

READING & LITERACY

A Year in Reading Instruction: 7 Developments You Need to Know



By Sarah Schwartz — December 28, 2022

7 min read



Education Week's Sarah Schwartz summarizes this year's developments in reading policy.
Lauren Santucci

It's been a big year for reading instruction.

States have passed—or begun enacting—laws requiring evidence-based teaching for early learners. Hundreds of thousands of teachers have gone through new training. A popular curriculum program was re-released with changes designed to bring it more in line with reading research, to mixed reviews.

These shifts all stem from the movement around the “science of reading”—an effort to align practice with methods that research shows are most effective for students.

Read on for a guide to some of the biggest moments this year.

1. States ramped up their efforts to implement reading science in schools

At least five states passed new laws in 2022 that required schools to use evidence-based methods to teach young children how to read—a continuation of a movement that has gained steam over the past few years.

Since 2019, 25 states and the District of Columbia have passed new legislation or implemented other policies that affect early reading instruction or how early reading teachers are trained, according to Education Week’s tracker.

State officials hope that new policies will shift classroom practice, which will in turn help more students become proficient readers. But reporting on these efforts from Education Week and other outlets this year has demonstrated how complicated it can be to put these changes into practice.



Latasha Johnson teaches reading skills to a kindergarten classroom at Walnut Creek Elementary School in Raleigh, N.C., last spring.
Kate Medley for Education Week

In North Carolina, for example, a 2021 law requires elementary school teachers to receive intensive training in evidence-based reading instruction and district leaders to evaluate their curricula and reading interventions. But some teachers in the state have said that they need more support to translate the theoretical knowledge they’re getting in training into practice in their classrooms.

Others don’t see the need for sweeping changes. Teachers often hold deeply ingrained beliefs about the best way to teach reading, and that idea that experimental studies might have more insight into best practice than classroom experience can feel like an attack. “Your philosophy on reading is as deep as religion,” one North Carolina principal noted.

2. One training emerged as a favorite among states and districts

A key part of many states’ strategies for shifting reading instruction is professional learning—introducing teachers to the research and new methods that they need to understand how to make these changes in practice.

And many states are turning to the same teacher training for this task: Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling, more commonly known as LETRS.

The program is a two-year course that instructs teachers in what literacy skills need to be taught, why, and how to plan to teach them. It also explores the research base behind these recommendations.

Will it work? There's some evidence that the training can change teacher practice if they're given coaching and support. But research has found that it doesn't always lead to improvements in student achievement.

Some reading researchers have questioned whether LETRS—which is expensive and intensive—is necessary for all teachers, or whether a shorter, cheaper training would equip them with the skills and knowledge they need to plan instruction aligned to the “science of reading.” For more on LETRS, see this explainer.

3. National test results confirmed that students lost ground in reading during the pandemic

The first set of pandemic-era results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the test known as the “nation's report card,” showed that reading scores fell, on average, about three points for 4th and 8th graders from 2019 to 2022.

The drop is significant, experts say, though it's not as large as the declines in math achievement during the same time period.

The effect isn't evenly distributed. Lower-performing students slipped downward—there are now more students reading below the “basic” level on the test. The highest-performing students held steady.

Some educators said that more of their older elementary students are now struggling with reading skills that are usually mastered in earlier grades, like sounding out multisyllabic words or reading fluently. COVID disrupted these students' time in kindergarten, 1st, and 2nd grade classrooms.

In response, some schools have incorporated foundational skills instruction into English/language arts lessons for older elementary and middle school students who need additional support.

4. Big-city school leaders threw their support behind the science of reading

Leaders of the country's two largest school systems—New York City and Los Angeles—have pledged to do more to ensure that all students are taught to read in the early grades.

New York City Mayor Eric Adams, who took office in January, announced plans this past spring to implement additional dyslexia screening, more-systematic phonics instruction in early grades, and

training for teachers on how to support students with dyslexia and other reading challenges.

The city's schools chancellor, David Banks, has called for schools to adopt new reading curricula, and the district has formed a literacy advisory council whose aim is, in part, to build buy-in among schools and educators.

In California, Los Angeles Superintendent Alberto Carvalho said that the district is working to “expand our implementation of the science of teaching reading.”

At an event in November, he emphasized the need for early elementary teachers to be trained in evidence-based practices and for struggling students to have access to extra support.

In both New York and Los Angeles, these initiatives are still in the early stages.

5. Some advocates said that a structured literacy approach wouldn't work for English learners. Others pushed back against that claim

In February, a newly-formed advocacy group, the National Committee for Effective Literacy, released a white paper calling the science of reading a “one-size-fits-all” approach that wouldn't be sufficient for English learners. They argued that the methods that states were mandating neglected the oral language development that students need when they're learning a new language.

Reading researchers and other educators who specialize in dual-language learners with reading difficulties pushed back. Young English learners learning to read need explicit, systematic instruction in foundational skills, just like their peers who speak English as a first language, they argued. This should be in addition to—not replaced by—oral language development.

Research bears this out. A federally-funded review of the most effective approaches for teaching reading to multilingual learners found that a lot of what works for students whose first language is English is also effective for kids who speak a different language at home. But the studies also showed that kids learning English needed more instruction in oral English proficiency than their peers: things like vocabulary knowledge, listening comprehension, and syntax.

6. A controversial curriculum got an overhaul. Critics said the changes didn't go far enough

One of the biggest names in early literacy instruction released a long-awaited revision of her program—to mixed reviews.

The program, the Units of Study for Teaching Reading, was used by 16 percent of K-2 and special education teachers as of 2019, according to an EdWeek Research Center survey .

But the program has come under fire from reading researchers and other critics. Several reviews from education organizations found that it did not explicitly and systematically teach children how to decode words, and instead taught other, disproven strategies for word-reading largely based on context clues. A recent podcast from Emily Hanford, a journalist with APM Reports, traced how the program became so popular—despite its reliance on faulty methods.

Lucy Calkins, a professor at Columbia University and the creator of the Units of Study for Teaching Reading, announced changes to the curriculum in grades K-2 in 2021, and the first set of revised materials became available for purchase in October.

Reading researchers told Education Week that while some of the changes in the new versions are substantial, the foundational skills instruction—in how to connect letters to sounds and read words—likely still won't be systematic or explicit enough for some students and teachers.

Other critics say that problems related to text quality and how lessons sequentially build student knowledge haven't been addressed in the revisions.

7. More states doubled down on high-quality curriculum

Reading researchers underscore that the science of reading isn't just about teaching students the letter-sound correspondences they need to know to read words. There are also evidence-based strategies for teaching vocabulary, comprehension, text structure, and other skills and knowledge that students need to become skilled readers.

Some states have tried to incentivize school districts to use curriculum materials that integrate all of these pieces together—and an analysis from this year suggests that their efforts are changing schools' practice.

Popular among these materials are several programs that aim to systematically build students' knowledge about the world, diving deeply into topics like the solar system or the civil rights movement by introducing them to lots of different texts on those topics. These curricula are guided in part by reading research showing that topic-specific knowledge can support reading comprehension.



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