

Why does it take an investigation to change how Kentucky kids learn to read?

The Courier Journal investigative series on Kentucky's declining reading achievement ([Between the Lines](#)) may accomplish what years of data could not — spark [meaningful change](#) in Jefferson County Public Schools.

JCPS leaders admit the investigative series has prompted them to reconsider their early grades methods. While I applaud the willingness to reflect, why didn't the pre-COVID declines warrant reflection and action? Where was the urgency when the [National Assessment of Educational Progress](#) ranked JCPS last in the Trial Urban District category for elementary reading progress? A successful transition will require the district leaders to focus on student outcomes, rather than special interests and adult conveniences.

Board Chair Diane Porter commented on the series, [saying](#), "We want students to not only be able to read, but they need to be able to comprehend." Although well-intentioned, the comment echoes misconceptions publishers sell as "balanced literacy." They assert comprehension is why we read, so instruction must be a "wash, rinse, repeat" process of acquiring word recognition hacks to recognize and practicing shortcuts year after year-- with phonics sprinkled into the first few years.

The goal is comprehension

However, even the most ardent phonics advocates agree the goal is comprehension. The difference is how we instruct students to meet the goal. Reading instruction is not to help children stumble onto the meaning of texts today using better guesses—it is to empower students to be lifelong comprehenders. Phonics is the first prerequisite for comprehension, not a competing approach.

Ironically, the balanced literacy proponents fail to see the whole picture. The very thing we want—students independently comprehending texts they love—is stunted without systematic, direct and explicit decoding instruction. Children who can't crack the code feel ashamed when complexity advances beyond their ability to use clues and visuals to guess words. Reading is generative because decoders can continuously grow their sight words and knowledge through independent reading. If anything, an early "imbalanced" focus on phonics and fluency leads to accelerated reader autonomy.

Often both sides forget phonics starts the journey, and comprehension is the destination—but those are not the only instructional factors affecting reading. Schools must directly widen students' vocabulary skills and background knowledge in all areas to develop proficient readers.

That is why learning to read is not only a Pre-K through third-grade "reading class" issue. Our mission is to graduate students with proficient skills. Consequently, we must provide explicit and direct instruction in vocabulary and build background knowledge in all K-12 subjects. Science, social studies, the arts, technology, etc., are crucial not only for future careers but for their impact on reading comprehension. Phonics and fluency open the door to words—content vocabulary and background knowledge enhance access to meaning.

Unfortunately, long before COVID, JCPS locked down direct and explicit instruction. The Board, influenced by JCTA leadership, took an unprecedented step—they started a committee to determine the district's teaching and learning direction. Their philosophy, reminiscent of the failed [1980s project-based learning](#), mirrored the indirect teaching of whole-language reading. Just as "balanced literacy" works for some advantaged students, this project-based approach caters to those already possessing foundational skills. This is devastating when pushed into lower grades, where progress monitoring and explicit instruction are crucial. Indeed, the authentic application of knowledge and skills is significant in learning. It is challenging to apply foundational skills you don't have.

Imagine an intelligent child from poverty with limited phonemic awareness and vocabulary and numerous [Adverse Childhood Experiences](#). She receives only a fraction of the explicit phonics instruction needed to develop fluency. As she struggles, she's taught to use clues and pictures to guess words because "that's what good readers do"—a claim neuroscience has refuted repeatedly. After third grade, her phonics window closes, and school becomes projects and group work rather than evidence-based explicit instruction. Although we did not teach her to decode, nor did we maximize her vocabulary and background knowledge, we blame poverty and biased tests when she performs poorly on state assessments.

She becomes the first in her family to attend college. However, her doubt swells when she cannot read her first assignment. Could this help explain why low-income first-generation college students are four times more likely to drop out than their second-generation peers?

Unfortunately, JCPS forgot our core competencies—like teaching kids to read. Instead, we prefer to be about abstractions like "innovation," "soft skills" and "culture." These aren't bad; however, they should be in service of learning, not a replacement. For example, JCPS eliminated the new third grade reading teacher training initiative focused on K-3 decoding, comprehension and diagnosing student needs. I presume they shifted the funding to the Board's other priorities.

If public schools don't teach poor kids to read, who will?

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