeare. Shanahan agreed that students may need context about cultural differences in the plays written 400 years ago, but "she said, 'We're reading, 'Romeo and Juliet.' So to prepare them, I explained to them that there are these two families, and the two families are feuding, and the boy and the girl fall in love' ... And I said, 'Wait a minute. That's not the prior knowledge. That's the story that they're about to read,'" Shanahan said.

Explaining words or concepts that can be gleaned through the text itself provides less opportunity for students to practice "reading to learn," he said.

Instead, he suggested brainstorming with a class about what they know about a subject before reading the text, or asking students to write down how what they are reading relates to what they previously knew about the subject. Doing this with a partner can also help build students' comprehension, according to a study of 9th graders.

3. Don't overload on vocabulary

Low academic vocabulary is one of the most common problems for struggling readers, but Shanahan cautioned that teachers should be careful in choosing which words to define for students.

"We want to build a lexicon or a dictionary in everybody's head, and we want that list to get longer and deeper and richer as they go through school," he said. "but we also teach vocabulary to enable their understanding of the text we're about to read, and those are two really different goals."

Rather than preteaching extensive vocabulary lists for each text, Shanahan said it is more important for students to learn how to recognize when they don't know the meaning of a word and it is interfering with their ability to comprehend a text. Students should also learn how to figure out word meanings on their own, either through clues and close reading of the text itself or through outside tools, such as dictionaries.

For example, he suggested teachers use more passive vocabulary scaffolding, such as a glossary or a vocabulary wall, and give exercises in which readers explain clues in a text that shows the meaning of a particular word. ■

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EPS Learning Puts District on Track for Reading Success

Oakland Unified School District (OUSD), California

A large urban school district was struggling with an ineffective "hodgepodge" of reading intervention products for its striving students. Learn how EPS Learning helped them streamline and find success for both teachers and students.

Meet Oakland Unified School District

Like many school districts nationwide, Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) in California faces significant staffing challenges—turnover, recruitment, retention, and credentialing—especially in special education and targeted services in other critical areas. And just like other districts, OUSD's challenges are compounded by the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic's instructional disruptions. Additionally, OUSD has seen declining overall enrollment, while the number of students requiring special education services has grown.

The district is currently navigating budget cuts and decreased funding, which are the result of declining enrollment and the end of temporary COVID-19 relief funding. Despite these challenges, OUSD remains committed to its social justice-oriented mission—striving to build full-service community schools that address the diverse needs of its students and their families. This includes providing free breakfast and lunch, on-site health clinics, after-school programs, and various other services that support students' well-being and academic success.

Against this backdrop of fiscal challenges and evolving community needs, OUSD remains strong in its commitment to teaching and learning, with a particular emphasis on literacy. One key initiative in the OUSD Strategic Plan aims to ensure that all students are strong readers by third grade. In 2022-2023, less than 33% of Oakland students met or exceeded standards on the statewide English Language Arts (ELA) assessment, compared to the statewide average of 46% and the national average of 47%. Improving literacy rates is essential for empowering students to take charge of their learning and prepare for future success in college, careers, and their communities. OUSD is dedicated to reducing academic disparities and enhancing literacy skills for all its students.

Making Good on Commitments

Until 2019, OUSD relied on a variety of literacy interventions and programs that lacked coherence. "We even had a reading clinic, where students would be bused to one central location for intensive reading intervention," said Micaela Reinstein, OUSD Director of Special Education-Elementary Schools. "But that meant they missed other parts of their school day, and the clinic didn't reach all the students who needed it."

"Teachers were using whatever products and curricula they had and were familiar with—there was no consistency. It just wasn't working. Our kids weren't learning how to read," she continued.

Alli Guilfoil, a former OUSD elementary special education director and current consultant for the district, said, "We needed a solution to expand student access to high quality reading intervention to our students with IEPs across all schools. California's dyslexia legislation, AB 1369, had also recently passed and would require just that in the coming years."

Guilfoil continued, "As the OUSD team evaluated options, we decided against partners with more clinical models. We wanted a program that integrated smoothly into the school day, so we explored SPIRE®, the intensive intervention solution from EPS Learning, and received positive feedback from nearby districts like San Francisco Unified. SPIRE stood out as the most multisensory and teacher-friendly option, fitting well into the schedule without disrupting core content, specials, or recess."

"We needed a research-based structure that would be easy for teachers to implement. We see a lot of teacher turnover, especially in special education," Reinstein said. "So, a scripted program that allows teachers to hit the ground running was necessary. We found that with SPIRE."

OUSD met with members of the EPS Learning team, who provided guidance, recommendations, product demonstrations, and efficacy research to validate SPIRE's effectiveness. The EPS team also helped develop an implementation plan specific for the district, including needed materials and teacher training. EPS Learning provided comprehensive training over the summer and throughout the school year. The implementation started with a small group of teachers in June 2019, who began using SPIRE in Fall 2019. All K–8 SPIRE materials for the district arrived that fall, and training for all K–12 teachers was scheduled. EPS Learning trainers worked with OUSD staff in November 2019 and January 2020, but the SPIRE rollout was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

"That threw a wrench into everything," said Guilfoil.

Powering Through the Pandemic

"We were fully remote for a year and a half once COVID-19 hit," Guilfoil said, adding that the district's primary concern was, "How do we make this work while our kiddos are at home? We scrambled to get printed materials into the hands of our students. We also added iSPIRE®, the online version of SPIRE."

"EPS was instrumental in helping us navigate that change. They guided us through the implementation and in helping get teachers up to speed," Guilfoil said.

Like many districts, OUSD is still feeling effects of the pandemic. Teacher retention is down, and the influx of more students with special needs has strained the district's resources. Reinstein said, "We looked at 2023 as a real reset for us—we have new teachers, a new leadership team in special education, and we've fully implemented SPIRE and iSPIRE in our schools."

Positive Results

Patty Sheehan, a recently retired special education teacher at OUSD's Acorn Woodland Elementary School said, "Prior to using SPIRE I had to invent my material. I had to look up the goals and see what the students were working on, and I had to find materials to address the needs of those goals and develop a curriculum. And I never felt confident that it was very thorough. But SPIRE was incredibly thorough."

Next Steps

In the spring of 2024, OUSD piloted EPS Learning's digital literacy solution, Reading Assistant®, in several classrooms with promising results. Reading Assistant is an AI-powered tutor that provides students with personalized reading practice and targeted interventions for rapid improvement. Using voice-recognition technology, the program analyzes students' reading skills as they read aloud. An interactive avatar provides immediate, customized feedback and micro-interventions. Reading Assistant provides intentional practice of skills that are explicitly taught through SPIRE. Students encounter the fiction and informational passages from SPIRE, and receive real-time feedback as they read the passages. The program also includes other stories so students can quickly move beyond the decodable texts included in the SPIRE content. According to Reinstein, teachers in the pilot program found it to be "a light lift for teachers, with a high payoff for students."

"It's a great intervention tool and fits into how our special education program is structured," Reinstein added. "One teacher loved it so much that the principal requested it for the whole school."

Teachers using SPIRE in their instruction are seeing impressive growth on assessments. In addition to rising assessment scores, OUSD is seeing improvements in other ways. "Teachers say that many students seem more confident about their abilities and enjoy reading tasks much more," said Reinstein. "Our students are also doing better when they're accessing other, higher-level interventions." This enthusiasm set the stage for a district-wide SPIRE implementation, and OUSD rolled out Reading Assistant to all K-8 schools in the fall of 2024.

One teacher who has seen significant success with SPIRE and EPS Reading Assistant is Anna Treidler, a teacher at OUSD's Joaquin Miller Elementary School. Treidler teaches a mild-to-moderate self-contained special education class, typically for grades 3–5, but for the fall 2024 semester, her class is made up of just 4th and 5th graders. Treidler has been using SPIRE since its implementation before the COVID pandemic and now uses Reading Assistant as well. She shared, "I'm really glad to have a structured, evidence-based reading intervention program. It's been easy to figure out how to use and incorporate into my daily routine."

Treidler explained how she organizes her class for literacy centers: "I group students by reading level and have them rotate through different stations. One of the centers is the computer station, where students use Reading Assistant. I have them complete one story, and if they finish, they can move on to Epic or Sora to read eBooks or listen to audiobooks. Another center is where we do a SPIRE lesson together."

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> OUSD Director of Special Education-Elementary Schools

Treidler credits much of her success with SPIRE and Reading Assistant to the support and resources provided by the EPS Learning team. "What's been most helpful for me is diving into the teacher's guide and following the steps and instructions. Once you get into the guide, it's clear and easy to use compared to some other curriculums I've worked with."

Treidler's positive experience with SPIRE and Reading Assistant extends far beyond student progress—it's also about how these tools support her as an educator. "I really appreciate the Quick Checks in SPIRE. The built-in assessments are extremely helpful for gauging student progress," Treidler said. "They give me solid data, not just observational notes, which helps me confirm whether students are truly grasping the material."

Ultimately, it's the students' success that matters

most to Treidler. "I've definitely seen a lot of growth, especially in students who came from general education classes where the reading intervention wasn't effective. SPIRE and Reading Assistant have really made a difference for them."

K-5 Reading Diagnostic Outcomes 2023–2024 School Year
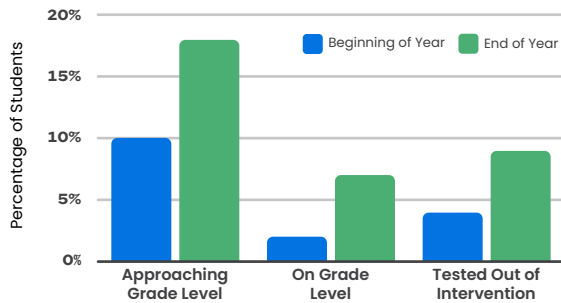
OUSD striving readers receiving SPIRE instruction demonstrated meaningful improvement over the course of the 2023-2024 school year, with 40% of students measured moving up at least one performance level. Across all of the 88% of OUSD elementary schools included in this analysis, there were more students performing on or above grade level, and fewer students significantly below grade level, at the end of the school year.

On Track and on Their Way

Guilfoil reports that at eight OUSD schools, the majority of students receiving SPIRE instruction moved up at least one performance band level on reading assessments. "At these sites, we have evidence of students receiving SPIRE instruction consistently throughout the school year, and, in most cases, special education teachers delivering SPIRE instruction have been doing so with their students consistently for multiple years," Guilfoil said. "We did have one teacher, brand new to SPIRE, along with some students

who were being taught by special education tutors also make significant gains. What this tells us is that SPIRE makes it possible for new teachers, paraeducators, or other classroom assistants to successfully support students to make significant progress in their reading. And that the progress is stronger with consistent instruction over time," explained Guilfoil.

"We believe that the trend of SPIRE 'super user' teachers leading students to more accelerated growth is related to the teachers believing in SPIRE. They've used it for years now. They've seen their students grow. As a result, they make sure to prioritize consistent SPIRE instruction for their students in need of reading intervention."

Working together

"We've gone through a lot of changes in the last five years, and EPS Learning has been really responsive and helpful," Guilfoil said. "They've ensured we've gotten the products we need and helped us reach out to families during the pandemic. We've got the products, the people, and the training—now it's really about monitoring student progress."

Jennifer Duffy, a customer success specialist with EPS Learning, reflected on the partnership with OUSD, saying, "It's so heartening to see teachers and admins who really care. They have a lot of challenges in front of them regarding the needs of their students, but I have no doubt they'll rise to them."

Together with EPS Learning, OUSD teachers will continue to make a profound difference in their students' lives, futures, and community.

Visit epslearning.com to view our range of curriculum programs. Questions? Contact your EPS Learning Account Executive.

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EPS LEARNING

Kaylee Domzalski/Education Week

Jessica Pack, a 6th grade language arts teacher at James Workman Middle School in Riverside County, Calif., speaks about AI and literacy at the ISTELive 25 + ASCD Annual Conference 25 in San Antonio.

Published July 03, 2025

How a Teacher Used an AI Tool to Help Her Students' Reading Comprehension

By Jennifer Vilcarino

San Antonio

What barriers do students face when asked to read text and show their comprehension of it?

This question was posed by an English/language arts teacher and educational consultant to a group of educators at a session at the ISTELive 25 + ASCD Annual Conference 25 here, held June 29 to July 2.

Some of the common responses among the audience of mostly teachers included limited vocabulary, boredom, and difficulty decoding.

The session—led by Jessica Pack, a 6th grade language arts teacher at James Workman Middle School in Riverside County, Calif., made the case that smart, strategic use of artificial intelligence tools could help boost reading skills. (However, it's important to note that many educators say AI tools do the exact opposite—they stifle creativity, lead to plagiarism, and give students an easy way out of tackling challenging assignments.)

Improving reading skills is one of the top priorities in schools across the country because

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of data showing that those skills are declining. The 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress has shown declining reading scores for 4th and 8th graders for years.

Those trends have prompted growing interest in the "science of reading," the use of proven, evidence-based methods for teaching reading that include teaching the foundations of language in a structured progression.

Pack has been using AI tools to bolster reading comprehension lessons, she said during the ISTE session, titled "Enhancing Literacy Through Creativity Using AI-Powered Tools."

"A lot of folks are landing on AI as a purely teacher-centered type of tool, so what we are going to do today is encourage a bit of student-centered use," Pack told the audience of educators at the conference here.

How this teacher used an AI image generator to work on reading skills

Pack said her 6th grade students from last school year had an average reading level of about 2nd or 3rd grade.

To address this learning gap, students were first asked to examine paragraphs from a book and generate keywords from that text. They would use those keywords to create a prompt for an AI image generator.

The students would then work in small groups to evaluate the image to see if it was missing something that was important to the text from the book. Finally, they would submit additional AI prompts to get the image to more accurately represent the text.

"This is huge. This is the metacognitive moment where they're demonstrating their comprehension—their full comprehension of the text—by being able to connect it back to whatever it is they were able to generate," said Pack.

Research shows that asking students to monitor and correct their own understanding of text as they read can boost their comprehension—though using AI for this purpose hasn't been studied extensively.

Pack emphasized that it is important for students to be taught to cite the images they create as generative AI images, because that instills the value of citing sources for content they create.

"They need to be aware of what content is AI-generated, and it starts building that digital citizenship foundation for citation of AI and being aware that not all the things we are creating are actual factual things," she said. ∎
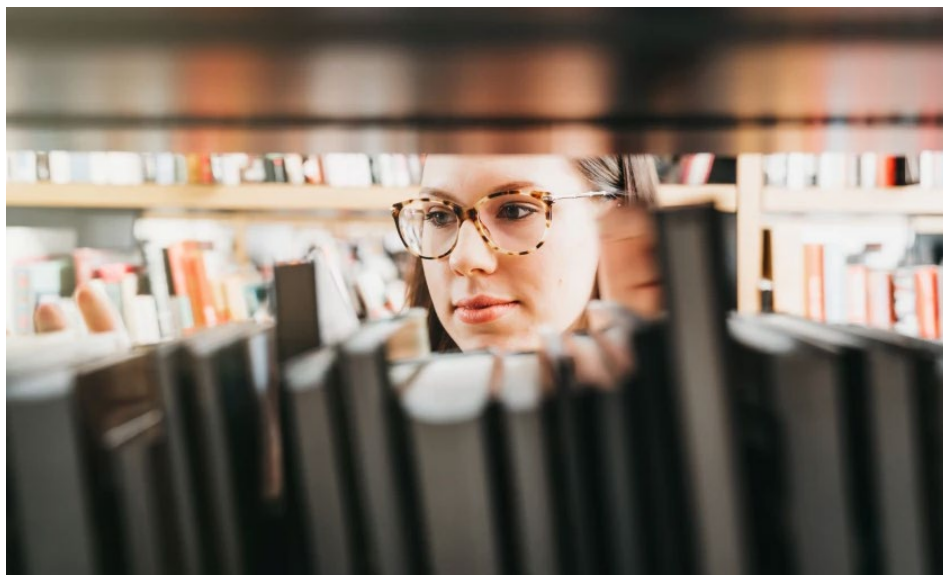
Ziga Plahutar/E+

Published March 14, 2025

4 Ways Teachers Identify and Support Struggling Older Readers

By Sarah Schwartz

For most students, instruction in how to read ends sometime in elementary school. But some kids still struggle with foundational reading skills well beyond that point.

Nearly half of upper elementary teachers, and almost 1 in 5 middle school teachers, say they teach phonics or other word-reading skills three or more times a week, according to a nationally representative study. Meeting these needs can be challenging for middle and high school teachers, who aren't usually trained in how to teach reading, and whose days are oriented around teaching content.

"At the middle school level, it changes," said Jenny Flieder, a reading interventionist at Roosevelt Creative Corridor Business Academy in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. "You move from all of that diagnostic, all of that skill building, to reading comprehension and literary analysis."

"No teacher sits around and figures out why that kid can't read on grade level. They don't. It's not the fault of the teacher—the system isn't set up like that," Flieder said.

Instead, she said, students "just start coping," turning to audiobooks or relying on their classmates for help.

On March 13, Education Week hosted a panel of middle and high school educators who are focused on supporting students who struggle:

- Julie Burtscher Brown, a literacy facilitator in the Mountain Views Supervisory Union in Woodstock, Vt.;

- Rachel Manandhar, an education specialist and literacy interventionist at Berkeley High School in Berkeley, Calif.; and

- Sue McCormack, a high school English teacher at Cheektowaga Central High School in Cheektowaga, N.Y.

They discussed how to find the students who need support, what works to catch them up, and how to make time for this instruction during the school day. Read on for four highlights from the conversation, and insights from other upper elementary and middle school educators who spoke with Education Week.

1. How teachers identify students who need more help

In middle and high school, most assessments of students' reading ability examine general comprehension—they don't tease out specific skills.

"Those are hard to pull out of a [state test], or an iReady test," said Flieder, referring to a popular reading exam given every few months. "You have to figure out what's going on with them."

These kinds of broader tests of reading comprehension ability can flag students who need help, and then teachers can drill down deeper, said Manandhar.

"Is it a word-level issue? Is it a syllable-level issue? Is it more of an automaticity, confidence, speed issue? And then from there, where are we at with the vocabulary and comprehension?"

Manandhar sees "the whole nine years" with her students, including decoding difficulties. "I think that people don't expect to see the world-level challenge at the high school level," she said.

In older students, especially, these word-reading difficulties are often greatest with multisyllabic academic language—the content-area words that students need to be able to read to understand advanced social studies or science text, for example. Inability to decode these words means students can't unlock the meaning of text, compounding comprehension difficulties.

"They get to the end of a sentence, and they can't tell you what it's about," Manandhar said.

2. What materials and methods teachers use

Interventions for older struggling readers aren't as plentiful as those for young children, but they do exist. McCormack, the New York teacher, uses a researcher-created program called Read STOP Write, a semi-scripted approach which she said involves regular choral reading and study of root words.

McCormack said she was nervous about following a script at first, but found that her students "really did like the routine."

In Woodstock, Vt., teachers at Woodstock Union High School use materials from Wilson Language Training for students who have the greatest foundational skills gaps. But Burtscher Brown, the founding teacher of the school's structured-literacy program and now a literacy facilitator in the district, said there are many tools that could work well in different contexts; no one program is perfect.

In general, it's important to have some curriculum to use as a starting point, said Jodi Kosek, an instructional content specialist for K-5 English/language arts and social studies in the Youngstown schools in Ohio.

"The cognitive load, because of the lesson

design, comes off of the teacher a little bit," said Kosek, whose district uses phonics resources from 95 Percent Group for upper elementary grades students with foundational skills gaps.

This support for teachers is especially important in upper elementary, middle, and high schools. "In older grades, the phonics piece isn't in their wheelhouse," said Kosek. Teachers at these grade levels are trained as content specialists, she said—not reading specialists.

3. Finding time for reading intervention in upper grades

It's common for elementary schools to set aside dedicated time for reading and math intervention—but not as common in higher grades. Getting these instructional minutes is crucial, though, teachers say.

In Youngstown, the district implemented an hour-long intervention block through grade 8, Kosek said.

And in the Woodstock district, administrators created credit-bearing high school classes for reading intervention, said Burtscher Brown. If students can get credit for Advanced Placement English Literature, they should get credit for structured literacy courses, she said: "Students are coming to structured literacy to learn to read and write well, and they should receive credit for their work as well."

But setting aside a full class period isn't always possible in high schools.

"We have so many competing interests at the high school level when it comes to graduation credits required, students' next steps for transition, the classwork that needs to be completed in order to pass classes and make progress," said Manandhar.

At Cheektowaga Central High School, McCormack integrated intensive reading instruction into her regular ELA class period. Adding time for this extra teaching has slowed the pace at which she can progress through course content, but growing students' skills has helped them engage more in the works they do read.

"Am I teaching Romeo and Juliet in March instead of February? Yeah," McCormack said. "But I'm also finding that, oh, my students are OK. ... They're starting to take a little risk with Shakespeare. Which, with 9th grade, is a struggle."

4. Building students' confidence

Helping students take risks, feel confident, and manage their emotions around reading is the most important part of the equation, said Manandhar.

"For so many of our high school students, as we all know, they're aware they're struggling," she said.

Manandhar is transparent with students—and their parents—about where their struggles lie, and helps them identify the strategies they use to compensate. She's also tried to create a physical space inside the school for literacy instruction where students feel comfortable, but also know that they will be held to high expectations. "It's warm and fuzzy—and we need skills," she said.

Making the room where literacy intervention takes place feel welcoming is a key—and often overlooked—piece of the puzzle, said Flieder, the Cedar Rapids reading interventionist.

The room that she worked in had been used as a special education room in the past. "I had a hard time getting the kids to come here, for WordFlight, because they thought that they were in a special ed. class," she said, referencing the reading intervention that the school uses.

She and her co-educator Myra Hall tried to make the room inviting, decorating it with bright colors and soft, cozy seating options. The principal helped them make the reading program feel exciting, organizing celebration days around it.

"No matter how glorious a program or a class or anything is, if you can't get the kids to engage in it, it is nothing," Flieder said. ∎

More Like This

Scaling Reading Intervention at High-Need Districts

Stronger Readers, Stronger Schools: Whitepaper for Literacy Leadership

Jennifer Norrell, superintendent of East Aurora School District 131, at the Resilience Education Center in Aurora, Ill.

Jamie Kelter Davis for Education Week

Published February 03, 2025

Why Reading Support Classes Help High Schoolers Succeed

By Sarah Schwartz

Biology, literature, calculus, U.S. history—all high school courses, regardless of subject, require a strong grasp of one critical skill: reading.

By the time students are in high school, especially in advanced courses, it's taken for granted that they can learn new, complex ideas through text. However many still struggle with reading comprehension.

That's why Jennifer Norrell, the superintendent of East Aurora schools in Aurora, Ill., knew that she would have to boost students' reading abilities before she could expect them to take on college-level work.

As part of the district's push to enroll more students in Advanced Placement classes, East Aurora instituted mandatory reading classes for students who scored below a certain threshold on interim tests and end-of-year assessments.

The classes give students practice with constructing viable arguments, citing textual evidence, and notetaking.

"No one really teaches high school kids that, and they encounter some of their most difficult, challenging, technical, reading and writing in high school," Norrell said.

Education Week spoke with Norrell, a 2025 EdWeek Leaders To Learn From honoree, about how she implemented this extra reading support for students in East Aurora. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Why dedicate an entire class period to reading instruction for high school students?

We have the third largest population in the state of Illinois of [English] language learners. It's us, it's [Elgin Area School District U46], it's Chicago Public Schools, where they have 350,000 kids. We have 13,000 kids, so we're a pretty densely populated group of [English] learners.

So for me to move kids, we had to do some other things. One of the first things that we did was to really look at our literacy in the district as a whole.

Were the reading classes designed specifically to support English learners, or were they designed to improve reading for everybody?

We implemented mandatory reading classes at all levels. They were designed based upon what your needs were.

We have three levels of reading classes. The first level was for kids who were struggling for whatever reason. We have programs that are in the reading classes where we could count that [as an ESL class]. ... That reading piece, for them, it looks different, but the time is still allotted.

And then for everyone else, we have general level reading, and then we even have honors reading for the kids who are scoring at the highest level to really push them—not just reading, but also, argumentative writing, rhetorical analysis.

There were levels so that every kid was really getting what they needed. It wasn't just checking a box. It was targeted toward kids' skill sets and [abilities]. And more importantly, it was targeted to how we could push them to exit this [reading class] with a whole new skill set.

How did you introduce the idea to the staff?

The first thing that I did was conversations with the leaders and the teachers, because they needed to understand the context of why. Because oftentimes that is a hurdle, right? You go in, you put things forward, and then you get pushback and resistance.

What kind of pushback and resistance did you experience?

[Educators] reaching out to board members, emails—not happy—[critics] showing up at the board meetings.

Then one of my strongest parent leaders [supported me], the president of my Bilingual Parent Advisory Council [a district-wide group to foster relationships between parents and school staff]. She is a powerhouse. She does work all over the state of Illinois, and now she's doing work nationally. And she's a language learner herself.

What [she] said to me is, 'My son graduated from this district. ... He got to college, and because he was a good kid, he was one of the kids that made it in AP. He said when he got to college, he struggled mightily, because he really wasn't reading at that level.'

She said, 'I'm going to tell the parents to stand down and not join forces with the staff. ... I hear you. I believe you.'

I would meet with [the Advisory Council], and other large parent groups, and they could understand it, and a lot of them had seen it. By me really forming those relationships with the parents, it enabled me to be able to get them on my side.

What effect have the reading classes had on student achievement?

It really was a game changer—to allow us to not only increase the numbers of AP [students], but also to allow us to increase the numbers that were receiving 3s, 4s, and 5s [on AP exams].

I wanted to make sure that our [AP enrollment] numbers went up, but it didn't jeopardize our percentages. I think that removing the barrier of literacy being a challenge, or tracking literacy in a greater amount of time that we had built into the schedule, was allowing us to set the groundwork for the success of kids in AP later on in their high school career.

We haven't been perfect at everything we've tried.

We certainly didn't expect the pandemic, and we certainly didn't expect our SAT scores [declining during that time] to be such a setback. We've got to rebuild all that up again. It hasn't been perfect, but the reading continues to pay off. ■

Published November 20, 2024

What Teachers Say They Need Most To Help Struggling Teen Readers

By Sarah Schwartz

Middle and high school teachers say they don't have enough time to support the struggling readers in their classes—and many say their school leadership isn't paying attention to the problem.

The findings, from a survey of more than 500 teachers, reading interventionists, and other educators in grades 6-12, come from the Project for Adolescent Literacy, or PAL, an educator-led group to support older students who are not reading at grade level.

The results paint a portrait of a fragmented landscape of reading intervention in secondary schools: Teachers use a wide variety of materials to try to reach struggling students and a similarly diverse collection of methods to assess progress.

They want more training on how to grow these students' reading skills and more time to put those practices into action—but more than half say their schools don't have policies to support these goals.

"Many respondents indicated that they are sounding the alarms based on their experience day in and day out in the classroom, and yearning for administrator support," said Rachel Manandhar, an education specialist and literacy interventionist at Berkeley High School in Berkeley, Calif., and a member of the PAL steering committee, in a recent webinar.

Teaching reading skills is usually the province of early elementary educators. By the time students get to middle or high school, the saying goes, they're reading to learn—not learning to read.

But as the "science of reading" movement has brought to light the gaps in many schools' early reading instruction and aimed to correct those, some upper grades teachers have said that their students are still missing foundational reading abilities.

The recent surge in state legislation on reading, aimed at aligning instruction with evidence-based best practice, almost exclusively targets grades K-5.

Still, in a separate report this year from the RAND Corporation, teachers of grades

Jack Hollingsworth/Getty

3-8 reported that 44 percent of their students always or nearly always faced challenges reading the content in their classes. Almost 1 in 5 middle school teachers reported that they are teaching basic word-reading skills, such as phonics, three or more times a week.

Lack of resources can be a 'nightmare'

The Project for Adolescent Literacy survey was disseminated through educator networks, via PAL and its host organization, Seek Common Ground. Respondents included teachers, interventionists, and other educators from 44 states, as well as Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa—countries that are also facing lively debates about the most effective methods for teaching reading in English. Respondents' demographics were similar to the racial and gender breakdown of U.S. teachers.

Most respondents, 80 percent, said they have found teaching practices or strategies that work with struggling adolescent readers. Seventy-one percent said they teach with materials that will help these readers grow.

Exactly what those materials are, though, varied greatly. Respondents listed 124 different programs or curricula—explicit, systematic approaches to teaching reading foundations such as Orton-Gillingham, Wilson Reading System, and Voyager Sopris' Rewards topped the list—and 60 different pedagogical approaches.

To measure students' progress, educators

most commonly used classroom-based assessments or anecdotal evidence: 46 percent of respondents mentioned these. Thirty-one percent said they used some form of normed assessment, such as NWEA's Measure of Academic Progress, a test given periodically throughout the school year.

"The majority of measurements mentioned are teacher-designed," said Kate Crist, a literacy consultant and member of PAL's steering committee. "They're very anecdotal, and they're very specific to individual teachers and classrooms."

In open-ended responses, educators explained the multifaceted challenge of working with older students who still struggle with foundational skills, such as decoding multisyllabic words.

They asked for professional learning that would explain how to differentiate in a classroom where students' reading levels range from 3rd through 12th grade, and materials that could help students practice phonics skills that aren't "juvenile-looking."

"I'm using [speech to print] a lot and I was able to find a program that I'm able to go through that is working well," wrote one teacher, in an open-ended response.

"And then alongside that, I'm creating a lot of my own things that are for everything else, because of course it's not just about reading the word, it's also about understanding the sentence structure, it's about reading fluently, it's about vocabulary. ... I'm sort of doing [a] mix of things but I tried to create everything myself last year and it was just a nightmare. I just didn't have the time for it."

Time was the biggest barrier cited by educators in the survey.

"There are about 40 students per grade who need serious reading intervention," wrote one respondent. "I wish more of my day could be dedicated to 1:1 and small group reading to practice these hard skills."

Another respondent suggested that their school implement an extra class for struggling students to get additional practice. "Currently no such class is offered," they wrote.

Almost half of respondents—46 percent—disagreed or strongly disagreed that their school leadership was paying attention to struggling adolescent readers.

"I am teaching my literacy intervention class on what would be my lunch break," wrote one respondent. "I approached my admin. and asked them if I could teach this class and said I would do it on my lunch break. So that's how much support I get from my admin." ■

OPINION

Published September 09, 2025

We Asked 100 Leaders for Their Top Challenges. Here's What We Learned

Which one is your school working on?

By Peter DeWitt & Michael Nelson

This summer, the two of us launched a statewide leadership series in Washington state with our colleagues Kim Fry from the Washington State Administrators Association and Gina Yonts from the Association of Washington School Principals. The statewide leadership series includes over 100 school-based leaders such as principals, assistant principals, instructional coaches, and other districtwide staff.

Our primary focus was fostering collective leader efficacy work, using collaborative inquiry as the process to deepen the impact of leaders and teachers. We define collective leader efficacy as a school or district leadership team's belief in their ability to develop a shared understanding and engage in joint work and evaluate the impact they have on the learning of adults and students in a school.

The leaders will spend two years exploring what's impacting, or getting in the way of impacting, student and adult learning. Using several surveys, leaders identified dozens of problems of practice, from high absenteeism to disengagement, inconsistent instruction, inequitable outcomes, and unclear systems. But as we listened closely and examined both their challenges and the strategies they're testing, we began to see clear patterns emerge.

Here are the 10 themes surfacing most powerfully in their leadership work:

1. **Equity** - Most leaders understand that equity can't be reduced to a program or initiative. They are learning, often through trial, error, and some political pushback, how to navigate and fix disparities in access and opportunity. They are working with educators on how to create authentic engagement for multilingual learners, students with disabilities, and historically underserved students. For more information, check out this EdWeek article focusing on

four ways principals can better support special education teachers.

2. **Student Engagement and Belonging** - Leaders are discovering that engagement isn't just about time on task. Student engagement and belonging is about whether students see relevance and feel ownership in the work. Through walk-throughs and dialogue with students and teachers, leaders are rethinking "engagement" as connection, agency, and voice.

3. **Attendance and Chronic Absenteeism** - Teachers and leaders are understanding that attendance is rarely about students "not caring." They are uncovering how belonging, relationships, and trust shape whether students attend school and are finding ways to focus on connection rather than compliance.

4. **Multilingual Learners and Language Equity** - One of the most frustrating

aspects to MLL students is when they are viewed through a deficit lens. Leaders are realizing that multilingual learners thrive when their assets are recognized and leveraged. In practice, they are learning how uneven the shift toward asset-based, standards-aligned instruction can be and that it takes modeling, support, and persistence to make language equity impactful and empowering.

5. **Tier 1 Instruction and MTSS Clarity** - Teachers and leaders are finding that they often have a shared language around Tier 1 instruction but lack a shared understanding of what it looks like. Clarity around Tier 1 sets the foundation for effective Multi-Tiered Systems of Support, and strengthening those Tier 1 practices is often the first, most overlooked step.

6. **Data Use That Drives Instruction** - In our work with leaders, we find that they collect data but often don't have

Canva

the time or systems to effectively reflect and analyze it. We are working with leaders to create theories of action (If, Then, So That) and we help them tie it to leading and lagging data they can use to drive improvement. Read more here about cycles of inquiry.

7. **Culture of Collaboration, Not Compliance** - Collaboration has long been a word used in schools, but to those on the receiving end, it feels more like contrived collaboration where they don't feel they have a voice in the process. Leaders are learning firsthand that collaboration can feel hollow if it's just about compliance. The shift they are making is toward joint work, where teachers and leaders work together, take risks, share responsibility, and use feedback as fuel for improvement.

8. **Instructional Alignment and Coherence** - Daily experience is showing leaders how fragmentation across grades and departments undermines impact. They are learning that coherence isn't about doing fewer things but about making sure every initiative connects back to shared priorities and high-quality instructional practice. The two of us have been working with districts to align their strategic plans with each school improvement plan and connect classroom practices to all of it.

9. **Behavior, SEL, and Schoolwide Systems** - Social-emotional learning is often a phrase these days that inspires a lot of negative feelings on the part of people who do not really understand what it truly means. Teachers and leaders are navigating this space and through practice are learning how proactive SEL, clear expectations, and consistent systems can create a more predictable and supportive schoolwide environment.

10. **Leadership Capacity and Systems Building** - Leaders know from experience that no one person can do this work alone. They are learning how to build leadership capacity through distributed roles, inquiry-driven improvement, and systems that sustain collaboration even in times of transition.

Clearly, none of these lives in isolation. What the two of us are finding as we collect survey data from leaders in different parts of the world is that regardless of where we live, these are the issues we are all facing. It's what we do about them that matters.

Our next step with the leaders we're working alongside is to invite them to select one of 10 data-informed themes. Based on their choice, they'll join an Instructional Leadership Collective, which is a group of peers focused on deepening their leadership practice and impact in that area. Each collective engages in monthly, facilitated inquiry using structured protocols. What we're seeing is powerful: When leaders come together with shared purpose, authentic dialogue, and aligned action, it builds coherence, strengthens capacity, and drives meaningful growth. ■

Peter DeWitt is a former K-5 public school principal turned author, presenter, and leadership coach. Michael Nelson is a leadership coach and thought partner for the Instructional Leadership Collective. Nelson is now co-blogging Peter DeWitt's Finding Common Ground Education Week Opinion blog.

Sonia Pulido for Education Week

OPINION

Published April 23, 2025

Don't Underestimate the Power Of Graphic Novels for the Classroom

By Larry Ferlazzo

Many students—and teachers (including me!)—love graphic novels.

Today's post begins a series exploring how they can be used in the classroom.

'Wonderful Societal Artifacts'

Tim Smyth is an award-winning educator and Eisner-nominated author of Teaching with Comics and Graphic Novels: Fun and Engaging Strategies to Improve Close Reading and Critical Thinking in Every Classroom, *available from Routledge. He also shares many engaging education strategies on his website, www.teachingwithcomics.com and can be found on social media @historycomics:*

Being a reading specialist and social studies educator for over 20 years, I continue to be amazed at the power of comics and graphic novels to inspire and engage students of all ages and levels. Students are not the only ones who benefit from this medium, as I am also a lifelong comics reader and get to share my passion with them, which energizes me.

As an educator, I agree with Spider-Man

that with great power, truly comes great responsibility. I have a responsibility to make sure that I go beyond using comics as just a hook and, instead, I focus on using this compelling medium to create analytical readers and writers.

Some ideas:

Don't underestimate the power of creation. My students generate their own comics in the manner they feel most comfortable, using Canva, Pixton, PowerPoint, photographs, hand drawing, etc. For example, students could choose a person from history that inspires them and make that person into a superhero—complete with origin story, accessories, uniform, enemies, allies, and an annotated works-cited page.

Every subject area has heroes that have impacted the content area, and these figures can be made into heroes allowing the students to fully immerse themselves in the research. My students have done this for celebratory months, such as Black History, Women's History, Arab History, LGBTQIA+, etc.

Don't forget that comic books come out every Wednesday, which means that they serve as wonderful societal artifacts, chronicling what's happening in the world around us in real time. I begin many classes by putting a

single comics panel on the smartboard and asking students to discuss its meaning as a do-now activity. These panels have allowed us to open vital conversations about race, gender, identity, and so much more in an engaging and nonconfrontational way. Today's comics truly do represent all walks of life, and I hope that this representation will help make meaningful change.

An easy comics lesson is one that I have done on the very first day of school. Before the students arrive, I set out assorted comics for groups of 3-4 students to read and analyze as historical artifacts. These comics span from the 1940s through today, allowing students to discuss the meaning of historical artifact and that history is all around us. I encourage them to look at advertisements, letters to the editor, technology, representation, gender roles, and so much more. They go home on the first day of school talking about class and they are excited to come back knowing that we will look at history in a completely new and exciting way.

As a reading specialist, I truly feel that we are all teachers of reading, regardless of what classes we teach. An important skill for students is annotating (did I just hear a groan?) and actively interacting with text. Comics are perfect in teaching this skill as students are forced to slow down and truly see what is happening—to make meaning in the melding of text and image. This is a 21st-century literacy skill as we routinely do this when consuming media in all of its forms.

My comics readers are experts at picking apart and annotating not just words but also political cartoons, videos, propaganda, and advertisements. While comics are never a replacement for prose, they are another important literacy resource which often inspires excitement and further research.

In my class, students have been drawn (pun intended) to wonderfully illustrated graphic novels about so many topics, including the *March* Trilogy about Congressman John Lewis' life (we also create our own well-researched comics about modern civil rights issues), the Harlem Hellfighters, Japanese-American internment camps, the plight of a mother in Syria, genocide, politics, economics, music, and countless inspiring graphic biographies.

As a content-area teacher, I just do not have the time to teach all of these topics with prose resources, but I can have students read the manga adaptation of Les Misérables in one 90-minute class. Students can also individually read comics in one sitting on multiple topics and then share with their partners and gain

a wider understanding of an event or person while allowing for student choice.

'Allegorical Digital Books'

Jun Shen is a social studies teacher and teacher on special assignment (ToSA) for educational technology at Laguna Beach High School in California:

My example might be more of an illustrated novel than a graphic novel, but in my 10th grade world-history class, I have my students create ones that get published in our local libraries.

I redesigned my pre-WWII totalitarianism unit last year through my district's Unit Design professional development process. Inspired by George Orwell's Animal Farm, I had my students create original allegorical tales that paralleled the actions of totalitarian regimes before WWII.

More specifically, students were given a list of key historical events, characters, groups, and institutions from Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, Stalin's U.S.S.R., and the Holocaust. Student groups had to choose one of those themes, research the history behind it, brainstorm creative ways to retell the story using symbolism and metaphors, and then craft an illustrated novel using the BookCreator app.

Many students made *Animal Farm*-like stories, with slightly different animal characters and settings. However, I was really impressed and entertained by some of the more creative allegories. For example, one book about the rise of Nazi Germany was set in a used car lot where an intelligent Tesla manipulated the head salesman to give it ultimate power over the dealership.

Another book about the rise of Stalin in the U.S.S.R. had its story take place within a power struggle between two girls on a high school varsity volleyball team. The students were also required to include a real history lesson in the back of the book to help the readers understand the historical parallels. Each group read their books to the class and taught the corresponding history lessons at the end of the unit.

One of the key components of the units created through Unit Design is the authentic assessments. This is taking project-based learning a step further by incorporating social entrepreneurship into the curriculum. We want to make sure that what the students learn is demonstrated by more than a test or paper, even more than a project that gets displayed. We wanted to make sure that the students take what they learn and help make the world better.

For this project, all the allegorical digital books were sent to one of our 8th grade English classes at our local middle school. The 8th graders were at the time reading *The Diary of Anne Frank* and were learning about the dangers of totalitarianism, which coincided perfectly with our 10th grade content.

First, the 8th graders read the 10th graders' books. Then, select 10th graders went on a field trip to the middle school to hold an authors panel in the 8th grade English class. There, the students had a chance to ask the authors questions about the creative book-writing process. The authors also had a chance to teach the 8th graders about the politics and the real-life implications of their stories, so as to inspire civic participation and citizenship.

Finally, the best book of the class, an allegory about the rise of Mussolini, but set in a coral reef, was published digitally and physically. *The Rise of the Mega* was published in our school district's digital library in the Sora app. It was also printed and hardcover copies were placed in each of our district's school libraries plus our local city public library.

Students all felt empowered through this unit, not only to have done something creative but with the knowledge that they helped, even if in a small way, maintain our democratic norms and institutions.

'Rich, Complex, and Engaging'

Kiera Beddes has been a high school ELA/history teacher, now digital learning specialist, in Utah for 13 years. She is currently a member of the Utah Teacher Fellows and is passionate about social science, literature, and technology in education:

I've been an English teacher for 10 years, even though I went to school initially to be a history teacher. In my classroom, I had a very broad view of what qualified as a text. Just like how anything could be a historical artifact, almost anything can be "read" as a text. Graphic novels and comics are 100 percent worthy of being instructional materials and offer a wide landscape for critical thinking.

I remember reading *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang in my adolescent literature class during my teacher-prep program, and it completely changed the way I looked at graphic novels in the classroom. I had no idea graphic novels could be so rich, complex, and engaging.

As I have dived more into the format, I've fallen in love with the vast array of graphic novels that can be used in the classroom. If you are still looking for reasons why you should consider using graphic novels, I could point

to the enduring popularity and high quality, the chance for students to practice both visual and multimodal literacy, as well as the chance to use 21st-century skills of creativity and critical thinking as they decipher the text. Great graphic novels are a seamless blend of text and picture. You can't make complete meaning of the story without both.

When I first started teaching, I encouraged my struggling readers to use graphic novels as a way to build up their confidence with reading, because they could usually read them faster than a regular book and feel a sense of accomplishment when they finished a whole book.

I used part of a graphic novel retelling of *Frankenstein* with the whole class for the same reason. Since the novel is a frame story (a story, within a story, within a story), using the graphic novel version for the creature's version of events allowed us to cover a lot of chapters in a short amount of time, comprehend it well, and explore a new type of storytelling.

I taught a film and literature elective ELA class and I used Filmish: A Graphic Journey Through Film by Edward Ross as one of the reference materials for the course. It is the most fascinating discussion of film that I've ever read. It is also super interesting to use a graphic novel format to analyze film.

Considering film is a visual medium, it makes sense to use another visual medium to analyze it. This book allowed me to use a unique literary form to help students look at film in a different light. Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* is also a must read for this very reason. What better way to understand comics than with comics?

McCloud breaks down the nature of sequential art, its history, and how to craft your own story. I would recommend using short selections from each with students, as taken as a whole they are quite dense.

The last way I've used graphic novels or comics with students is as mentor texts for student work.

There is a lot of power in using art as storytelling, even for the kids who aren't super artistic. For instance, students can explore tone really easily with the use of color. Comics are a great way to help students understand sequencing and to demonstrate their comprehension of plot structure.

Comics are really flexible considering the technology you have on hand: I've had students create comics on paper, in Google Slides, or with comic book templates in Canva or Adobe Express.

Teachers should use graphic novels and

comics in the classroom because they engage students, develop different literacies, and foster critical thinking. These texts offer diverse perspectives and can simplify complex concepts, making them accessible and relatable. To easily incorporate graphic novels, teachers can use them to build struggling readers' confidence and employ them as mentor texts for student projects. Using graphic novels or comics in the classroom is more than just the cool factor. They are a valuable source of rich text worthy of study and use in the classroom.

Thanks to Tim, Jun, and Kiera for contributing their thoughts! ■

Larry Ferlazzo is a former award-winning high school English and social studies teacher of more than two decades.

Vanessa Solis/Education Week + Getty Images

OPINION

Published May 20, 2025

Want Students to Read on Grade Level? These Strategies Can Help

Active reading, peer-assisted learning, and other ways to scaffold literacy instruction

By Jennifer Throndsen

Are you a teacher, instructional coach, or school leader who is concerned about how to support all students in accessing grade-level texts? If so, you are not alone. In fact, in a survey last year, less than a quarter of educators reported their school is doing "very well" in meeting the academic needs of all learners.

Exacerbating this issue is the large percentage of students who are not reading proficiently, as we were recently reminded by the declining scores captured in the latest National Assessment of Educational Progress.

So, what are educators to do? Luckily, the research is clear that one of our best strategies is scaffolding, an approach in which the teacher or more capable peers directly support developing readers. In fact, literacy researcher Timothy Shanahan has curated dozens of studies that show appropriate scaffolding can accelerate student learning by using more challenging text than a student might be able to handle independently.

In my nearly two decades first as a classroom teacher then a teacher trainer, I have found the following three strategies highly effective:

Active reading strategies

Instead of reading texts to the students, listening to an audio version, or asking the strong readers to read, we can use active engagement strategies that afford all students the opportunity to engage in grade-level text with scaffolding. Six common active reading-engagement strategies include:

Cloze. Cloze reading occurs when a teacher reads a challenging text aloud and strategically selects words to omit. Students are prompted to fill in the missing words.

Echo. Echo reading happens when the teacher reads aloud a portion of the text, such as a sentence, paragraph, or page, and students echo back with similar pacing, intonation, and expression.

Choral. Choral reading takes place when two or more students, or even a whole class, read the text simultaneously. This strategy gives striving readers scaffolded support via the more proficient readers as the teacher models appropriate pacing.

Duet. Duet reading is when two partners, one strong reader and one striving reader, are paired together to read a text aloud in unison.

Partner. Partner reading strategically pairs up two students who take turns reading part of the passage aloud. It may be a page at a time, a paragraph, or even a sentence depending on the length of the text and students' stamina. Both students have the text in front of them and are tracking it. The stronger reader can provide prompts for unknown words for the striving reader.

Whisper. Whisper reading is just what it sounds like. Students read independently in a whisper voice. It is a great replacement for silent sustained reading as it offers hard evidence of student practice instead of hope that there is.

Background knowledge activation

Depending on the text and the students you are serving, you can either activate their prior knowledge on the topic or take a few moments to build background knowledge if it is foreign to them. For example, if you're reading about the Civil War and the topic is new to your students, then it would be best to spend some time building their knowledge. This could take the form of a short video that provides a basic overview of the conflict or pre-teaching some key terms that are in the text they will encounter.

However, if you'll be reading about a topic that is known to your students—say you're teaching about tornadoes in the Midwest—then you can use a technique like a K-W-L chart that asks students to share what they already know, what they want to know, and finally what they learned after reading. By activating prior knowledge or building background, educators can facilitate stronger and lasting connections to the new learning while increasing comprehension.

Peer-assisted learning

As researchers Douglas Fuchs, Lynn Fuchs, and Pamela Burish documented more than two decades ago, peer-assisted learning strategies are highly effective instructional practices that instantly increase the amount

of scaffolding a student may receive just by providing a peer for them to engage with. The duet reading strategy mentioned above is one example.

Another is paragraph shrinking, when a capable reader and a developing reader practice summarizing a text they are reading. Within the partnership, the students take turns serving as the "coach" and the "reader." The coach will provide the reader with feedback on each of their summary statements. The reader will read for a set amount of time or a certain amount of text before the coach and reader switch roles.

For additional scaffolding, both students could be reading the text aloud in preparation for the designated reader to summarize that portion of text. Generally, the student who coaches first is the more capable reader so that they can model the feedback process for their partner.

The coach provides feedback to the reader in a few ways: encouraging them to rethink the "who" or "what," revisit what they identified as the most important details, or shorten their summary sentence if it exceeds the set limit of words. If the coach is unsure of what the main idea for a particular paragraph should be, they consult the teacher. (For more information, you may consider watching this three-minute video that highlights how to implement the three steps of paragraph shrinking.)

A caution: Let's remember that scaffolding is not differentiation. When we scaffold our instruction, we are giving students access to grade-level material without altering the grade-level expectations. Unlike when we use differentiation, we are not lowering the expectations but rather identifying the scaffolds students might need to effectively access the grade-level material.

Using these types of scaffolding strategies can be powerful levers helping students successfully participate. Teachers and school leaders, ask yourselves how you can scaffold instruction to ensure all students have access to grade-level materials. ■

Jennifer Throndsen has more than 20 years of experience in the classroom, including as a teacher, instructional coach, district office specialist, and state-level director. She now works with state, district, school leaders, and classroom teachers to improve student learning outcomes.