

RACE AND EQUITY

## NAACP targets a new civil rights issue— reading

*Advocates say using the ‘science of reading’ to improve reading instruction is a step toward social justice for Black children*

by **SARAH CARR** December 27, 2022

First grade teacher Emily VanDerhoff, who is also a member of the Fairfax County NAACP’s education committee, was incorporating phonics into her classroom before Fairfax County renewed its focus on how it teaches reading. Other educators may need time and training to adjust their practice, she said. Credit: Chikwendiu/The Washington Post

**FAIRFAX, Va.** — For years, the Fairfax County NAACP’s small education committee devoted itself mostly to fights over Confederate school names and acts of racism against individual students. It

battles that mattered for some, “but rarely made us feel like we were having a profound impact on the system,” said Sujatha Hampton, who became chair of the committee in 2019.

That changed in the summer of 2020. In the wake of George Floyd’s death, committee membership exploded. By 2021, it had committed to its most ambitious goal yet: overhauling the way Fairfax County Public Schools teaches students to read and supports struggling readers. The performance gap in reading pass rates between Black and white students was nearly 20 percentage points—virtually unchanged since the district had first made “minority achievement” a priority in 1984.

**The Washington Post**

This story also appeared in [The Washington Post](#)

In a virtual meeting that March with Fairfax’s school district leaders, Hampton said the NAACP urged the district to “flood the Internet with your poor reading scores for Black and brown students if you don’t take this seriously.” The cause, as activists saw it, was partly “the absence of systematic, cumulative, phonics-based reading instruction in the early elementary classroom,” they later wrote in an [open letter](#). “the research suggests that this shift would have the most immediate and profound impact on closing the achievement gap.” Some teachers had always incorporated phonics—intentionally sequenced lessons on how to sound out words from letters—but the district had not made it a requirement.

School district leaders committed to radical and swift change. And this past school year, dozens of elementary school administrators started training in LETRS, or Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling, which teaches them the “science of reading,” including how students learn to decode letters on the page and form meaning from words. The district gave all kindergarten through second-grade teachers scripted lesson plans featuring phonics. They were told to implement them immediately.



First grader Kris Coward sounds out vowels under the guidance of her teacher, Emily VanDerhoff. The NAACP and other organizations say that improving reading instruction for Black children is a civil rights issue. Credit: Jahi Chikwendiu/The Washington Post

The NAACP provided the “catalyst” for rapid change, said Noel Klimenko, assistant superintendent of instructional services for FCPS. “It has been controversial,” she added, “and non-optional.”

The Fairfax group, and its neighboring chapter in Arlington, Virginia, are among a growing number of NAACP organizations that have in recent years turned their attention to how reading is taught in schools. They are part of a nationwide movement to embrace what cognitive science shows us about how students learn to read, particularly about the role of phonics—and they see this as a path toward educational justice.

The line separating “secure v insecure, access v exclusion, captive v free” is a modern Mason-Dix line, **argues** Kareem Weaver, an Oakland-based educator and the education lead of the city’s NAACP chapter. He and a growing number of other activists and parents see reading as a defining civil rights priority of the 21st century.

**Related: While white students get specialists, struggling Black and Latino readers get left on their own**

In Emily VanDerhoff's first-grade classroom this fall, Fairfax students have mastered consonant-consonant words: cat, bed, dog. It is the second year that VanDerhoff feels like she is fully incorporating "evidence-based" practices.

A few years ago, she taught reading skills very differently. For example, she might have read a book like "What Is at the Zoo," in which each page follows a predictable pattern: *Are there elephants at the zoo? Yes, there are. Are there giraffes at the zoo? Yes, there are.* The students wouldn't have learned phonics to be able to read words like "giraffe" and "elephant," so they were expected to rely on the picture and the first letter to recognize or guess the words.

Some learned phonics partly on their own—or simply memorized different letter patterns. But "those who didn't learn to recognize longer and more complex patterns fell off a cliff in third grade," VanDerhoff said. "There aren't pictures anymore then."

Inequities were visible in which children sought outside (and usually expensive) help. The teacher, a member of the NAACP's education committee, altered her approach even before the district announced its change.



Sujatha Hampton, the chair of the education committee for the Fairfax County, Virginia NAACP, has led a push for the district to make changes to its reading curriculum, including a renewed focus on phonics. Credit: Jahi Chikwendiu/The Washington Post

Nobody in Hampton's family struggled to read. Her son learned on his own by the age of 2, and Hampton, who is Indian American and whose husband is Black, made sure her daughter could read fluently before the child started preschool. "I was not going to have a Black child going to school knowing how to read," she said. "I could not take the risk that the school would not see her as smart enough—or not smart at all." She said she feels fortunate that it was a relatively easy path for both kids.

Still, while she worked toward her master's degree in special education, Hampton taught many children labelled "emotionally disturbed"—almost all of whom, she said, were Black and struggled with reading. So, Hampton taught herself how to teach phonics, and devoted much of her time to tutoring her students in reading. "As soon as they learned to read, a lot of troubling behaviors disappeared," she said.

When Hampton took the helm of the NAACP's education committee over three years ago, she was focused on structural inequality, not just incidents of racism. The committee pushed to change the **admissions system** for the prestigious Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology magnet school, for instance, to broaden access for Black and Hispanic students.

In 2020, after committee membership reached an all-time high, a white Fairfax mother spoke up at one of the Zoom meetings. Her family had spent more than \$20,000 on private language therapy to help her son, who is dyslexic, learn to read. She worried about the disproportionate impact felt by Black and Hispanic children, noting that universal access to stronger reading instruction might be the most effective way to narrow the yawning racial achievement gap in reading results.

"She was a white woman with white children but framed it in racial equity terms," Hampton said. "I felt like we could get behind it and know that we were taking care of our kids." (The mother did not want to be identified to protect the privacy of her son.)

The NAACP linked up with two other organizations—Decoding Dyslexia Virginia and the Fairfax Special Education PTA—to push for change. The three groups spent the late fall and early winter coordinating their efforts, strategizing on messaging and plotting a heavy-handed appeal to the school board. (They followed up on the NAACP's literacy letter in spring of 2021 with a joint missive to the district.) "We really picked up steam when the organizations joined forces," said Diane Cooper-Gould, a Fairfax parent and advocacy co-chair of the Special Education PTA and a parent of a student with dyslexia. Before then, "we were making very, very slow headway," she said.

Hampton knew that the opportunity to effect change probably would be limited, since school district leaders would ultimately shift their focus away from racial justice issues. "We had a window of opportunity," she said, "and we tried to make sure we capitalized on it."

### **Related: [States' urgent push to overhaul reading instruction](#)**

The FCPS superintendent at the time, Scott Brabrand, who left the school district this past summer and now serves as executive director of the Virginia Association of School Superintendents, declined to comment.

comment. But other district officials say the combined pressure from the groups, and particularly NAACP, was critical to engendering change.

“I don’t think that without the outside push and the NAACP letter we would have made as rapid a change,” said Carrie Leestma, an education specialist for the district who until recently focused entirely on dyslexia.

As a onetime special education teacher, Leestma had regularly encountered teenagers who struggled to read. She recalls one 15-year-old who had been held back and was reading at a second-grade level in eighth grade. Looking at his file, she worried about his options in life. “Within a couple of months he was arrested, and he’s still in jail now,” she said.

“We shouldn’t be able to look at a group of kindergarteners and know in six years who is not going to be reading, based on race,” Leestma added.

Symone Walker, the co-chair of the education committee for the Arlington, Virginia NAACP, has a son who struggled with reading before being diagnosed with dyslexia in eighth grade. Symone Walker, the co-chair of the education committee for the Arlington, Virginia NAACP, has a son who struggled with reading before being diagnosed with dyslexia in eighth grade. Credit: Jahi Chikwendiu/T  
Washington Post

Symone Walker, co-chair of Arlington's NAACP education committee, sent a similar letter to Arlington Public Schools as the one that engendered change in Fairfax. Walker became an advocate after trying to get her own son, Jackson, help with reading in the county's schools. Despite persistent struggles, Jackson, now 17, did not get diagnosed with dyslexia until the summer before 8th grade. (Jackson being referred to by his middle name to protect his privacy.)

"I'm a lawyer, and I'm educated," Walker said. "But when it came to my own child, I felt vulnerable, lost and overwhelmed."

Jackson's teachers blamed his early difficulties with reading on his attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. She treated it with medication, but he continued to struggle with reading. "If a teacher asked me to read something on the board, I wouldn't want to because I knew that I struggled more than other kids," Jackson said.

Throughout elementary school, Jackson's teachers repeatedly dismissed the family's concerns, a nonchalance that Walker at least partly attributes to the fact that "there are lower expectations for Black kids and what they are capable of doing. So, they weren't alarmed that he couldn't read in first or second grade." In fourth grade, Jackson started getting some individual help, but the school refused to start his individualized education program what reading remediation program they were using, despite his mother's repeated requests. "I don't think I got the proper help I actually needed," Jackson said.

As the years progressed, teachers passed Jackson along, and he received mostly good grades but floundered with reading. He struggled to sound out and recognize words, and he frequently had to guess based on context. By middle school, Jackson said, he started to despair of ever catching up. "It felt like I wasn't progressing," he said.

Seventh grade was pivotal. Toward the end of the year, educators told his mother they no longer thought he needed special education services—"they literally congratulated me," she said—even though he couldn't read well. That summer, Walker arranged to have Jackson evaluated independently. "It was a relief," Walker said of the diagnosis. Jackson read several years behind his grade level; he was severely dyslexic and required intensive help that he had never received in the public schools.

**Related: [Want your child to receive better reading help in public school? It might cost you \\$7,500](#)**

Although Walker accepted the diagnosis, she notes that other relatives, including Jackson's father, were more resistant initially—a hesitancy she and several others say is common in Black communities. "There's a reluctance in a lot of Black families in not wanting to acknowledge or talk about learning disabilities," she said. "There's a hesitation to take on the additional stigma. ... Daily, we fight microaggressions and negative stereotypes that we are not 'good enough' and not 'smart enough.'"

In eighth grade, still lacking sufficient academic help, Jackson began to act out, throwing paper and disrupting the classroom. "I started to get emails about disruptive behavior," Walker said. Jackson said he was frustrated academically but also was "naturally a class clown."

“You weren’t born a class clown. You became a class clown,” his mother replied.

Jackson thought this over; he mostly agreed. “I think a lot of it had to do with the reading. I do,”

Walker knew that the odds of Jackson getting **referred to the police or criminal justice system** were much higher than for white students with similar behaviors in school. “The school-prison pipeline became real for me,” she said. As Jackson finished eighth grade, Walker, along with education committee co-chair Sherrice Kerns, sent the NAACP letter to Arlington, hoping that it help prevent other families, and particularly families of color, from experiencing the despair and frustration she felt over her son’s struggles in school.

She also took out a home equity loan so she could afford to send Jackson to the Siena School, a program in Silver Spring, Maryland, focused on kids with dyslexia—even though it meant a 90-minute round-trip drive each weekday.





First grade teacher Emily VanDerhoff uses images, vowel combination and words during a phonics-based reading lesson at Hu Elementary in Springfield, Virginia. She is among hundreds of teachers in the district receiving intensive training in the ‘science reading.’ Credit: Jahi Chikwendiu/The Washington Post

Superintendent Francisco Durán, new to Arlington Public Schools in the spring of 2020, was “open and willing” to embrace reading reforms, but Walker knew any changes would be too late to help her high school-age son. At Siena, in contrast, Jackson said, he felt like “every single teacher was helped and he began to progress. For the first time, he began talking about graduating high school and attending college.”

The decision hasn’t been an easy one financially, Walker said. But “I thought it was a matter of saving my son’s life.”

However well done, phonics alone is insufficient. More than 20 years ago, the **National Reading Panel endorsed** the efficacy of phonics if taught in a systemic way and combined with other key elements of teaching literacy, including an emphasis on understanding spoken language. Put together, all these elements are referred to as the “science of reading.”

But for many years, a few literacy experts and authors who downplayed the importance of explicit phonics instruction **held sway** over both teachers’ colleges and the curricula classrooms used for millions of kids. Some educators have long been among the main opponents to reading reform, determined to go against their own training and ingrained practice.

One reason for the enduring resistance is that many children learn how to read *without* extensive phonics instruction. And some **key leaders in the field are just becoming aware** of how many children struggle without it—including the vast inequities that can result.

That growing awareness is leading to change. A new **Virginia state law**, for instance, will require school districts to adopt curriculums aligned with the science of reading, among other changes. Many **other states have made similar reforms**, including Mississippi, Delaware and North Carolina.

**Related: Retraining an entire state’s elementary teachers in the science of reading**

In Fairfax County, Klimenko says the district faced reluctance from several teachers and administrators who were accustomed to other methods, but that’s diminishing—especially as educators realize that it is by no means shifting to a phonics-only approach. VanDerhoff, the teacher, said some resistance came from teachers “needing time and support to adjust to the changes, and not having enough of it.”

“It can be a shock for people who first come across the science of reading,” she added. “It takes everything you’ve been doing and said, ‘That’s not what science supports.’”

**“Those kids who are like my son that got failed up to high school and moved along semiliterate, there is no easy path for them.”**

Symone Walker, education committee co-chair, Arlington, Virginia NAACP

VanDerhoff is in a group of teachers participating in the LETRS training, which can take up to 18 hours. Last school year, more than 300 Fairfax administrators and teachers received LETRS training with upwards of 200 more expected to do so this year. More than 1,000 teachers have also had training in Orton-Gillingham, which is popular for struggling readers because of the explicit instruction on the connection between letters and sounds.

Yet Fairfax schools employ more than 6,500 elementary teachers (and that's not including ones who teach subjects like art, music and gym), meaning the training has reached just a fraction. Still, 98 percent of school literacy specialists, who provide support and expertise to classroom teachers, have been trained or will be this year, according to the district.

Arlington, a much smaller district, has been following a similar path. Superintendent Durán arrived in 2020 already in favor of transforming reading instruction. Over the next two years, the district focuses on kindergarten through third grade, training reading specialists in LETRS and providing early-elementary-school teachers with a curriculum that emphasizes phonics. More recently, the work extended to fourth- and fifth-grade teachers, according to Durán.

“Students who are struggling with reading need very explicit phonics instruction,” Durán said. When that's not present, “it's our students of color, our English learners, and our students with disabilities who get most lost,” he added.

In Arlington, early results have been positive, with a 20 percent decrease in the number of students needing intensive reading intervention in the early elementary grades, according to Durán. In Fairfax, Klimentko said, the district does not yet have any quantitative evidence of the reforms' impact, but anecdotal reports have been positive.

**Black students scored 17 percentage points lower than white students on state reading tests in Fairfax County, Virginia during the 2021-22 school year.**

In both districts, the plan is to eventually touch every grade—kindergarten through high school—through a changed approach to literacy. Part of that work will be swooping in to help high school students who are not reading at grade level, Durán said. He acknowledges that “we haven't gotten there yet.”

And until they do, Walker said, the NAACP will not be taking literacy reform off its list of priorities. “Those kids who are like my son that got failed up to high school and moved along semiliterate, there is no easy path for them,” she said.

Her son's success at Siena is bittersweet: Jackson is happy there, but the family wishes he could go to a more diverse high school. The teen had long dreamed of attending a large neighborhood high school where he could play sports and participate in an array of extracurriculars.

His restored confidence has been worth the sacrifice, however. Walker's main regret now is that she didn't know more—and therefore do more—earlier in Jackson's education. She will work for as long as it takes to ensure other families, and particularly families of color, aren't left playing catch-up. "I'm doing this for my grandkids," she said of the right to read. "I see it as basic as a right to clean water."

*Carr reported this story, part of ongoing coverage on equity in access to reading supports, as a O'Brien Fellow in Public Service Journalism at Marquette University in 2021-22.*

*This story about **literacy instruction** was produced by The Hechinger Report, a nonprofit, independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education. Sign up for the **Hechinger newsletter**.*