—Stephanie Shafer for Education Week

Supporting Struggling Readers

EDITOR'S NOTE

There are many ways to support struggling readers. This Spotlight will empower you to help struggling readers who feel ashamed; support older students who lag in reading; nurture lifelong readers in a digital age; implement intensive tutoring for older readers; identify struggling readers by using a bathroom log; and learn what educators can use from Wordle.

OPINION

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What Teachers Can Do to Help Struggling Readers Who Feel Ashamed

By Madeline Will

For the millions of students who struggle to read at grade level, every school day can bring feelings of anxiety, frustration, and shame.

That's why it's critical to support students' social-emotional needs alongside their reading instruction, experts say, especially in later years. After 3rd grade, students are expected to switch from learning to read to reading to learn. But if students haven't mastered the foundational reading skills at that point, they may never become strong readers. They may disengage from school as the years go on, and many—especially students from low-income families—will not graduate.

"By the time kids hit 3rd or 4th grade, if they're still having a tough time [with reading], they view it as a failing on their part," said Elizabeth Jaeger, an associate professor in the University of Arizona College of Education. "Reading is such a core part of being successful in school, and they see themselves as not being able to do that. ... 'All these other kids just like me are doing just fine, and I can't seem to get it together.' That's just a really heavy burden, I think, for a lot of kids and that's the heart of their vulnerability."

School can be a minefield for those students, particularly as they reach middle and high school. Reading is woven throughout every subject area, meaning that children who don't receive appropriate support can fall behind in multiple classes, even though they are capable of intellectually understanding the material. Teachers may call on students to read aloud in front of the entire class, opening them up to potential judgment or snickers from their peers. And sometimes, students who lack decoding skills are given early-reader texts to practice, which feel babyish and boring.

Often, students who are not progressing at the same rate as their peers are ashamed and try to hide their lagging reading skills, said Ann Monroe, the assistant dean of the University of Mississippi School of Education who studies shame in the classroom. That desire to hide can manifest itself in four ways, as defined in psychiatrist Donald Nathanson's model of the Compass of Shame:

- **Attack self.** This can range from verbal self-put-downs ("I'm so stupid") to self-harm.
- **Attack others.** A student may lash out at a teacher or classmate who exposes their weakness in reading.
- **Withdrawal.** A student who is ashamed of their reading abilities may avoid participating in class or stop showing up altogether.
- **Avoidance.** A student may try to deflect attention by exhibiting disruptive behaviors, such as being the class clown or acting out.

"It's a rare occasion for a kid ... who knows they're struggling to be willing to be brave enough to ask for help," said Jeanne Schopf, a middle school reading specialist, interventionist, and coach in Sturgeon Bay, Wis.

Do's and Don'ts for Supporting Students Who Are Reading Below Grade Level

Older students who have not mastered reading are at risk for disengaging from school. Here are some expert-recommended do's and don'ts for teachers:

- Do build a supportive classroom environment where students feel empowered to be vulnerable and make mistakes.
- Don't force students to read aloud in front of their peers.
- Do offer scaffolding and supports so that students can access grade-level content even if they are not reading at grade level.
- Don't always group students who are reading below grade level together. Instead, utilize flexible grouping that are sometimes homogenous and sometimes heterogeneous.
- Do give struggling readers books that are interesting and age-appropriate while still being accessible in terms of reading level.
- Don't assume that a student who is refusing to engage in classwork is lazy or doesn't care about school. Embarrassment and shame might be at the root of their behavior issues.
- Do incorporate students' strengths and interests into reading instruction.

Many students don't master foundational skills in early grades

Research shows that systematic, explicit phonics instruction is the most reliable way to make sure that children learn how to read words. Yet many elementary teachers aren't trained in this type of instruction, so students are often taught to identify a word by guessing with the help of context clues. They might learn some letter-sound patterns but not others. They can't reliably decode words but may be able to mask their reading difficulties if they understand the meaning of the story and can predict words that make sense and look right on the page.

The opposite is also true: Some students may be able to decode, but they don't have a deep enough understanding of oral language to make meaning of the words they are saying.

Often, children who can't reliably decode words continue to advance through school at a substandard level without receiving any ev-

idence-based instruction, said Sarah Part, a policy analyst at the nonprofit Advocates for Children of New York, which offers legal and advocacy support for students from low-income backgrounds in New York City who are struggling in school.

"The problem just gets worse and worse and worse over the years, and the student gets increasingly frustrated and falls further and further behind," she said. "They're students who could have learned to read, no question, had they gotten the type of instruction they needed."

Small deficits students may have in reading compound over time—a phenomenon known as the Matthew Effect in Reading, after the Bible verse in which the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. A student who struggles with decoding can't access the information in grade-level texts, unless teachers provide other avenues. If they can't access the information, they can't use it to make sense of future texts, and their comprehension and background knowledge suffers.

By the time students who struggle to read get to middle or high school, many of them have been in ineffective reading-intervention programs for years, experts say. They may develop low self-esteem or anxiety, and many are angry, both at themselves and at educators who have not been able to teach them to read.

"They've really internalized these messages that school isn't a place for them, that they're not smart, and that reading isn't an enjoyable activity," Part said.

Sometimes, these students disengage or act out so frequently that teachers assume they're not applying themselves or don't care about school. But in reality, Part said, "it's all stemming from the fact that it's really frustrating and humiliating to be older and not be able to read."

Teachers can help mitigate feelings of shame

Teachers can support students' social-emotional needs by maximizing their positive feelings, minimizing negative ones, and creating a culture where students feel comfortable talking about their emotions surrounding reading, Monroe said.

To start, teachers must create a classroom environment where students feel comfortable asking for help and making mistakes in public without fear of mockery. Meg Tegerdine, a 5th and 6th grade special education teacher in Florissant, Mo., said her students often feel like educators in their past have given up on them. It takes time for them to get to a place where they feel comfortable being vulnerable and taking risks in reading, she said.

—Stephanie Shafer for Education Week

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>
> **SARAH PART**
> Policy analyst, Advocates for Children of New York

"Nothing works if you don't have relationships" with students, she said. "I try really hard every year to let them know ... they're worth fighting for and I'm going to be the one fighting for them."

But pedagogical strategies like "popcorn reading," in which students are randomly called on to read aloud for a short period of time, can cause anxiety for students who are below grade level in reading, educators say. "That is a really easy way for a kid to feel discouraged or put on the spot," Tegerdine said.

Instead, teachers could use strategies like "choral reading," in which the entire class reads aloud in unison, or private read-alouds, in which a student reads directly to the teacher, to build fluency and oral-language skills, Monroe said.

Teachers should also carefully consider how often they're grouping students of similar reading skills together, because that can stigmatize struggling readers, Monroe said. While ability-based reading groups are meant to target instruction to students' learning needs, research shows that students in lower-level reading groups are slow to progress academically and less likely to move up to higher-level reading groups in later grades.

"A lot of times, students get stuck in groups," Monroe said. "They notice it, and this can create a feeling of shame."

She recommends teachers use flexible grouping, a strategy that puts students in different reading groups depending on the day and the lesson. Sometimes, the groups may be homogeneous in terms of reading skills, while other groups might consist of students of varied abilities.

Also, it's important to capitalize on the strengths students already have. For example, Monroe said she worked with a high school teacher who had many students reading below grade level. However, the students were artistic and enjoyed illustrating comic books—so the teacher encouraged them to add more text into their comic books and then swap their books with peers to read.

"When you're doing something you're good at, you're much more motivated," Monroe said. And "when kids are motivated, they tend to do better."

Teachers should meet students where they are

Experts say older students who are reading below grade level should have access to age-appropriate texts that are engaging while still being accessible. High/low books—short

the National Assessment of Educational Progress showed that only 66 percent of 4th graders and 73 percent of 8th graders were at or above a "basic" level of proficiency in the subject.

But the pandemic turmoil has resurfaced questions about exactly how best to get students up to speed, and it's directed funding toward academic recovery. The pandemic also hit at a pivotal time for reading instruction: When the virus started to shut down schools in the spring of 2020, many states and districts were in the middle of a years-long push to align early-reading classes more closely to research-based practice.

Reading well is a complex process, involving lots of different skills like recognizing and understanding vocabulary or monitoring comprehension. But the building blocks of reading ability, the foundational skills, involve decoding the printed letters on the page into spoken words. If students can't read words and fluently connect them into sentences, they won't be able to understand what they're reading.

Decades of studies have shown that explicitly and systematically teaching students which sounds represent which letters—teaching them phonics—is the most effective way to get them reading words. This happens in students' first years of school, usually kindergarten through 2nd or 3rd grade. But as reporting from Education Week and other outlets has demonstrated, many elementary-teacher-preparation programs don't teach their students how to deliver that kind of instruction.

As a result, teachers say, some students move on to higher grade levels with gaps in their ability to read words. Research bears this out: Many older students who have comprehension difficulties also struggle with word-level reading.

This reality flies in the face of the maxim that students "learn to read" in K-3 and then switch to "read to learn" in older grades. In fact, as this research demonstrates, the issue is less clear-cut. Students who didn't get enough practice with word-level reading will continue to struggle as the demands of content knowledge and comprehension ramp up.

The pandemic has only compounded this issue, widening the gaps between students who can read fluently and students who can't, said Tiffany Hogan, a professor at the MGH Institute of Health Professions in Boston and the director of the institute's Speech and Language Literacy Lab.

"Teachers are having to differentiate instruction in a way that they never have before. It's a really Herculean task," she said.

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>
> **TIFFANY HOGAN**
> Director, Speech and Language Literacy Lab, MGH Institute of Health Professions, Boston

What foundational-skills gaps look like in older readers

Foundational-skills gaps can show up differently for older students from how they do for younger ones, said Jeanne Wanzek, a professor of special education at Vanderbilt University. "Maybe they don't have gaps in phonics and word recognition that might be more common in K-2, but they struggle with reading multisyllabic words and they don't really have a strategy for that," she said.

That is the case for Jenna Madden's 3rd graders.

"Most of my students are able to decode a one-syllable word, but they have trouble with the 2nd grade material, where they have to decode multisyllable words," said Madden, who teaches in Emann's district in New Jersey. "And now in 3rd grade, we're seeing not only two-syllable words but words with three or four syllables in grade-level text."

It's also likely that students will have mastered some parts of the K-2 curriculum but not others. "There's often splintered skills," Wanzek said. "It's just more complex, in terms of where their strengths are."

Struggles with word reading and comprehension feed into each other, she added: Students who skip a lot of words because they can't decode them will have a harder time understanding the text, applying comprehension strategies, and storing new knowledge. As students progress through the grades and must read more academic texts, they have to rely on more background knowledge and vocabulary—information they may not have, Wanzek said, if they had trouble reading related content in earlier grades.

"If you're struggling at 4th or 5th grade or higher, it's not going to be as simple as if you're in kindergarten," Wanzek said. "Often, it's multiple components that need to be addressed, and we see in the older grades that these multicomponent interventions have higher effects."

Older students with word-reading difficulties do need support for those skills, Wanzek said. But reviews of research on upper-grades interventions also find that explicit-vocabulary and comprehension-strategy instruction can improve students' reading ability. For example, teachers can show students how to paraphrase what they've read or draw inferences based on information in the text and prior knowledge.

Madden, the 3rd grade teacher, makes it a priority to teach students grade-level skills and content, even as she also attends to the building blocks of reading.

"Even though I have students who are reading below grade level, it's still important to expose them to grade-level text," she said.

How to address foundational skills without neglecting grade-level work

How schools address older students' word-reading difficulties depends on what skills children already have.

For students who have some phonics skills and can decode short words, one research-based recommendation is word study. This involves teaching students how to identify different syllables within words and how to read through multisyllabic words, but it also includes morphology: the study of the smallest units of meaning within words.

Morphology instruction teaches how to break up words like "untouchable" into parts: the prefix "un-," the root "touch," and the suffix "-able." And it teaches the meaning of those parts, which research has shown can support vocabulary development.

For students who need support in reading fluency, researchers recommend having students read passages aloud, with monitoring and feedback from a teacher.

This kind of supplemental instruction can be done in a separate intervention block. But it isn't always necessary to break out these skills from

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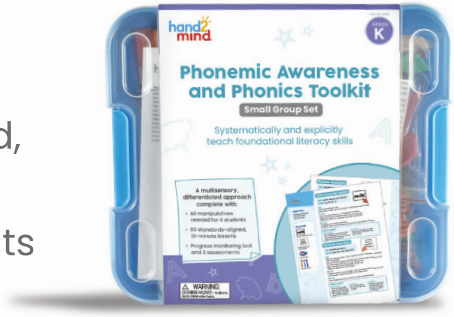

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for high interest, low reading level—can help build fluency and vocabulary skills while also maintaining interest in reading.

Nonfiction texts often strike a good balance between having sophisticated content and relatively simple sentences, the University of Arizona's Jaeger said. And Tegerdine said she uses a lot of comic books and graphic novels with her students, since the subject areas are usually more mature, but there's less text.

Schopf, the middle school reading interventionist in Wisconsin, said she gives students who are reading below grade level the same books as their classmates as long as there is additional support. For example, students can listen to an audiobook, which will help them develop more vocabulary and meet certain grade-level standards, such as identifying the theme or the main character. (Students will also meet with Schopf for explicit phonics instruction.)

But often, middle and high schools don't provide students who are below grade level in reading with the assistive technology they need, said Part of the Advocates for Children of New York.

"Not being able to read at grade level should not be a barrier to getting other grade-level academic content," she said. "That's what's going to help students engage in school."

After all, by middle school, students who struggle with reading have often experienced what could be considered trauma, educators said.

"It's very important—in addition to getting students evidence-based instruction—to validate their past experiences," Part said. "They've been struggling for a long time, and no one has helped them. It's not their fault: The school system failed them." ■

—Getty/Igor Alecsander

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How Schools Can Support Older Students Who Lag in Reading

By Sarah Schwartz

At the beginning of 2020, Shelly Emann felt like her district was on the right track with reading instruction.

In the Madison public schools in New Jersey, where Emann works as a K-8 instructional coach, teachers in kindergarten and 1st grade had just started using a program that taught students the building blocks of reading in a systematic progression: how to identify the different words in sounds, how to match those sounds to letters, and how to use that knowledge to decode new words.

Emann hoped that this new system would head off some of the reading difficulties she had seen in her nearly two decades as a 4th grade teacher, working with many students who didn't know how to read through harder words with multiple syllables.

But then, COVID-19 hit. "That threw us for a loop," Emann said.

Getting wiggly 5- and 6-year-olds to sit through phonics lessons on Zoom was a losing battle. And pandemic-adjusted schedules didn't always leave enough time for K-2 teachers to pull together small groups of students for additional support. The district is expanding the new reading program to 3rd grade, too, but supply-chain issues delayed the delivery of materials for the first few months of the school year.

Madison is far from unique. Since the spring of 2020, many students across the country spent less face-to-face time with their teachers during a critical period of their reading development: the first few years of elementary school, in which students learn how to read words.

National studies of student-test scores during the 2020-21 year found that these students weren't doing as well as their peers in years past. And now, some teachers and reading specialists say that they're seeing more 4th, 5th, and 6th graders with reading difficulties than they used to.

Still, Emann feels good about the progress Madison is making. The elementary principals have worked together to create an intervention block for all kids in grades K-5, and the district has hired additional reading interventionists.

Just as importantly, she feels like the pandemic has finally amplified the message she's tried to convey to her colleagues for years: Many older students in grades 4 and up have gaps in their foundational reading skills, too—and that limits their ability to access grade-level work.

Now, the teachers she works with want to talk more about finding and fixing foundational skills gaps, because they're trying to address learning loss, Emann said.

The pandemic has intensified some students' reading difficulties

Older students struggling with reading is not a phenomenon new to the pandemic. In 2019, before COVID disrupted schools, scores from

whole-class teaching, Wanzek said. "The good news is that we actually do know from previous research that you can make incredible gains in reading with older grades—as well as younger grades—by focusing on classroom instruction."

That is the approach that Bayside Middle School in Virginia Beach, Va., is taking. The school has woven morphology and fluency instruction into whole-class lessons, said Rene Martinez, the 6th grade literacy coach at Bayside.

Students who need more support than what's offered in core classes spend additional time working with reading specialists on a digital supplemental program that addresses foundational skills. And students who struggle with decoding one-syllable words or letter recognition get time in small groups with reading specialists and interventionists.

Many students struggled with grade-level work before the pandemic, and the shift in practice in the district isn't a response to COVID alone, Martinez said. But the disruptions of the past few years have exacerbated students' needs, she added.

During the 2020-21 school year, Martinez started working with the district's high school and elementary language-arts coordinators to figure out how the school could fill in foundational-skills gaps while still keeping middle schoolers on track to tackle high-school-level work. Together, they adapted a 6th grade curriculum to maintain focus on essential grade-level skills and content, while also allowing time for core instruction in morphology and fluency. This is the first year teachers are working with the new program.

Lorraine Hajjar-Conant, who teaches 6th grade English/language arts at Bayside, didn't think students would like much of the small-group work, with its focus on reading aloud and breaking down words into parts. But so far, kids look forward to it, asking her in the mornings whether they'll get to do it that day. She's seen some improvements in students' comfort with reading aloud, too.

Even so, it's a tricky balancing act to make time for fluency and word work while also teaching 6th grade skills, like identifying the causes and effects of events in informational texts, Hajjar-Conant said. Teachers try to integrate the two as much as possible—for example, asking questions about plot, characters, and theme while students are reading fiction for fluency practice, she said.

"I think it's great that we're trying something different to see if we're going to get a positive outcome," Hajjar-Conant said. She's looking forward to next year, when the school will have data on whether these changes helped set students up for more success in 7th grade.

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> **JEANNE WANZEK**
> Professor of special education at Vanderbilt University

Experts anticipate a 'protracted period of catch-up'

Even though these foundational gaps can underpin reading difficulties, there are barriers to addressing them in older grades.

"It was something that was completely new to all of us, because we're not from an elementary background," said Hajjar-Conant. The school has started work this year to address students' foundational-skills gaps, both in whole-group instruction and intervention.

"It was a lot of new vocabulary and a new way of learning information. It was definitely a struggle," Hajjar-Conant said, of the learning process for her and her fellow teachers.

Teachers in older grades may have to put in more legwork to use assessments that can diagnose foundational-skills gaps and materials that can support instruction in that area, Wanzek said. Most of the screeners and diagnostic tests that can identify word-reading issues are the domain of special education teachers, and they're not generally used in older-elementary general education, she added.

It can also be harder to find age-appropriate materials, said Hailey Love, an assistant professor of special education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. "Often when children are perceived as being behind, they're subject to practices that are actually found to decrease motivation."

Teachers might have students only read texts at their "level," which would be written for younger children. It's important that students still get to engage with grade-level material and that they have the same choice in reading materials that other kids have, Love said.

And then, there's the shift in mindset. Middle school teachers are used to spending their time teaching to middle school standards, not how to sound out words, Hajjar-Conant said.

"The way that our administrators are trying to put it is, it's not something additional. We need these kids to read at a 6th grade level, so if we have to go back to 3rd grade skills, that's what we're going to do," she said. "We're going to have time to address the standards, but we need to teach them how to read."

Martinez, the literacy coach, acknowledges that change is a long process. Asking teachers to try new instructional methods poses an extra hurdle to jump in a year already fraught with COVID-related challenges.

"Schools are just humans, put together. And humans have limitations," said Hogan of the Speech and Language Literacy Lab. Her team works with school partners, and many of their literacy initiatives were "rocked by COVID," she said. In some of these schools, teachers are also trying to support students through the traumas they've experienced over the past few years, like losing parents to the virus.

For Hogan, the answer isn't to abandon efforts but to acknowledge that they might take a more circuitous route than expected. "I think that what needs to be kept in mind," she said, "is that there's going to be a more protracted period of catch-up than we anticipated." ■

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How to Nurture Lifelong Readers in a Digital Age

By Sarah D. Sparks

—Stephanie Shafer for Education Week

Successful readers develop not just the skill but the habit of reading. As a decline in pleasure reading coincides with a move to different modes of screen-based texts, experts worry students need more comprehensive support to become lifelong readers in the digital age.

"There's a lot of pressure on readers today to be able to select texts that are purposeful and useful and to discard others" in academic contexts, said Kristen Turner, a professor of teacher education at Drew University and the director of the Digital Literacies Collaborative, a professional network for teachers. "Then also to find those long-form texts that might allow them an escape or to learn something or to get another perspective ... it can be overwhelming."

That's problematic, because developing the habit of long-form and pleasure reading is associated with significantly better academic achievement across subjects. Analyses of reading behavior and achievement data from both the National Assessment of Educational Progress and the Program for International Student Assessment show students who report reading for pleasure or that reading is one of their favorite pastimes have higher general reading achievement.

"Around the world and in the U.S., people aren't reading unless they have to; half of them are saying, 'Don't make me do this,'" said Naomi Susan Baron, a reading researcher and the author of the 2021 book *How We Read Now: Strategic Choices for Print, Screen, and Audio*.

Similarly, the Pew Research Center's annual survey of reading found in 2021 that nearly 1 in 4 U.S. adults said they hadn't read a book in any format—print, electronic, or audio—in the past 12 months. More than 30 percent of those who earn less than $30,000 a year reported no book reading, compared with only 15 percent of those who made $75,000 annually who had not read a book in the last year.

Holding students' attention

While multiple studies have found reading online can interfere with comprehension, this effect differs by age and text complexity: Young readers using simple, short texts have not seen a significant drop in comprehension, whether they were reading in print or online, while teenagers and adults, grappling with long-form and more complex texts, did find digital reading more challenging for comprehension and focus.

Baron and her colleagues found in studies across the United States and internationally, more than 80 percent of college-age students said they find it easier to concentrate on print rather than texts in other media, and more than 70 percent reported they find print easier to learn from and remember.

"Students tell me [in print] you're able to lose yourself in the words and you can read forever without thinking about anything else. It's an escape. Whereas if you're reading digitally and if you have internet access, you cannot escape," Baron said.

One reason why: Both college students and, in a separate study, high schoolers said they are much more likely to multitask—read multiple texts, respond to email or social media, watch videos, and so on—when reading online versus in print. An analysis of more than a decade of research finds students comprehend less when they are reading online, in part because they think they are understanding the text they read better than they actually are.

Instead of getting lost in a story, students are more likely to get distracted, experience eyestrain, and become prone to stopping before finishing it. Over time, studies suggest that can become a habit that makes it harder to follow longer texts fluently and think deeply about what they read. NAEP data suggest students who spend more screen-based reading time perform worse in reading in both grades 4 and 8.

New supports are needed to nurture a love of reading

Emerging research suggests children and adults alike have more difficulty reading online texts that require long focus or more than one sitting. Yet most teachers do not know how to nurture a love of reading, particularly longer texts, in students outside of traditional print, according to Turner.

"Even the new teachers are part of a generation that was actually taught to read and write almost entirely in print. A lot of the research that's been done [on reading long texts on different modes] has been done with college students or even older high school students who were never taught how to read on a screen or to annotate on a screen or to engage deeply with text on a screen," said Drew University's Turner. "It seems like a small shift, but it's actually a huge shift in how we think about teaching reading."

To build better reading habits in new platforms, experts recommended educators focus on:

- **Streamlining:** Close other applications while reading, such as email or other websites, and encourage students to read through a text completely before going back to follow hyperlinks. Unlike print footnotes, it can be easier to get sucked into long detours from online links.
- **Noting:** Most long digital text formats include annotation and collaboration tools, which can help students engage more deeply with the work—if the tools are of high quality and students learn to use them regularly.
- **Building stamina:** Particularly in digital text, taking breaks can reduce eyestrain and improve focus. But students also should be encouraged to build up the time they read challenging text.

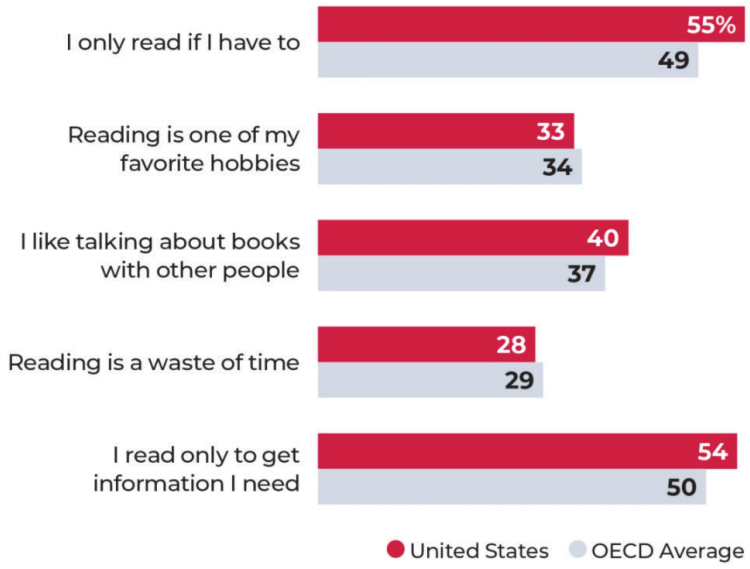
Helping students build these skills can pay off in building better reading habits in and out of school. Melissa Jacobs, the director of library services for the New York City public schools, the nation's largest school library system, said one silver lining of the pandemic is that it has forced schools and students alike to develop more comfort in switching among print, digital, and audio books. She said the overall time students have spent on library titles increased with the addition of online and audio versions expanded in response to remote learning needs.

"Over the next few years, I think that students are going to be able to develop a skill set that will allow them to self-select the format as a reader," she said. "I think what I would like to see happen is that the student is able to differentiate and decide that, 'I want to read this book as an audio book. I want to read that book as a print book. I want to read this book as an e-book.' "I would love the opportunity to provide as many formats as possible, as many mediums as possible, so that students have access and there's equity and they can differentiate what really makes a difference for them as an independent reader."

Building a sense of autonomy can help students develop a passion for reading that will carry them into adulthood, Jacobs said. "[Teachers] can't just say, 'You must read this and it's going to be your pleasure-reading book.' Adults find things that we like, and if we don't like it, we abandon it. Abandonment should be OK to help students become readers for pleasure." ■

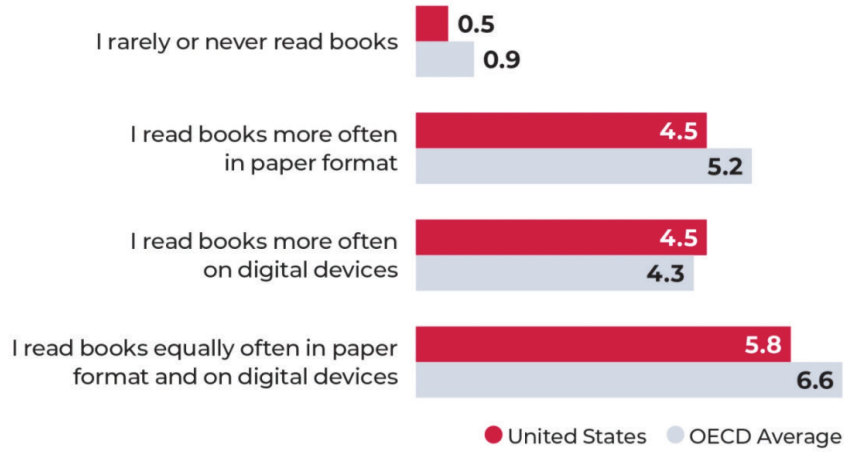
The Organization for International Cooperation and Development tracks the reading performance and habits of 15-year-olds in more than 100 countries and economies, including the United States. It finds U.S. teenagers more likely than those in other countries to read only when necessary, rather than as a hobby.

Percent of 15-year-olds who say:



Teenagers who equally read books in print and digital formats tended to read more hours per week than those who favored one format over another, the OECD found. But international teenagers read more often than U.S. teens did in print.

Hours of Weekly Reading



SOURCE: OECD, "21st-Century Readers: Developing Literacy Skills in a Digital World"

The Science of Reading: From Theory to Practice

Kristin Gauldin

The term "science of reading" has become a buzzword recently, and there is often confusion over what the term means. Sometimes teachers think this refers to a specific curriculum, program, or method, but in reality the term refers to a large body of research on reading. The Science of Reading encompasses thousands of studies on reading. The best explanation I've come across is from Louisa Moats who explains,

"First, the body of work referred to as "the science of reading" is not an ideology, a philosophy, a political agenda, a one-size-fits-all approach, a program of instruction, or a specific component of instruction. It is the emerging consensus from many related disciplines, based on literally thousands of studies, supported by hundreds of millions of research dollars, conducted across the world in many languages. These studies have revealed a great deal about how we learn to read, what goes wrong when students don't learn, and what kind of instruction is most likely to work the best for the most students."

This research is not new. In fact, a critical report on reading called The National Reading Panel was published back in the year 2000, and this report summarized a great deal of this research. These findings were not embraced by administrators or publishers, and methods that were not aligned with research continued to be promoted. Essentially, this information was not filtering down to those who needed it most—teachers. It can be overwhelming to overhaul your reading instruction, but you don't need to do everything at once. There are simple steps you can take to begin to transform your literacy instruction, and remember, one step at a time.

It can be overwhelming to overhaul your reading instruction, but you don't need to do everything at once.

Stop Using the 3-Cuing System

We want our students to keep their eyes on the words, to process each letter, and to decode from left to right. No guessing!

This is when you are asking students to figure out a word by looking at the picture, the first letter of the word, skipping the word and then figuring it out by using context, etc. These are guessing strategies, not reading strategies, and they aren't supported by research that shows they work. In fact, what the research tells us is that these are things that poor readers do, not good readers. We want our students to keep their eyes on the words, to process each letter, and to decode from left to right. No guessing!

Use Decodable Texts, not Leveled Readers

Replace those repetitive, predictable texts with decodable books that are filled with sounds and words they have been taught and are able to decode. Also, remember that decodable books are like training wheels...they are temporary and you want to get rid of them as soon as you can. Once students have a solid foundation in phonics, you can move to regular trade books.

decodable books are like training wheels...

Teach Phonics Explicitly and Systematically

One of the big differences between balanced literacy and structured literacy (aligned to SOR) is the approach to phonics instruction. Balanced literacy tends to sprinkle phonics in randomly, mostly addressing certain concepts as they come up in the errors students make within the texts they are reading. But there is a lot of research to support a systematic and explicit phonics approach. We want to be proactive and move through a set scope and sequence that leaves nothing to chance. According to this research, explicit teaching is intentional with clear goals and well-defined learning outcomes. It is well-planned, as teachers must have a clear conception of what will take place in a lesson if it is to accomplish its goals effectively and efficiently. Explicit teaching is sequential, following a series of steps that explains the purpose or outcome of a lesson, providing modeling of the skill or ability, guided practice with feedback and guidance from the teacher, opportunities for more distant practice, and evaluation to determine success and to allow for reteaching. There is no one correct sequence of skills, but in general, look for a sequence that starts with simple concepts and moves to more complex ones. You also want to make sure your phonics lessons follow "I do; You do; We do".

Encourage Phonemic Awareness

One of the most common sources of reading difficulties is poor phonemic awareness. Make sure to spend time on this concept in your classroom! You can embed this practice within your phonics lesson, and you can also spend a few minutes before your lesson on these skills. Research supports about 6 minutes a day on phonemic awareness activities.

One of the most common sources of reading difficulties is poor phonemic awareness.

Build Vocabulary and Background Knowledge

We never want to neglect the language comprehension side of reading instruction. Reading aloud to students is a wonderful way to expose them to grade-level content and vocabulary. We can beef up this instruction by explicitly teaching vocabulary words and being intentional about the concepts and subjects we teach in connection with our books.

Intensive and Well-Organized Teaching

The amount of instruction that is provided to students has long been known to be an important ingredient in reading success. Students who receive more teaching generally outperform those who receive less. Likewise, small group teaching tends to be more intensive than whole class instruction, leading to more learning (Hong & Hong, 2009). It is essential that teachers employ clearly and consistently structured lessons that keep the focus on learning rather than trying to get used to unfamiliar routines.

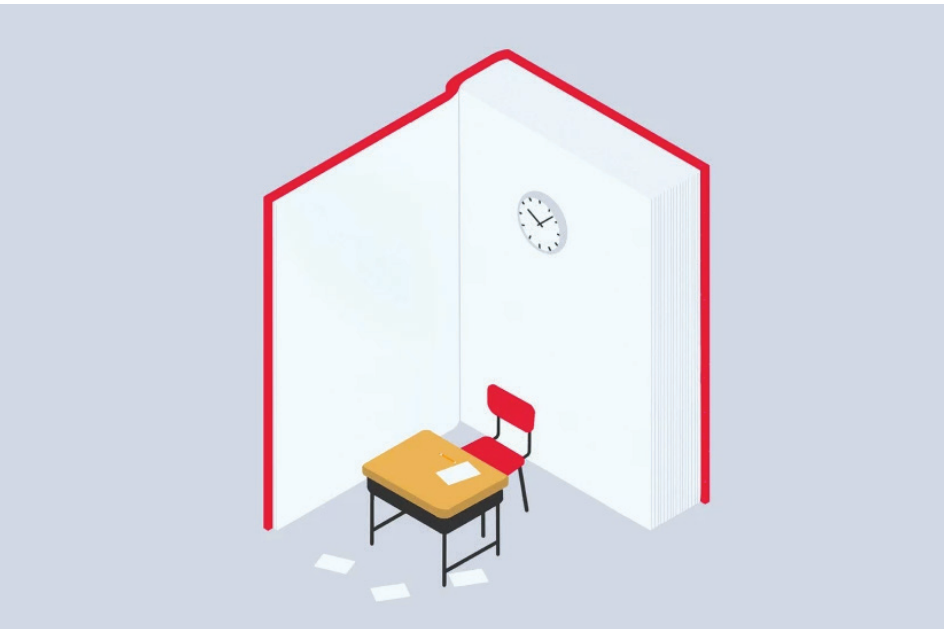
Research has found that higher reading achievement can be accomplished if instruction is differentiated on the basis of student needs.

Opportunities for All

Some students learn more easily than others. Research has found that higher reading achievement can be accomplished if instruction is differentiated on the basis of student needs. This differentiation should address what it is that students must be taught as well as the degree of explicitness and intensity of the instruction. Let's face it, if one group of students masters particular phonics skills and another has not, it would make little sense for them to work on the same skills. Some students also have been found to benefit more from explicit teaching and close teacher guidance while advanced students tend to flourish with little guidance. The point being differentiation is a must!

Conclusion

There is an important phrase that is often used in education, when we know better, we do better. As we evolve, we grow. There is great opportunity to propel ourselves forward and do the best we can for our current and future students!



—Stephanie Shafer for Education Week

Published January 4, 2022

The Benefits of Intensive Tutoring For Older Readers

By Ileana Najarro

When considering how schools can best support middle and high schoolers struggling with either the foundational skills of reading or reading comprehension, experts point to a research-backed strategy that can help close academic gaps: high-impact tutoring.

The term refers to an intensive form of tutoring that is offered through a school, is informed by data on individual students' needs, aligns to classroom work, and can be effective in getting students to grade level faster. Yet few districts have been able to implement that kind of programming prior to the pandemic because of such challenges as cost and staff shortages. New federal relief funds are helping more districts explore the possibility.

High-quality individualized tutoring has traditionally been something families have bought outside of school, said Susanna Loeb, the founder and executive director of the National Student Support Accelerator, which researches high-impact tutoring.

As researchers and school districts look to close opportunity gaps in part by ensuring students with the most need have access to high-quality tutoring regardless of their families' financials, they hope schools are able to find creative ways to invest in high-impact tutoring. That includes using federal relief funds tied to the pandemic that further exacerbated tutoring needs.

"In those instances where a student might need extra support for whatever the reason, then the school should be able to provide that," said Tanji Reed Marshall, the director of P-12 practice at the Education Trust, a nonprofit advocating for students from low-income families and students of color. "It should not have to be weighted on whether a family has the resources themselves."

How high-impact tutoring can work for older readers

The high-impact tutoring researchers point to goes well beyond after-school homework help. Sessions are often held three or more times a week in groups of three or fewer students for the whole year with the same tutor so they really get to know each other at school or immediately before or after school, said Loeb.

Because it's tailored to individual students' needs, Loeb added, high-impact tutoring is a good match for older students who need reading support, especially since those students have less time left in K-12 education.

If a middle or high school student hasn't mastered learning how to read, a tutor can work directly with them on foundational skills, such as phonics. If a student needs help building reading comprehension in a subject like earth sciences, a tutor can focus on how that student can succeed in that specific class, reading for knowledge, as well as improving their overall reading comprehension.

Schools that are considering high-impact tutoring programs need to look at empirical evidence that shows the program is viable, and they also need to be sure they use data to identify which students need this extra support and what exact support they need, said Reed Marshall with the Education Trust. In working with older students, it's important, for instance, that tutors use grade-level material to help reduce any stigma around the need for support.

"You need to know what it is you're trying to get done so that you avoid just tutoring students who you believe need the tutoring versus tutoring students who actually do," Reed Marshall said.

Take the Metro Nashville public schools for example. In the summer of 2020, the Tennessee district piloted a tutoring program connecting recent high school graduates with more-experienced college students to help their transition in the middle of the pandemic, said Keri Randolph, the chief strategy officer for the district.

The positive experience led to the district creating a high-impact tutoring program for 1st through 3rd grade literacy and 8th and 9th grade math, which began during the 2021-22 school year. Research found those areas to be most in need of extra support and where high-impact tutoring could help most, Randolph said.

The district created its own tutoring curriculum and provided training for the variety of tutors it has, including community volunteers, educator-preparation-program students, existing classroom teachers, retired educators, and more.

As of December, about 1,000 students are part of the program across 46 schools, with both academic progress and social-emotional gains measured regularly, Randolph said.

Ensuring equitable access to quality tutoring

While the Nashville district is an outlier in terms of actually having a fleshed-out high-impact tutoring program in place, private top-notch tutoring has been a long-standing go-to for some families.

Private tutoring can add to the opportunity gap in districts where only some families

can afford it and where the core curriculum doesn't properly serve all its students, Reed Marshall said.

The demand for private tutoring, as well as inequitable access to the resource, has stretched back for years. There have been efforts, namely in response to the No Child Left Behind Act, to provide tutoring through schools rather than relying on family finances, Loeb said. But much of that resulted in less-intensive programs with mixed results.

At Metro Nashville, demand for in-house high-impact tutoring exceeds capacity as schools are already seeing how the program can benefit a variety of students, including older readers, Randolph said. The intention for its inaugural year, however, was to serve the students most in need based on district academic data.

The challenges and opportunities ahead

Hope in scaling up the tutoring program in Nashville now lies in its sustainable design, Randolph said. Building it in-house, for instance, means the district is spending about $800 a year per student, saving thousands in what it would cost to buy a program. By spring, the district hopes to offer the program across 90 schools with about 7,000 students participating.

High price tags are a deterrent to many districts looking into high-impact tutoring, Loeb said. Really intensive programs can go for $2,500 per year per student, though often it can come out to about $1,000. There's also labor shortages across the country that make it difficult to hire and retain trained tutors.

And whether it's building a program from scratch or purchasing one, implementing high-impact tutoring across a district is a complicated process when many educators are stretched thin as it is, Loeb added.

At Cherokee Heights Elementary in St. Paul, Minn., investing in a partnership with the nonprofit Minnesota Reading Corps to offer high-impact tutoring in K-3 has paid off, said Principal Heidi Koury. The program began in 2020, and already, she's seen students get on track in terms of grade-level reading skills. She sees this early intervention as a means to help students no longer need extra support later on.

Koury and Randolph both see federal pandemic-relief funds as a resource schools and districts can turn to for investing in these programs. Nashville, for instance, used philanthropic funds to jump-start the program but will rely on federal funds to continue with the program, budgeting for its future while knowing those funds won't last forever.

The federal funds can help districts explore whether high-impact tutoring is the right fit for their students' needs, especially as the academic effects of the pandemic and how to address them are still being deciphered, Loeb said. What's more, if implemented effectively, the tutoring could double as an equity initiative and a form of intervention.

"You're not changing all of schooling to get high-impact tutoring in there, you're really getting it in there to reduce the inequalities, to give the students who need these extra supports the extra support," Loeb said. ■

OPINION

Published April 11, 2021

How a Bathroom Log Helped One Middle School Understand Its Literacy Issues

By Seth Feldman

Reading isn't just a set of skills. The most important factor in helping middle schoolers overcome literacy issues is creating strong relationships with students and families. As an administrator, I'm always using assistive technology to help guide curricular decisions and working to build structure so that students can access their education, but my best educators are the ones who stay laser-focused on developing meaningful relationships.

How to Support Struggling Readers in Middle School

The embarrassment of having a hard time reading can lead to evasive behavior and hopelessness. Here's how my school steps in.

— Shutterstock

At the age of 13, around 65 percent of students who play competitive sports quit that sport and try a new sport. It's because they stop winning or adopt some notion that they aren't good enough. The same goes for reading. At Bay Area Technology School, we've found that 7th and 8th grades are the most crucial years in terms of making sure that kids don't feel hopeless about their reading ability.

If we can identify struggling readers and keep them motivated, we can turn them around in life-changing ways. They might not be reading Faulkner or Shakespeare, but they can read their high school textbooks and graduate from high school. The challenge for our educators is that, by 7th grade, students might be hiding their challenges behind coping mechanisms that keep them from being discovered. Here's how we find and help our middle schoolers who have trouble with reading.

Replacing Remediation with Advancement

As a former reading teacher, I know that language matters. For example, I want to strike the term "remediation" from the dictionary of education. No student is remediated. They are not sick or broken. What we are looking to do is to advance all learners. Our middle schoolers don't want to be called out as being unin-

telligent or incapable, so when they hear that they're in remediation class, they are more likely to lose hope and become withdrawn.

When I was teaching ELL students, a huge part of my job was to help kids fend off that feeling of hopelessness and stay motivated. So now as a superintendent, I ask my teachers not to talk about remediation, but instead to talk about advancing everyone toward excellence. That's something students can buy into, and if an educator commits to that cause, they can turn around struggling readers. First, though, they have to identify them.

Starting With Smart Assessments

The first and most objective question we ask is, "How well is this student doing with assignments or group projects?" For one of our main reading assessments, we use Lexplore, which has an AI eye-tracking feature that helps educators identify students' reading patterns to see if they might have dyslexia or another learning disability. It's not a diagnosis, but positive data from Lexplore is a good enough reason to recommend further academic testing to a parent.

Our most recent round of testing was in mid-February, when we found that 15 percent of participating 6th through 8th graders were reading at a low level, with 41 percent below average and 44 percent average. Rather than reflecting a COVID slide, these figures were an improvement over the results we saw in fall of 2020, when 20 percent of students were reading at a low level, and only 40 percent were at average level.

Whenever we test, if an educator notices the red flags and has reason to believe their student is struggling with reading alone, they know they can help their student in a couple of different ways, such as using devices that measure phonemic awareness or comprehension.

What the Bathroom Log Really Means

Another way that educators can identify and help struggling readers is simply keeping a bathroom log. Last year, there was a 6th grade boy at my school who was always going to the bathroom, every single period. We noticed it right away and we also noticed that when he took his diagnostic examination for reading and math, he scored at a 2nd grade level.

We didn't call him out on it, but we did some heavy intervention in reading using assistive technology. As he grew from 2nd grade to 4th grade level, his bathroom visits decreased. By the end of the year, he was up to a 6th grade level and he wasn't on the bathroom logs at all, except at lunch.

Another student went to the bathroom every single day, 12 minutes into every class. That was when teachers were finished with explicit instruction and transitioning to group work. I got to know this boy, and at some point I just asked him, "Can you read?"

And he said, "No, not really. It's kind of why I go to the bathroom all the time." He absolutely, positively owned up to it, and we got him some help. He's in a special reading-advancement class of only 10 kids this year. Even though it's online, we have seen two grade levels of improvement, which is a big deal.

When we called home to tell his mother how proud we were that he grew in reading, she cried. This was the first time from kindergarten through 8th grade that anyone ever called her to say that he could read, even just a little bit.

> "Educators need to find time to listen to how their students read and then ask them to share what they've read afterward. A student might be able to make the noises necessary to read, but are they also able to comprehend what the text is telling them?"

What We Learn From Interactive Reading

Educators can find out a lot by simply listening to a student read and then talking with them about what they've read after a page or two. When I was a teacher, I would sit with a student, ask them to close the book, then say, "You've made great progress. Can you help me recall three facts from that paragraph we just read?" That will tell you if a kid knows only how to make "reading noises" or if they also know how to recall, retain, and process the information they've read.

Our school starts each morning with 20 minutes of interactive reading. Educators need to find time to listen to how their students read and then ask them to share what they've read afterward. A student might be able to make the noises necessary to read, but are they also able to comprehend what the text is telling them?

One schoolwide strategy we teach is called the "inside, outside, outside" method. We tell students to first look inside the word, at the prefix and suffix. Then they look outside the word, at the sentence before and the sentence afterward. If they still can't figure out what that word means, they look further outside using a thesaurus—not using a dictionary, because the thesaurus will help students learn other academic terms along the way and allow them to make academic connections to the new word they just learned.

This method isn't just for middle schoolers. I recently had a former student call me and say that, after months of studying, she was taking her MCAT and didn't recognize a word. "I started to sweat," she said, "I even started to cry a little bit. But then I looked inside the word, and I recognized one of the roots. I looked at the sentence before and the sentence after, and I knew the answer was C and that I was going to pass this test and become a doctor."

These methods not only give students a way to get unstuck, but they create the sort of bond where a student will call a teacher 10 years later.

A Laser Focus on Relationships

If you have a relationship with a student, you also build a level of trust, and that student will be less reluctant to read in front of you. No matter what subject you teach, you can act as a reading coach.

Reading isn't just a set of skills. The most important factor in helping middle schoolers overcome literacy issues is creating strong relationships with students and families. As an administrator, I'm always using assistive technology to help guide curricular decisions and working to build structure so that students can access their education, but my best educators are the ones who stay laser-focused on developing meaningful relationships. ■

Seth Feldman is the superintendent of the Bay Area Technology School in Oakland, Calif.

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OPINION

Published January 8, 2022

What Educators Can Learn From Wordle's Success

By Thomas R. Guskey

Like many others, I've been amazed by the phenomenal rise in the popularity of the game Wordle. If you spend any time at all on Twitter, you've undoubtedly seen countless posts from friends featuring the Wordle yellow, green, and gray boxes. Wordle's astonishing growth made me wonder why such a simple game should attract so much attention so quickly.

The secret of Wordle's popularity appears to be the same as what explains the popularity of all game apps and video games: They allow players to experience *success and progress on a challenging task*. The nature of the task seems irrelevant.

Consider the earliest video games. Pac-Man is an excellent example. The Japanese arcade game manufacturer Namco Limited introduced Pac-Man in 1980, and it became an overnight sensation. People of all ages throughout the world began playing the game, all vying to improve their scores. The goal of the game was simple: gobble up the dots in a maze while avoiding capture by ghosts. To this day, it remains one of the highest-grossing and bestselling games ever developed, generating more than $14 billion in revenue.

What explains Pac-Man's popularity is certainly not the task. There is nothing inherently interesting about gobbling up dots. It also has nothing to do with cultural relevance or innate appeal. Pac-Man was equally popular among men and women, young and old, in countries throughout the entire world. Nor does it have anything to do with attaining a tangible reward. If you succeed in gobbling up all the dots in Pac-Man, your reward is to be presented with another game with more dots in a more complex maze and faster ghosts. That's like saying to a student, "If you solve these 10 problems correctly, I'll give you 10 more to do, and this time, they're going to more difficult!" That's some reward!

Pac-Man, just like Wordle, is popular because it allows players to experience *success and progress on a challenging task*. Every time you play the game, you have the chance to improve your score. In Wordle, the challenge increases as the words get more complicated and the letter combinations become more difficult. Most importantly, doing better than others isn't as important as seeing your own progress and improvement and the pride you feel in getting better.

A Mastery Experience

Psychologist Albert Bandura refers to these as "mastery experiences." Experiencing success and seeing improvement give us a sense of pride, confidence, and optimism for success on future tasks. More generally, they enhance our mental well-being and give us a "can do" spirit.

The struggle with the COVID pandemic has strained the mental well-being of students and teachers alike. To remedy that, we need to find ways to offer both students and teachers more "mastery experiences." We need to bring the Wordle focus of *success and progress on a challenging task* into classrooms on a more regular basis. Teachers who find ways to do so are likely to see remarkable improvements in their students' mental health as well as their own.

An elementary mathematics teacher friend of mine does this by explaining to students that solving math problems is much like solving problems in video games. Specifically, success depends on having a strategy and knowing the tricks. She begins one lesson by presenting students with a list of large numbers and gives them just two minutes to determine which of the numbers are evenly divisible by 3. All students start using long division, but none is able to complete the task in two minutes.

She then explains "the trick" is to add the digits. If the sum of the digits is a multiple of three, then the number is divisible by three. So, for the number 1032, simply add 1+0+3+2=6. Since 6 is a multiple of 3, the number 1032 is divisible by 3. After going over several examples, she presents students with the same list of large numbers. This time, all are successful in just two minutes. As homework, she asks students to teach their parents the same trick.

Granted, not everything important for students to learn can be seen as a "trick." But everything can be seen as an opportunity for a successful mastery experience. And those successes don't have to be big. Wordle offers just one word each day. Similarly, we must do our best to ensure that every student has at least one successful learning experience each day. Students who experience even modest success each day are likely to leave school feeling a little more pride, a little more confident, and a little more optimistic about their success in coming days.

Teachers need successful mastery experiences as well. They need help in implementing evidence-based practices that lead to students' success. They need to see tangible evidence of that success from their students so they know that what they do makes a difference. Teachers who do are likely to feel better about themselves, more confident of their effectiveness as teachers, a greater sense of pride in their work, and more positive mental health generally.

Success and progress on a challenging task offer the keys to motivation. The designers of Wordle and Pac-Man recognized that, and we must do the same. We must help students gain successful learning experiences each day, even if modest. We need to make sure students leave school each day ready to answer the question, "What did you learn today?" We also must help teachers recognize their vital role in providing students with those experiences. Doing so will greatly reduce the mental and emotional fatigue that permeates so many schools today and help restore the joy that comes to students and teachers alike from the experience of learning success. ■

Tom Guskey is professor emeritus in the College of Education at the University of Kentucky where he served as the department chair, head of the Educational Psychology Area Committee, and the president of the Faculty Council.

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