EDITOR’S NOTE
A growing number of learners are struggling with reading. In this Spotlight, review data on literacy learning gaps; assess the tasks ahead for educators teaching young learners; get insights on newer claims about what’s missing in curriculum and teacher trainings; and gain understanding on what the experts are saying about early reader instruction tools.

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More Than Phonics: How to Boost Comprehension for Early Readers

By Sarah Schwartz

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

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

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

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

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

The whole process is deceptively simple—it took less than 60 seconds—but this kind of embedded vocabulary instruction is a key piece of Matthews’ overhauled early reading program. In 2014, only 14 percent of the school scored proficient on the state’s annual assessment. The numbers have grown steadily to the point where this year, 80 percent of the students met the standard. In 3rd grade, the numbers reached 95 percent.

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

A body of research has shown that once students can decode, their reading comprehension is largely dependent on their language comprehension—or the background and vocabulary knowledge that they bring to a text, and their ability to follow the structure of a story and think about it analytically.

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

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

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

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

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

Engaging With Rich Content

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

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

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

“To learn words well, you need to encour-

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In improv, comedians are taught to say, “Yes, and ...” to build off of the scenario that their fellow performers create. The same framework can help kids build related vocabulary. Take the word “cautious,” McKeown said.

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

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

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

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

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

Building Knowledge

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“My biggest fear is that districts that are starting to do some of this work to build knowledge in early grades, that they won’t stick with it,” Myracle said. “The gains are going to be longer in coming.”
Get our Reading Intervention Toolkit, go.voyagersopris.com/VP-Reading-Toolkit, to help struggling K-5 students on the journey to reading success.
Why ESSA-Rated Solutions Are Needed to Address Equity Gaps

The impact of evidence-based interventions on outcomes

T rusted education thought leader Pam Austin spoke in a recent podcast on a subject close to her heart: equity in education and what educators must do to achieve it.

The reality is that some students need more instruction to achieve the same outcomes as their peers. As educators seek interventions to close this gap, two terms are used to characterize these interventions: equality and equity.

**Equality and Equity in Education**

Equality in education means that there is quality for all. “Every student gets a great teacher—not by chance, but by design—because teachers are equipped with proven solutions that set the stage for instructional equality.”

Equity in education means that we are providing every student with the exact quality of instruction that is necessary for their growth and learning. “Students come to us with varying skills, so their needs will vary, as well as their strengths and weaknesses. Instruction cannot be ‘one size fits all.’ As educators, our goal is to respond to students with the instruction and intervention needed in order to provide equity in education.”

To deliver on the promise of equity, educators need targeted evidence-based strategies that are systematic and cumulative, explicit and diagnostic; strategies that apply what is known as the science of reading. The science of reading gives educators a knowledge base for instruction so they understand when and how to move forward when students struggle.

Having access to this knowledge base opens the door to equality through the quality of instruction, ultimately leading to equity for all students. For those students who need more instruction and more support with interventions, teachers must apply literacy instruction that is explicit and systematic.

**The 5 Essential Components of Literacy**

In 2000, the National Reading Panel Report summarized several decades of scientific research on the science of reading into five essential components, which, when applied in a systematic and explicit way, would ensure equality in literacy instruction:

- **Phonemic awareness** helps students learn to manipulate individual sounds in words in a carefully sequenced series of lessons. Students...
count, identify, or isolate phonemes, learning to isolate beginning, middle, and ending sounds in words. This prepares students for the key skills of segmenting and blending words and sounds.

**Phonics** provides numerous opportunities for practice reading and spelling both phonemically regular and irregular words. Students receive immediate practice applying newly learned phonics skills in text that has been carefully constructed to correspond with the phonics skills students are learning while engaging them in interesting topics.

In **Fluency**, teachers model appropriate reading rates and expression. Students repeatedly read passages aloud with feedback and support to improve their reading rate. Timed readings motivate and challenge students to improve their fluency while monitoring their own progress.

**Vocabulary** skillfully meshes a carefully planned sequence of word introduction with read-alouds, student passage reading, comprehension activities, and text discussions. This design gives students repeated exposure to new vocabulary in a variety of contexts using oral and written language.

**Comprehension** uses a combination of read-alouds and accessible text to teach critical strategies for understanding text, focusing on the skills most struggling readers lack. Students often chorally read with their teacher, and then retell the story in their own words. As students gain facility with listening comprehension and begin reading more difficult text, reading comprehension becomes the main focus.

How can educators be sure interventions that promote systematic and explicit instruction will actually deliver the promised outcomes for students? That’s where legislation on research-based evidence of effectiveness comes in.

**ESSA Evidence of Effectiveness**

The kind of evidence described in ESSA is generally produced through formal studies and research and is segmented into four tiers, or levels, of evidence: Strong, Moderate, Promising, and Demonstrates a Rationale. In order for an intervention to be categorized as the top tier, Strong, the evidence must be based on at least one well-designed and well-implemented experimental study.

ESSA provides funding for literacy programs and other grants that can help students succeed as long as they have such evidence that shows they are effective at producing results and improving outcomes when implemented.

“This means via ESSA, school districts may have funds to purchase solutions that are proven and backed by the science of reading and that will help to close the learning gaps between students.” Voyager Passport is one of those solutions.

Voyager Passport is a reading intervention program for grades K–5 that follows a Structured Literacy approach. “The science-based Voyager Passport program was built to address diverse learners with reading deficits and provide these students with the skills critical to becoming successful readers. Voyager Passport is an ESSA Strong-rated solution, which is the highest tier you can give an intervention program.”

**Achieving Equality and Equity**

Equality in education ensures every student receives the exact quality of instruction that is necessary for their growth and learning. Equity in education can occur when every teacher is empowered with evidence-based strategies that are systematic and cumulative, explicit and diagnostic. Structured Literacy interventions based on the science of reading advance both goals.

As Pam Austin says, “If I could wave a magic wand and change anything in the world of education, I would ensure that every teacher has a gift of deep knowledge of literacy and language so that they become practitioners of prescriptive and diagnostic reading instruction, providing high-quality instruction that results in equity for every student so that each will receive the instruction he or she needs.”

Follow the full podcast as Pam provides examples of the evidence-based instruction strategies used in Voyager Passport. It is available for listening at go.voyagersopris.com/ESSA-Solutions-Podcast.
More and more American students are falling significantly behind in reading, and the widespread academic disruptions during the pandemic are likely to create a critical mass of struggling readers in the nation’s schools, new analyses of federal data show.

There’s been no improvement in overall reading performance at any grade level in the national tests called the Nation’s Report Card for the past decade or more, with declines for lower grades happening since 2017 and for 12th graders since 2015.

That stagnation has been driven largely by a growing share of students failing to meet even the most basic level of reading proficiency, and by steadily falling scores in the National Assessment of Educational Progress for the 10 percent to 25 percent of students who struggle the most with reading.

The NAEP measures three levels of reading achievement—basic, proficient, and advanced—based on students’ understanding of literature and their ability to gain information from texts. However, since 2017, the number of students who cannot meet even the basic literacy benchmark has grown in 30 states among 8th graders and 13 states for 4th graders. Nearly half of 4th graders in New Mexico, for example, cannot meet the lowest reading benchmark, according to analysis by Ebony Walton, a statistician for NAEP.

The decline in performance for the bottom 10 percent of readers has spanned nearly all racial and socioeconomic groups, NCES reported in a symposium on reading research. And the drops have been significant enough to prompt the Council of Chief State School Officers and the Institute of Education Sciences to launch initiatives focused on studying and supporting the most-struggling readers.

“This is not a Black and brown problem. It’s not a problem just for poor students or students with special needs,” said Peggy Carr, the associate commissioner for the National Center for Education Statistics, which administers the NAEP. “We all are represented in the bottom—perhaps disproportionately for some relative to their representation in the population, but nonetheless we’re all there.”

What skills trip up struggling readers?

While the group of students who fall below basic reading performance has been growing, their educational status is largely a black hole. We still know relatively little about what these students can understand and what skills they most need, according to Lynn Woodworth, NCES commissioner.

In an attempt to get a clearer picture, one analysis by the IES looked at NAEP oral reading data from a nationally representative group of 1,800 4th graders from 180 public schools. While the study could not determine which skills caused students’ overall low reading performance, “a large body of research has established that foundational skills are the main drivers of oral reading fluency, which in turn is necessary for reading comprehension,” said Sheida White, an NCES researcher and the author of the study.

White found, for example, that, among below-basic-level readers, the difference in accuracy was greater between students in higher and lower groups than it was between readers in the proficient category and and those who barely missed making it into the basic reading performance category.

The lowest-performing 4th graders misread about 1 in 6 words, on average, and often didn’t recognize words in print that they knew from spoken language.

Low below-basic readers had significant trouble decoding key words, and focused on reading individual words rather than phrases, sentences, or passages. In one example, demonstrated in the first audio clip found here, the 4th grade student only finished about a third of the text within the allotted time and read in a stilted monotone, which has been associated with poor comprehension. (The photo associated with these audio clips from IES does not depict either of the actual students speaking.)

By contrast, proficient readers like the one in this second audio excerpt, completed the passage and read with expression, pausing in the correct places and emphasizing particular parts of the text for listeners, showing understanding rather than just decoding the material.

P. David Pearson, a reading researcher and emeritus faculty member in the University of California, Berkeley, Graduate School of Education, argued educators need to avoid siloing different areas of reading instruction for different students and grades. Teaching reading comprehension should begin in the earliest grades, and teachers should continue to look for and remediate problems in decoding and
other early-literacy skills among older struggling readers.

“We can fall into an either-or track, so comprehension and word recognition become a kind of a zero-sum game. And we want to discourage that,” Pearson said. “Just because we’re teaching them word recognition doesn’t mean that we can’t teach comprehension. And just because we’re focusing on building knowledge, doesn’t mean that we have to de-emphasize strategy instruction. ... We want to think of the various instructional components and activities as complementary and integrated rather than completely separated and independent of one another.”

Reading skills and deficits compound over time. While the oral fluency study did not look at 12th graders, a proficient 4th grader reads aloud more accurately than an adult with only basic literacy—159 words correct per minute versus 123 words correct per minute, based on data from the National Assessment of Adult Literacy.

Reading Intervention

And poor reading skills significantly narrow students’ choices after high school. In a separate study based on the Program for International Student Assessment, IES researchers found U.S. students’ focus of study at age 19 was strongly linked to their reading proficiency at 15. For example, while 9 percent of all 19-year-olds were still working to earn a high school diploma and 26 percent were not studying for any higher degree, among students who had performed in the lowest two reading levels on PISA at age 15, 23 percent were still working to graduate high school at 19, and another 49 percent were not in school at all. By contrast, only about 4 percent of the best readers at age 15 were not studying for a postsecondary degree by 19.

In January 2020, just before the pandemic, the Council of Chief State School Officers released a report calling for states to pass new laws and launch initiatives aimed to improve reading—and in particular, to ensure that teachers base instruction on the latest science on reading development.

Take me to Education Week’s Interactive

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The Tough Task Ahead for 1st Grade Teachers

A case study on providing math and literacy foundations

By Madeline Will

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

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

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

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

Also, kindergarten enrollment was down nationally. An EdWeek analysis found that almost 20 states lost 10 percent or more of their kindergartners during the pandemic, compared to the 2019-20 school year. While some of those children who stayed home may be in a kindergarten classroom in fall 2021, others will skip it entirely and head straight to 1st grade. Kindergarten is optional for children in 31 states.

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

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

• Emma also spent most of the year learning remotely, but her parents organized a kindergarten pod with two other families. The
What 1st grade teachers can do

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

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

“You can’t assess the brain without first passing through the heart of a student,” Chang said.

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

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

Jolie Brouttier, a 1st grade teacher at Down-town Elementary in Bakersfield, Calif., said she’s planning to spend the first couple weeks helping students accustomed to being in a physical classroom. After learning remotely for most or all of the time in school, students might come to 1st grade not knowing how to work with manipulatives for math lessons, handle scissors safely, or even properly hold a pencil.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

How districts can help their 1st graders

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

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

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

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

Interactive and Shareable Resource
Take Me To Education Week’s Teacher Strategies.

Published on June 10, 2021

Popular ‘Wonders’ Curriculum Shows Gaps in Alignment To Reading Research
By Sarah Schwartz

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Review seeks to evaluate alignment to research**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The program’s positives, according to SAP: It has a coherent scope and sequence for letter-feature instruction, includes direct and explicit instruction, and focuses on reading prosody—reading out loud with appropriate expression. Text selections are varied and complex, and there is a full range of English-learner supports throughout the program. There’s also racial and ethnic diversity among the characters in the passages that children read.

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

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

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

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

**What should teachers and schools take away from this analysis?**

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

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

If a school has strong elementary social studies and science programs, teachers and instructional leaders could look at Won-
That beginning readers should be using these early reading materials, only 23 percent said comes to decodable books.

Currently works as a consultant training teachers. Has written several books on phonics and curricula language arts curriculum is the key to building knowledge,” Cabell said.

“Don’t think any one English/language arts curriculum is the key to building knowledge,” Cabell said. 

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

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

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

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

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

‘Decodable’ Books: Boring, Useful, or Both?

By Sarah Schwartz

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

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

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

“When you can make that match … that’s where the power lies,” she said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Building Strong Habits

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Boring and Stupid’?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**What Makes a Good Decodable?**

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

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

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

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

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

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

There are no research-based rules on how much time beginning readers should spend with decodable text, said Shanahan. It would be “very reasonable,” though, to spend some portion of phonics instruction on practice, he said. This includes decoding individual words, spelling words, and reading decodable books.

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

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

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

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

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

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

**OPINION**

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**The Pandemic Will Worsen Our Reading Problem. Another Outcome Is Possible**

Universal literacy is a complex—but achievable—goal

By Emily Freitag

The data on the foundational literacy skills of the class of 2032—the children who were in kindergarten during the shutdown and 1st graders during this bumpy and inequitable 2020-21 school year—are terrifying. According to one commonly used reading assessment, the DIBELS benchmark measures, the percentage of students falling into the “well-below benchmark” category that predicts future reading failure grew from 26 percent in December 2019 to 43 percent in December 2020. All demographic subgroups were affected, but Black and Hispanic students were particularly impacted. There is no precedent for this kind of decline in the last 20 years of using these reading measures.

The foundational learning in early years makes future learning possible and builds confidence in students’ ability to learn. Delayed and disrupted schooling in K-2 creates gaps that compound over time. The patterns of educational outcomes that followed past school closures caused by outbreaks or natural disasters suggest that we will see these heart-wrenching results continue in the class of 2032’s schooling data, income, and lifetime outcomes.

If these historical patterns hold true, we can expect everything from 3rd grade state test scores to Algebra 1 completion to high
school graduation will show similarly stark and inequitable declines. Postsecondary completion, lifetime earnings, incarceration rates, and lifetime expectancy will correlate. The children of the class of 2032 will feel the effects. Our country will be able to measure the impact in contracted GDP.

However, another outcome is possible. While data predict these trends, no child is condemned to this path. We know there are teachers who help children beat these odds every year. If this can be done for some children, it can be done for all children. One hundred percent of the class of 2032 could learn to read with command and fluency. We might not be able to do it by the end of their 3rd grade year, but we can do it by the end of 5th grade. It is well within our collective capability to give every student in the class of 2032 and every class that follows command of reading.

We know more about how children learn to read than we do about any other content area. We know that learning to read starts by hearing and manipulating sounds. We know students then connect symbols to those sounds, unlocking a code we use to interpret and communicate in print. The English-language code is not simple—there are 44 unique sounds—but we know the best order in which to teach children those sounds. Teaching a child to read is both complex and doable.

The real challenge is how to engineer effective literacy instruction at scale. Every school system has individual teachers who are famous for helping every single child learn to read, and some schools consistently produce more readers than others. But very few schools and no school systems can deliver a guarantee.

The components of a functional early-literacy system are clear: high-quality, systematic curriculum; trained teachers; targeted assessments; effective data meetings; and sufficient time on task. There are also clear processes to assess, group, and instruct students, as well as monitor their progress. What we don’t yet know is how to help schools combine the component parts and move through the steps with sufficient precision to produce reliable results for every child, in every classroom.

If school leaders set the intention to ensure 100 percent of the class of 2032 achieves mastery of foundational reading skills, the path would require at least three things:

• **Leaders must track results with discipline, accountability, and the expectation that success is possible.** This involves looking at school- and systemwide data every quarter, identifying by name the students who need support, conveying a clear message to teams that 100 percent of students are expected to get to proficiency, and continuously trying new approaches and improving the offerings until every student is successful.

• **Leaders must ensure every school has the key components of a cohesive literacy instructional program.** Teachers, leaders, and support staff need to be trained on the science of reading. Every school needs a strong, evidence-based foundational reading curriculum as the basis for instruction. The curriculum must be supported by effective screeners and diagnostic assessments to indicate which students are falling behind and pinpoint where students are in the progression of foundational skills. Educators need sufficient time in the day for instruction and collaborative planning. And each school needs someone who knows how to make sure these pieces work together effectively.

• **Leaders must obsess over concrete progress.** Progress comes when every teacher, caretaker, and staff member who engages with a student’s reading instruction can identify the exact letters, sounds, and sound-spelling patterns that child is working on in a given two-week interval. Anything more general will not power the progress students need. Getting everyone on the same page with this level of specificity will take concentrated and consistent leadership. Every school needs a leader who is focused on little else than literacy instruction, and every school system needs to allocate real focus and attention across the system.

Supporting every student to be able to read with proficiency is hard, but we can do hard things. In the past century, we eradicated smallpox and doubled the human lifespan; in the last year, we developed and scaled vaccines for a novel virus. Educators are a profoundly capable group. We can eradicate illiteracy.

The stakes are high, and the alarm bells are ringing. If we cannot support our young learners during this critical time, we will all lose out. If we commit to get 100 percent of the class of 2032 to read on grade level by the end of 5th grade, we will find a way. And we will see the benefits to our country and communities for generations to come.

Emily Freitag is the CEO and founder of Instruction Partners, a nonprofit that supports equitable, high-quality classroom instruction.
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There Are Four Foundational Reading Skills. Why Do We Only Talk About Phonics?

We must teach the integrated set of foundational skills completely

By Heidi Anne E. Mesmer

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

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

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

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

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

Some educators think phonological awareness is synonymous with phonics, but this is another misconception. In fact, when I recently observed foundational skills lessons in more than 10 K-2 classrooms, I only saw one phonological awareness lesson. Phonological awareness is the ability to orally identify and manipulate the sound units of language such as words, syllables, and speech. Research tells us that if students do not consciously attend to and distinguish these units, they are unlikely to benefit from phonics. Similarly, instruction in print concepts primes students to learn phonics. Can you imagine going to a job where you learn all about the different types of buttons, threads, fabrics, and zippers but no one tells you that you are manufacturing jeans? Yet that’s often how reading instruction can feel for children.

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

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

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

1. Systematic instruction is effective. It is driven by a scope and sequence, a guide specifying the content to be taught and its order. Let one scope and sequence drive instruction. I often see districts using two to three foundational skills plans, an overkill approach that is bound to confuse students.
2. Students need to learn all the foundational skills. I see approaches that heavily
emphasize just one or two skills, such as phonics, but completely miss others. These skills are complementary and need to be consistently taught, in response to development, through grade 5.

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

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

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

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

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