

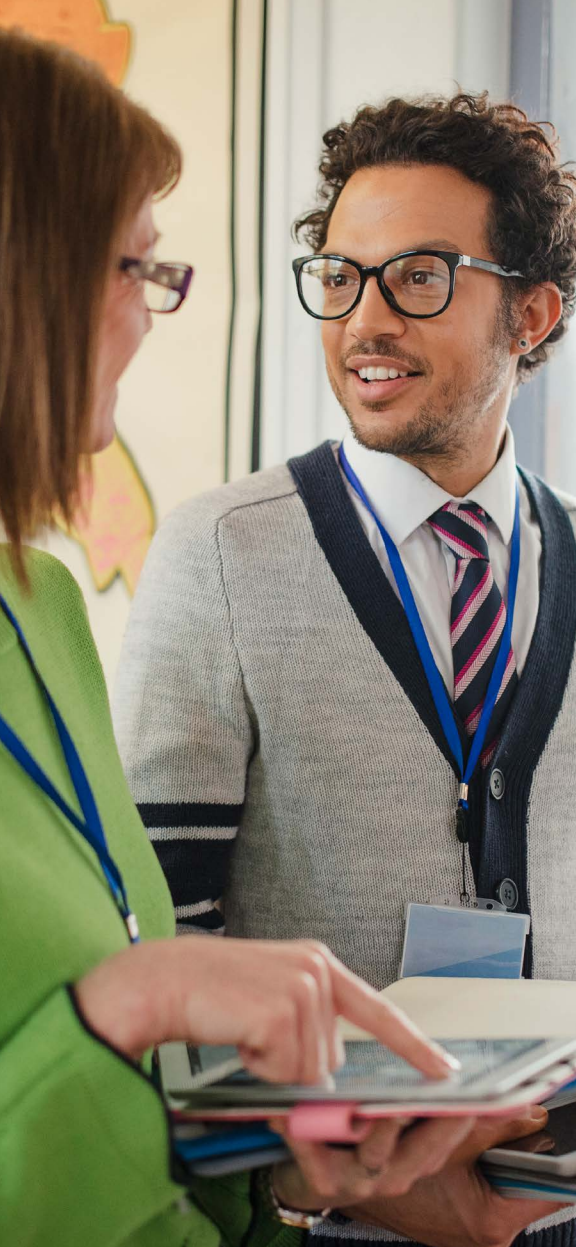


# PUTTING THE SCIENCE OF READING INTO PRACTICE

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Why some students are left behind and how  
assessment and evidence-based reading instruction  
can close the gaps

PLAYBOOK



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# FOREWORD

The reading wars, a decades-old debate around how students learn to read and best practices for literacy instruction, continue to rage. However, there is growing acceptance of the science of reading, which breaks the process of reading into five critical skills that every person must master in order to become a fluent, skilled reader:

- 1 Phonological awareness:** ability to identify language sounds
- 2 Phonics and word study:** ability to connect speech sounds to letters and make them accessible by sight
- 3 Fluency:** ability to read text
- 4 Vocabulary:** ability to build, store, and retrieve words and background knowledge
- 5 Comprehension:** ability to deduct meaning from text

It takes explicit, structured literacy instruction and differentiated supports to ensure all students—including English learners (ELs) and students with word reading difficulties such as dyslexia—are able to build these five skills.

However, some students experience barriers to reading success which, in turn, jeopardize successful learning outcomes. Some of these barriers put students at a disadvantage before they ever enter the classroom. For example, children in low income families often have language and literacy gaps that are evident prior to starting school.



These gaps can become life-long deficits in all content areas if not addressed early through direct and systematic instruction grounded in the science of reading. When students are given ambitious but achievable goals, and are provided with targeted, evidence-based instruction to improve the particular areas in which they're struggling, they can become successful readers.

However, the unfortunate reality is that upon entering schools, students who are most at risk often encounter even more barriers to achieving the catch-up growth they need to get on track for reading and academic success. These barriers include:

- Implicit bias that lowers expectations for students who are historically underserved
- Lack of teacher training in evidence-based reading instruction grounded in the science of reading
- Missing data around the particular skills a student is struggling with and lack of knowledge around applying that data to instructional planning within a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework

This last bullet is a critical first step to addressing inequities in student access to high-quality reading instruction grounded in the science of reading. To strengthen the skills necessary for building reading proficiency, teachers must know what students don't know.

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*Only assessment data that targets the five core reading skills can tell teachers which areas a student is struggling with and guide them toward evidence-based interventions and supports that meet a student's individual learning needs.*

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In this playbook, reading experts and educators from across the country offer advice for assessing students for reading difficulties and literacy gaps and addressing those deficits with instruction and interventions grounded in the science of reading. Keep reading for more about choosing valid assessments, supporting ELs, planning effective literacy instruction, and implementing a school-wide reading improvement model built to provide the supports every student needs to become a proficient reader.

# LITERACY AS A SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUE

## Why We Must Follow the Science of Reading to Give All Students the Skills and Opportunity to Succeed

When we think about issues of social justice, many people think of voting rights, health care, hunger and food insecurity, racial injustice, and sexuality and gender equality. However, there is another social justice issue that deserves equal attention: the ability to read. Each year, **over one million** fourth grade students are added to the list of nonreaders in our country.

Not only do poor reading skills impact academic achievement, they are also associated with increased risk for school dropout, attempted suicide, incarceration, anxiety, depression, and low self-concept. Adults who lack basic literacy skills are more likely to be unemployed, underemployed, and incarcerated. This means they are far less likely to be able to provide for their families, support the economy, and pay taxes. They may not use the healthcare system out of fear or use it too much because they are unable to follow written instructions on prescriptions or discharge papers. Thus, making sure all children learn to read is not only an issue of social justice but also of economics.

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*As a nation, we know we have gaps when it comes to reading proficiency. We have achievement gaps for all students compared to proficiency standards and even greater gaps for subgroups of students.*

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## What Is the Current Status of Reading Proficiency in the US?

As a nation, we know we have gaps when it comes to reading proficiency. We have achievement gaps for all students compared to proficiency standards and even greater gaps for subgroups of students. National performance on the 2019 National Assessment of Educational Performance (NAEP) indicates that only 35% of all fourth-grade students performed at or above proficiency levels in reading, indicating that almost two thirds of students are struggling readers.

When the 2019 NAEP data are disaggregated by race, the results are even more troubling. Only 18% of Black students performed at or above proficiency levels compared to 45% of White students. While there are certainly middle-class White children who have difficulty reading, many suggest that the real fault line for America's high illiteracy rate occurs at class and race.

## We Know How to Teach Children to Read but Are We Doing It?

Unfortunately, along with having large gaps in reading proficiency, we also have large gaps between research and practice. In 2000, the National Reading Panel issued a report summarizing the research and evidence on the best ways to teach children how to read. They found the best approach to teaching reading includes:

- 1 Explicit instruction to teach phonemic awareness
- 2 Systematic phonics instruction
- 3 Methods to improve reading fluency
- 4 Teaching vocabulary and comprehension strategies

## EXPERT: Dr. Kim Gibbons

Researchers are no longer debating the importance of systematic, multi-year phonics and word analysis instruction and a large academic vocabulary. The scientific community has achieved broad consensus on how children learn to read, what causes reading difficulties, the essential components of effective reading instruction, and how to prevent reading difficulties. As a result, not knowing how to effectively teach reading is not the problem. Rather, the real problem is the gap between science and practice. Even though data show the science of reading is effective, this conclusion has not yet been widely adopted in practice in public schools across the nation.

One of the most research-supported models of reading is the Simple View of Reading (Hoover & Gough, 1990; Castles, Rastle, & Nation, 2018). The Simple View of Reading asserts that students need skills in two areas: reading each word in texts accurately and fluently (decoding) and comprehending the meaning of texts being read. While the Simple View of Reading does not specify how word recognition and language comprehension should be taught, it does make clear that the first task of a beginning reader is to learn how to decode words. Children need to be explicitly taught direct sound-spelling relationships following a systematic scope and sequence that allows children to form and read words early on. When children get off to a good start learning how to decode words, they can read the words they know how to say and begin reading widely, learning the meaning of words they have never heard before.

## Explicit, Systematic Reading Instruction Is Critical to Keep Students From Struggling

Many children have difficulty learning to decode without explicit and systematic instruction. Oftentimes these students get labeled as struggling readers. When students cannot read very well, they tend to not read much and miss out on opportunities to learn the meaning of new words through reading. In fact, studies have estimated that fifth grade students who read at the 90th percentile encounter about two million words every year in text read outside of school. Alternatively, a reader at the 10th percentile encounters just 8,000 words. The end result is often described as the rich get richer and the poor get poorer phenomenon.

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*Children who are still struggling with reading at the end of first grade rarely catch up because the kids who get off to a good start reading enjoy reading, read often, and increase their vocabulary.*

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Many children who don't learn to decode in the early grades can easily grow into adulthood without knowing how to read.

## Debating the Science of Reading Keeps Students From Learning to Read

Even though there is broad consensus over the past 20 years on how to best teach reading, a debate rages on. One side argues students should be taught decoding because if students know how the sounds in words are presented by letters, reading comprehension will follow. The other side argues that students should be taught comprehension because if students are focused on the meaning of what they're reading, they can figure out what the words say. Some prevailing views continue to maintain that if children are read to a lot, reading should come easily for them.

Many of the popular approaches to reading instruction are not aligned with the science of reading because they omit systematic teaching about speech sounds, the spelling system, and how to read words by sounding them out. These programs are weak when it comes to the structure of English language and strong in literature, illustrations, and cross-disciplinary units. With these programs, the role of the teacher is to create a literacy-rich environment by setting up reading groups, reading with kids, and helping them find books at their reading level. When this doesn't work, it is assumed that children aren't read to enough at home or the child has a disability. However, usually it is neither of those causes. For many children, the reason they can't read is because they have not been taught to read using the science of reading.

## Reading Equity Starts With Teachers Being Taught the Science of Reading

Unfortunately, the most recent report from the National Council on Teacher Quality (2020) found that only about half of the traditional elementary teacher preparation programs across the country are teaching scientifically based reading instruction to future teachers. A 2019 *Education Week* survey found that more than half of teachers and postsecondary instructors who teach courses on reading said children don't need a good grasp of phonics (Schwartz, 2019). Most teachers described their approach to teaching reading as "balanced literacy" which typically includes some phonics. However, that instruction is not systematic and explicit.

Good word recognition skills only make up half of the equation. Once students know how to decode, their ability to understand what they read is determined by their language comprehension. Language comprehension involves all the words students know the meaning of and their understanding of how language works. In addition, a child's ability to comprehend what they read is linked to their prior knowledge. Some researchers have speculated that the association between strong reading comprehension and family income is because larger incomes often mean more opportunities and experiences that build knowledge of the world.





### Follow the Science and Close the Reading Equity Gap

In closing, I have long reflected that I reside in a state (Minnesota) that celebrates the fact that we have the highest ACT scores in the country. Yet my state also has the largest achievement gap between Black and White students in the country. It is time to embrace a fundamental belief that all children can learn to read despite many obstacles outside of our control. We need to understand that if, as a country, we continue to keep doing what we have been doing, we will keep getting what we have been getting: great variability in outcomes and further disadvantaging the most disadvantaged students.

What we have been getting for the last decade is no change in average reading scores and only a small improvement for students at or above the 90th percentile. **The percentage of students at the 10th percentile that score below NAEP basic is increasing at every grade level.** These data should create urgency that we can and must do better for large numbers of students. We must raise our bar. We can no longer be complacent and accept mediocrity as evidence of change. We must be the ones to demand evidence in our classrooms and acknowledge that literacy instruction is a social justice issue. The ability to read must not be treated as a luxury but as a basic and necessary human need that calls for an urgent response in our nation's classrooms.

## EXPERT: Dr. Kim Gibbons

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### Kim Gibbons, Ph.D.

*Dr. Gibbons is the Director of the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement at the University of MN and the Co-Director of the Wisconsin Minnesota Comprehensive Center. Her most recent book is Effective Universal Instruction: An Action-Oriented approach to Improving Tier 1 (2018).*



## THE BENEFITS OF USING A STRUCTURED LITERACY APPROACH WHEN TEACHING LITERACY SKILLS

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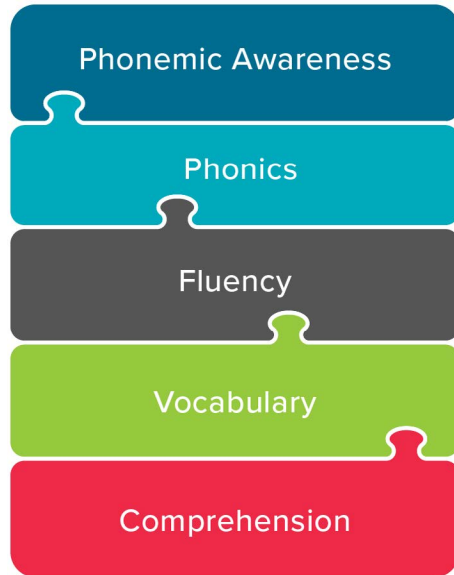
*A variety of methods for teaching early literacy skills have been advocated over time, but none are as grounded in research—or have as equitable implications—as structured literacy instruction.*

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As noted by Jeffrey Walczyk and colleagues in the 2014 article, “One Hundred Years of Reading Research: Successes and Missteps of Edmund Burke Huey and Other Pioneers,” over the last 100 years, at least five major books published in the US have summarized the available research about the most effective reading instruction practices. Dr. Edmund Huey’s book titled *The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading* in 1908 was the first to review research about how to teach sound-symbol correspondence (i.e., phonics), the importance of exposure to books, and the role of oral language development. Subsequent volumes, including a report by the National Reading Panel (NRP) published in 2000, also reviewed those topics and documented additional accumulated research. But as noted by Walczyk et al, the actual practices used in classrooms across the decades have not always applied the research findings. Instead, various popular theories about child development have contributed to reading instruction practices.



## 5 Essential Elements of Effective Reading Instruction



[View the Full Infographic](#)

For example, theories about how literacy skills are developed put forward by Ken Goodman and Marie Clay suggested that reading is a skill that develops naturally in all children. This theory led to the practice of “whole language” and “guided reading” instruction in many classrooms. Numerous studies have discredited these methods, yet they persist in many schools.

Despite variations in reading instruction practices, all of the major research findings have been consistent in supporting structured reading instruction methods. Recently, the scope of such instruction has been broadened to include written expression and the term “structured literacy” instruction used.

### What is Structured Literacy?

[Structured literacy instruction](#) includes both a continuum of skills and a variety of instructional practices, as identified by the International Dyslexia Association. Importantly, structured literacy approaches do not mean teaching only certain skills by certain methods. Instead, structured literacy instruction incorporates activities across all five reading domains, using a variety of teaching practices.

By integrating the necessary skills with a range of teaching practices, structured literacy provides both breadth and depth to students’ literacy development. Structured literacy lessons cover the five reading domains of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension identified in the NRP Report (2000). In addition, spelling and writing instruction are often included. By including all of these domains within lessons at every grade, students learn both the constituent parts of words as well as how to combine parts to create words, sentences, and paragraphs.

## The Core Components of Structured Literacy Instruction

Structured literacy instruction also incorporates a range of teaching practices that focus on ensuring students acquire deeper understanding of written language. Take a deeper dive into structured literacy and the components of effective reading instruction, based on the science of reading.

### Systematic and Cumulative Content

Systematic and cumulative content refers to the order for teaching skills. The smallest and easiest skills are taught first, followed by progressively more advanced skills. In this way, the instruction is cumulative and requires regular practice of earlier learning because that learning is embedded in later lessons.

### Planned Explicit Instruction

Structured literacy also involves explicit instruction because literacy skills are taught in an intentional way to support student accuracy with reading and writing.

Explicit teaching includes teacher modeling and frequent student opportunities to practice emerging skills. Such explicit instruction is a key foundation for all students; however, some students will require additional support. For this reason, structured literacy instruction incorporates diagnostic teaching strategies.

### Diagnostic Teaching

Diagnostic teaching involves additional mini lessons for students who are struggling, accompanied by brief assessments to observe the effects. The process of teaching and evaluating student learning during instruction allows the teacher to pinpoint the exact source of a student's literacy struggle and provide additional lessons that fill in any gaps.

**3 Core Components of Structured Literacy Instruction**

- Systematic and Cumulative Content**: Represented by an icon of three overlapping documents with checkmarks.
- Diagnostic Teaching**: Represented by an icon of a person at a computer monitor showing a line graph.
- Explicit Instruction**: Represented by an icon of two people with double-headed arrows between them.

(International Dyslexia Association, 2018)

**What It Takes for All Students to Become Strong Readers**

Decades of research by reading experts and cognitive scientists into how we learn to read has revealed principles of instruction to guide teaching so that all students, including those with reading difficulties like dyslexia, can learn to read well.

**5 Essential Elements of Effective Reading Instruction**

- Phonemic Awareness**: Ability to segment and manipulate sounds.
- Phonics**: Ability to connect letters and sounds.
- Fluency**: Ability to read with accuracy, automaticity, and expression.
- Comprehension**: Ability to understand and use what is read.
- Self-Monitoring**: Ability to detect and correct errors.

**3 Core Components of Structured Literacy Instruction**

[View the Infographic](#)

## The Benefits of Structured Literacy vs Whole Language Instruction

Despite strong evidence that structured literacy instructional practices are the most effective for all students, as noted above, current classroom practices do not always utilize these methods. As in earlier decades, popular theories about child development and the components of reading sometimes persist.

Some teachers continue to advocate whole language instruction despite evidence that it does not work. The whole language method is based on the theory that reading development occurs for humans in the same way that oral language develops, and it advocates print exposure as the primary pathway for students to develop reading and other literacy skills. This theory has been refuted in thousands of articles and books, including the three research summaries listed in this article. Certainly print exposure is a factor in literacy development and many studies, starting with Huey's, have documented this. Nonetheless, print exposure alone will not result in literacy for all students.

Instead, structured literacy instruction provides both evidence-based and equitable access for all students.

Students enter school with a wide range of prior exposure to literacy skills and resources. For this reason, structured instruction, as noted by Keith Stanovich in 1986, depending on exposure to print as the primary reading instruction method, will always lead to widely varying student outcomes because it advantages certain students and disadvantages others. To address inequities in education outcomes, providing structured literacy instruction for ALL students is essential.

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*If we want all students to become strong readers and develop the full breadth and depth of literacy skills—or at least have access to the opportunity for full literacy—we must use structured literacy instruction methods.*

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## 7 Essential Features of Science-Based Reading Instruction

Which instructional approach has them all?

	Structured Literacy	Balanced Literacy (Whole Language)
Planned systematic instruction	Yes	No
Focus on phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension	Yes	No
Teacher modeling of all skills	Yes	No
Immediate corrective feedback	Yes	No
Practice of new skills	Yes	Some
Regular review of prior learning	Yes	No
Exposure to and engagement with a variety of texts	Yes	Yes



### Rachel Brown, Ph.D.

Dr. Brown is a nationally certified school psychologist and a licensed psychologist. She has consulted with numerous school districts to support Rtl implementation.

EXPERT: Ms. Linda Diamond

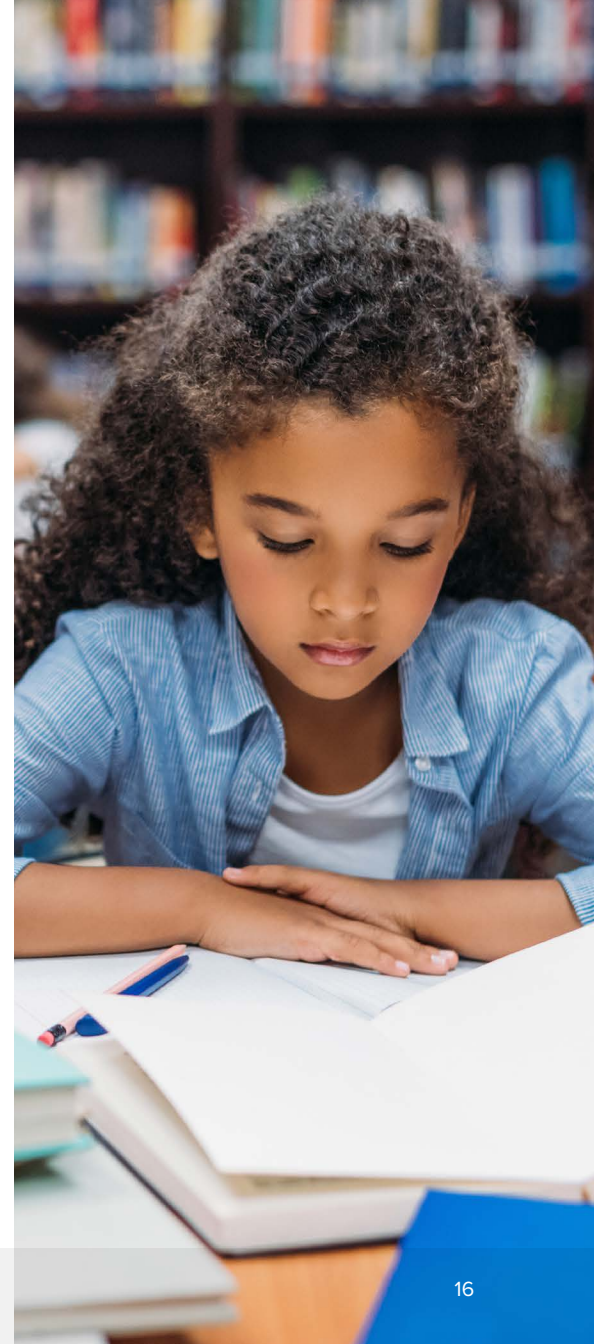
# WHAT'S THE KEY TO TEACHING TO THE SCIENCE OF READING?

## Evidence-Based Instruction and Interventions Rely on Valid, Reliable, and Efficient Assessments

With a nationwide focus on high-quality core reading curricula and recognition of the importance of evidence-based reading instruction, we also need to consider assessment. Without reliable, valid, and efficient assessments, we are less able to objectively determine if students are on track with grade-level reading or to identify necessary adjustments to instruction and interventions.

### Elements of Effective Reading Assessment

In an effective reading program, assessment informs instruction. In the primary grades, reading instruction includes certain discrete skills which taken together are predictive of future reading achievement. These early skills provide the foundation for other important outcomes such as fluency and comprehension. Because of the importance of mastery of these early reading skills (phonemic awareness and decoding, for example), reading assessment in the primary grades is often more frequent and quite targeted. In grades 4-12, however, assessment, while continuing to monitor progress, is most useful to identify causes of reading difficulties in older students in order to get them the support they deserve.







1

### Define Terms in Testing

When judging whether a test is useful, we need to understand three important terms: reliability, validity, and efficiency.

- Reliability refers to how consistently a test measures that which it was designed to measure. We want the same result to be achieved under the same circumstances. Curriculum-Based Measures (CBM) such as those in the FastBridge assessment solution are reliable.
- Validity refers to how accurately an assessment measures what it was intended to measure. It is not enough for an assessment to be reliable; it must also be valid. Again, appropriately constructed CBM will be valid.
- Efficiency refers to the ease at which teachers can administer assessments and the speed at which they can be taken and deliver results. Efficiency of testing and obtaining results is vital to rapidly determine if students are on the appropriate trajectory to become readers.

2

### Conduct Universal Screening

Teachers deserve efficient tools for universal screening and progress monitoring. Universal screening is preventive, like regular medical check-ups. Screeners, especially in primary grades, assess the most important reading skills in order to alert teachers to students who may be at risk of reading difficulty. Most screeners are administered three times a year.

If large numbers of students perform poorly on screening measures, it may mean instructional adjustments are needed for the entire class and/or the core curriculum is insufficient. If smaller numbers of students perform poorly on screeners, then diagnostic measures can pinpoint their areas of weakness and identify where to start intervention.

**3 Monitor Student Progress**

Frequent progress monitoring is essential for students receiving intervention in order to adjust reading instruction quickly. Think of how frequently a newborn gets weighed and measured. The reason for frequent wellness checks is to quickly adjust nutritional requirements. Frequent progress monitoring is a reading wellness check-up.

**4 Apply the Data**

Skillfully using the data from both screening and progress monitoring assessments supports educational equity by ensuring all students become proficient readers. To reach this goal, educators use the data obtained from valid and reliable measures to gauge the extent to which the core reading curriculum meets the needs of large numbers of students; how well educators are implementing that curriculum; what other materials may be needed, especially for targeted intervention; and what additional professional development and support for teachers may be necessary.

In fact, the use of screeners and progress monitoring assessments will serve a school system at the district, school, classroom, and individual student level.



If screeners across many schools within a district reveal significant numbers of students at risk of reading failure, district leaders need to look carefully at their districtwide reading programs and quality of instruction.



If students across many classrooms are not progressing, then the school needs to take a close look at its instructional materials and the quality of teaching. The core reading program may not be grounded in the science of reading and may lack texts that are rigorous and build knowledge. This scenario may lead to the selection of different materials and in organized professional development.



When many students within a classroom are not progressing, the teacher may benefit from coaching assistance.



At the student level, if screeners show most students within a classroom are on track, then only those students who are not making progress will require further assessment and targeted intervention within a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS).

## EXPERT: Ms. Linda Diamond



Just as exercise and good nutrition, supported by regular medical check-ups, are a recipe for a healthy life, psychometrically reliable, valid, and efficient assessment measures, coupled with evidence-based instruction, are the recipe for ensuring all students become strong readers. We need assessment to verify, before our students run into difficulty, that our instruction is effective. We need assessment to enable us to intervene rapidly when necessary and do so with the appropriate intensity, targeted to the skills and content students need. Perhaps even more important, we need assessment to tell us whether our curriculum and instruction are of sufficient quality to ensure every child becomes an able and confident reader.



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### **Linda Diamond, M.Ed.**

*Linda Diamond is a former teacher and principal and co-founder of the Consortium on Reaching Excellence in Education (CORE). She is the author of the Teaching Reading Sourcebook.*

# WHAT DOES EFFECTIVE READING INSTRUCTION AND ASSESSMENT LOOK LIKE?

## Best Practices for Implementing Direct and Systematic Reading Instruction Grounded in the Science of Reading

When a news story by American Public Media addressed the question “[Why aren't kids being taught to read?](#)” I asked myself, “Why aren't they?”

This story reviewed available research about effective reading instruction and then pointed out that such research is rarely taught in teacher education programs. In 2000, the National Reading Panel (NRP) published findings from a comprehensive analysis of available research about the most effective reading instruction practices. There are two important aspects to effective reading instruction: (a) content and skills to be learned, and (b) teaching practices that work for all learners.

Let's review both components.





1

## Reading Content and Skills

The NRP report found there are five essential components to reading that need to be included in reading lessons across grades. These areas are:

1. **Phonemic Awareness:** Knowledge of individual sounds (phonemes)
2. **Phonics:** Knowledge of the sounds that correspond to each letter or group of letters
3. **Fluency:** A combination of accuracy, automaticity, and prosody when reading so that the reader understands what is read
4. **Vocabulary:** Knowledge of the meanings of individual words
5. **Comprehension:** Understanding of the overall ideas and information contained in text

All five areas need to be included in reading instruction every day at every grade level. Certainly, the instructional focus at younger grades should include more emphasis on phonemic awareness and phonics, but young students also need to learn accurate and automatic decoding, word meanings, and how text conveys information.

At higher grades, comprehension is the main focus, but older students still need to learn new vocabulary related to the content areas, develop fluency reading new words, and learn how to decode multi-syllabic content-area words, especially those with Greek and Latin roots and affixes. When students lack strong instruction in one or more of these skill areas, deficits can impact learning across content areas.

## 2 Reading Instruction Practices

The methods used to provide reading instruction are also important. Direct and systematic instructional methods have been found to be the most effective across students of all ages.

### Direct Instruction

Direct instruction refers to teaching methods that provide learners with precise details about the skills to be learned and many opportunities to practice those skills. Direct instruction methods use an instructional hierarchy of specific learning stages that provide learners with opportunities to see examples of the skills and guided practice using the skills followed by independent practice until the skills are mastered.

### Instructional Hierarchy

Direct instruction works because it includes activities that follow the instructional hierarchy (Loring et al., 1978) that reflects the learning process:

1. **Acquisition:** The learner has no background with the skill or knowledge to be learned. The teacher describes and models the skill or knowledge and then provides scaffolded practice that focuses on accuracy.
2. **Fluency:** The learner practices the skill or knowledge regularly in order to use it automatically.
3. **Mastery:** The learner uses the knowledge or skill spontaneously during school-based activities.

4. **Generalization:** The learner uses the knowledge or skill spontaneously in settings and situations different from where it was learned (e.g., another course or outside of school).

Direct instruction is an important component of effective reading lessons because it provides opportunities for learners to access reading instruction regardless of prior knowledge or experiences.

Visit [Effective Reading Instruction](#) to view a table with examples of instructional activities for all five areas of reading at each stage of the instructional hierarchy.

### Universal Screening

To examine progress toward grade-level learning goals, teachers should implement universal screening, a process in which all students complete standardized reading assessments. When all students complete the same assessment, their results can be evaluated to learn both group and individual outcomes. Universal screening data can show the effects of core instruction as well as which students need additional help in order to meet the learning goals.

When the screening scores indicate that 80% or more of students are meeting the learning goals (e.g., benchmarks or standards) then core instruction is generally understood to be highly effective. When less than 80% of students have scores that meet the goals, school teams can take steps to improve the core reading instruction.

EXPERT: Dr. Rachel Brown

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*The FastBridge assessment solution includes universal reading screening assessments for grades K-12, including earlyReading, aReading, AUTOreading, and CBMreading.*

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**Rachel Brown, Ph.D.**

*Dr. Brown is a nationally certified school psychologist and a licensed psychologist. She has consulted with numerous school districts to support Rtl implementation.*

### **Systematic Instruction**

Another important teaching practice for reading instruction is for it to be systematic. Systematic instruction involves providing lessons in a specific sequence. In the case of reading, systematic instruction provides a coherent order to the lessons so that new learning builds on prior learning. Usually, easier skills are taught before harder skills. Systematic reading instruction includes practices such as teaching the most frequent letter sounds first and separating presentation of highly similar letters and sounds so that students do not get confused. This type of instruction allows students to keep practicing beginning skills as they add new skills over time.

### **Learner Differences**

Although direct and systematic instruction that includes all of the five “big” areas of reading has been found to benefit all students, the exact duration and frequency of lessons necessary is likely to vary across students. Some students will reach the mastery and generalization stages very quickly and others will need many more opportunities to practice during the acquisition and fluency stages. Not all students will learn to read at the same rate, but with the right instruction and lesson time, they can learn to read.

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# ADDRESS LITERACY DEVELOPMENT IN A MULTI-TIERED SYSTEM OF SUPPORT (MTSS)

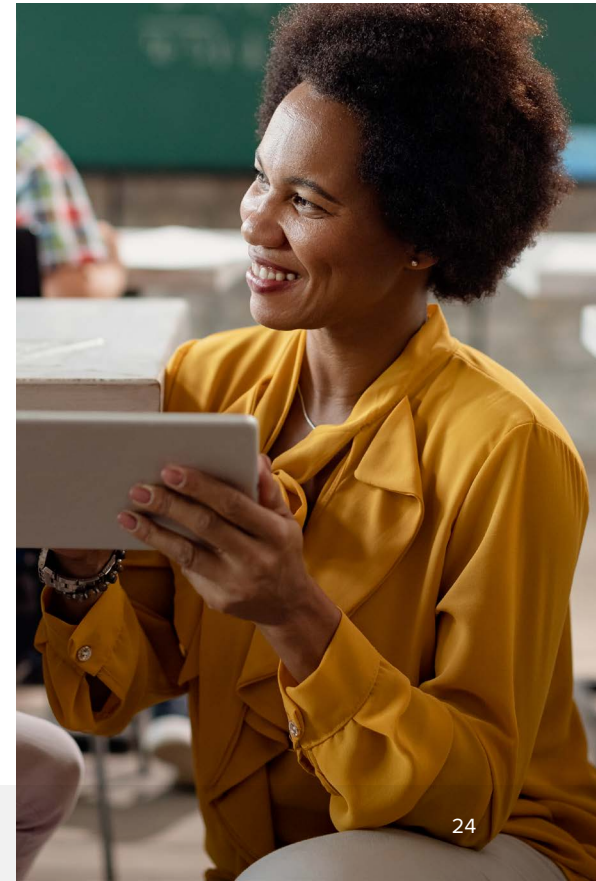
## Build an MTSS Infrastructure That Includes Reading Assessment

Tell educators that they can purchase a core instructional or intervention “program” for literacy development that works for every single student, and you’d be met with dubious laughter.

Educators know there is no one program that works for every single student. In fact, simply spend some time on websites that provide information on the strength of both the evidence and effectiveness of literacy programs (such as [What Works Clearinghouse](#) or [National Center on Intensive Intervention](#)) and you’ll quickly see that few instructional practices in the area of literacy development have strong evidence of effectiveness.

In meta-analytic studies, researchers such as Ken Kavale (1990) and John Hattie (2012) show how the mean effect size for many core instructional strategies and interventions used in both general and special education are below what would be called effective.

Adding to this is evidence that schools are not choosing to implement literacy instruction that is scientifically based ([The Most Popular Reading Programs Aren't Backed by Science](#)). Furthermore, we know the sense of urgency for reading by third grade ([Learning to Read, Reading to Learn](#)) is now complicated by limited access to instruction due to COVID-19.





## EXPERT: Dr. Seth Aldrich

The good news is we can use data to keep what is working for many students and modify what is not. Kavale argues compellingly to implement interventions for literacy development with eyes and minds wide open and use progress monitoring data to make timely instructional adjustments when students do not respond. Considering intervention attempts as “best guesses” requiring careful evaluation through progress monitoring is especially important with English learners (ELs) (August & Shanahan, 2006).

When focusing on early literacy development, an MTSS provides the most effective infrastructure to determine if students are acquiring the foundational knowledge and skills needed to read and write.

By offering differentiated core instruction, interventions for those who need them, and assessments to understand needs and determine whether strategies are working or not, an MTSS allows educators to be responsive to all students’ needs.

## **An Assessment Framework for Literacy Development**

Universal screening, assessments to guide instruction, and progress monitoring assessments are elements essential for making good decisions about what is most needed at a district, school, grade, class, and individual level in an MTSS framework.

### **Assessments to Guide Reading Instruction**

Instead of assessment systems that diagnose students and disempower educators to meet their needs, an MTSS provides an assessment system to diagnose the needs and empower educators to meet them. Having the wisdom to know what educators can control (e.g., instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) is key to an effective MTSS assessment and intervention.

### **Universal Screening of Reading Skills**

By using research-based assessments to identify whether students are learning how to read, we take the first step in the problem-solving process. These assessments are used to evaluate core instruction for all students as well as subgroups of students (e.g., ELs, students with IEPs). Universal screening also helps to prioritize, based on data, students who will receive tiered supports.

EXPERT: Dr. Seth Aldrich

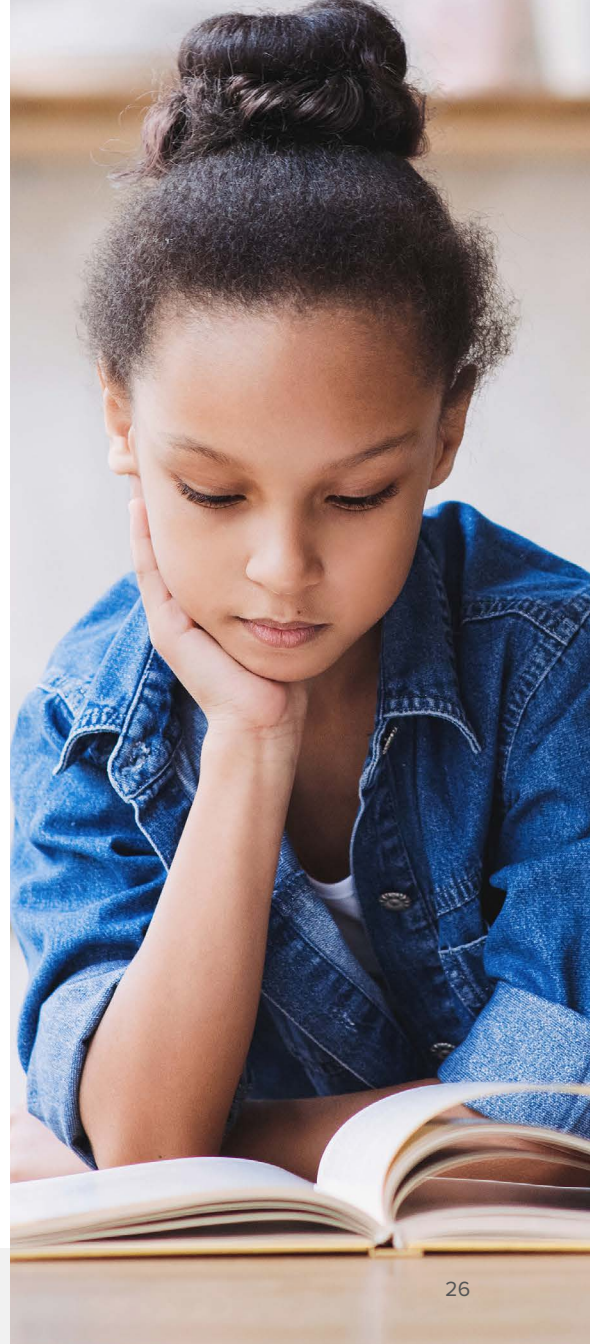
## Monitoring Progress of Literacy Skills

[Frequent progress monitoring](#) with timely instructional adjustment leads to positive outcomes for students in the majority of cases when schools implement a menu of interventions with a strong track record.

Too often, schools have one or two intervention options of questionable effectiveness. When a student does not make expected gains, the blame is put on teachers, students, and/or their parents. Or, students are diagnosed as having intractable deficits, when it was the *intervention* that was weak for that particular student.

There are many key aspects to consider when monitoring the progress of literacy skill development:

1. To start, progress monitoring assessments must *match what is being taught*. Assessing progress on letter naming when the intervention addressed letter sounds won't answer the effectiveness question.
2. Progress monitoring assessments must be *sensitive to change*. When assessing progress in reading automaticity and accuracy passage sets (a flagship of progress monitoring in the area of literacy) with a mix of difficult and easy passages result in "bounce" in the data. Accuracy instruction must come before automaticity. This extends the time it takes to make decisions concerning progress. With carefully constructed passage sets that are equated (e.g., FastBridge's), determination of progress can be made sooner (Ardoin & Christ, 2009).



## EXPERT: Dr. Seth Aldrich

3. Educators must have opportunities through progress monitoring checkup meetings to be *responsive to data*. Teachers and students are working hard. We do not want to wait half of the school year only to discover that we picked the wrong intervention or need to adjust variables such as fidelity, dosage, intensity, or the intervention itself. With carefully constructed, standardized passage sets conducted weekly, we can determine progress within six weeks. For this reason, educators using progress monitoring should consider weekly rather than biweekly progress monitoring. Two minutes per week for a progress monitoring assessment session is time well spent when you can avoid an additional six weeks of ineffective instruction/intervention.
4. For example, it would be very difficult or impossible to lose 20 pounds in one month (e.g., five pounds per week) but one pound per week is feasible. The same is true for learning.

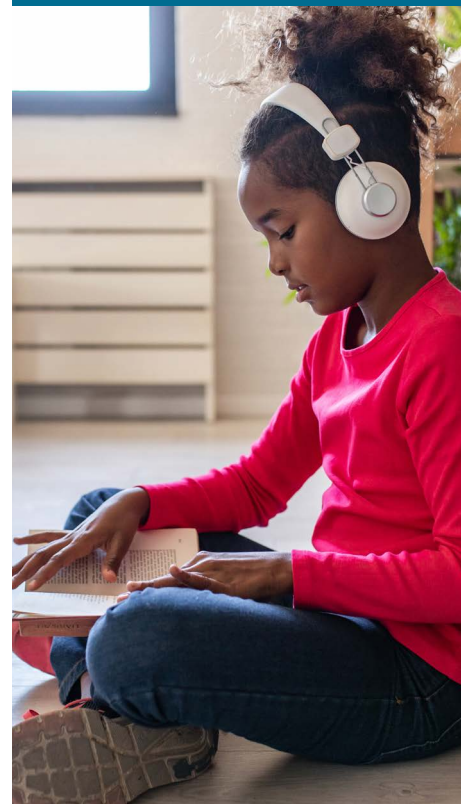
### Coordinating Schoolwide Infrastructure

Finally, set up an infrastructure of tiered problem-solving for an MTSS such as post-benchmark meetings, progress monitoring checkups, individual problem-solving, and district and school MTSS meetings. Coordinate this with other school initiatives for problem-solving (school improvement teams, special education decision making) to create a synergy in which assessment and problem-solving are coordinated and efficient.

Given the questionable evidence of many literacy development approaches schools implement, evaluating and removing instructional programs that are not working at a grade level, for certain groups of students, or for individual students helps educators strengthen the resources available for all students.

FAST Projection is a tool that provides an accurate prediction of student progress in fewer data points to help keep at-risk students on track.

[Learn More](#)



## EXPERT: Dr. Seth Aldrich



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#### Seth Aldrich, Ph.D.

*Dr. Aldrich is a certified bilingual school psychologist, as well as a NY State licensed psychologist. He works with several school districts concerning Multi-Tiered System of Support for academic and behavioral difficulties.*

# THE SCIENCE OF READING: IT'S NOT JUST FOR NATIVE ENGLISH SPEAKERS

## Learn How Instruction Grounded in Reading Science Can Help English Learners Achieve Language Proficiency and Reading Success

In the [Reading League statement](#), reading science is defined as, “a body of research that has emerged from multiple disciplines, such as cognitive psychology, neuroscience, and linguistics. The findings from thousands of research studies over the last 40+ years have converged to teach us how the brain learns to read and write, and why some students have trouble. These findings also provide us with guidance on how to teach reading so that more students can learn to read proficiently.”

However, there is a gap between this body of research and the reading practices employed in most schools today. Furthermore, most teacher preparation programs fail to include this learning for new teachers. This disconnect between research and practice shows up in persistent ideas that decoding is something that will happen naturally, and it has led to the use of teaching strategies that are not connected to content. The result is teachers simply encouraging children to love reading without teaching them skills to become strong readers.





Another myth that persists is that reading is a natural process like learning to speak. Humans are not born readers and the deep orthography of the English language adds an additional complexity when learning to read and write (Moats & Tollman, 2017). Weak word recognition is the most common and debilitating source of reading problems. On average, it takes a child two to three years to learn to decode English. It is one of the toughest alphabetic writing systems in the world.

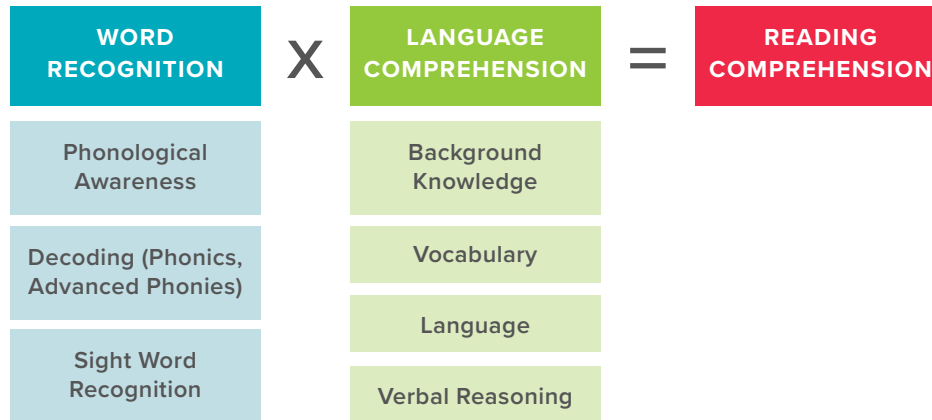
### **How Does the Science of Reading Inform Best Practices for English Learners (ELs)?**

ELs are not a monolithic group of students. These students are a highly diverse group of learners who total more than 4.8 million in the United States and represent 350 home languages. However, the majority of ELs in the United States were born here, and 77% come from Spanish-speaking homes.

Literacy depends on language. In order to understand how reading works, we need to understand how language works and how the brain processes alphabetic code. Many teachers are expected to teach ELs without the necessary preparation and/or knowledge to scaffold instruction and differentiate for linguistic needs.

One way the science of reading can inform best practices for ELs is by understanding the Simple View of Reading. Researchers Phillip Gough and Bill Tunmer (1986) proposed the Simple View of Reading to describe what is actually a highly complex combination of skills that results in reading comprehension. The two keys that open the door to reading comprehension are word recognition and language comprehension.

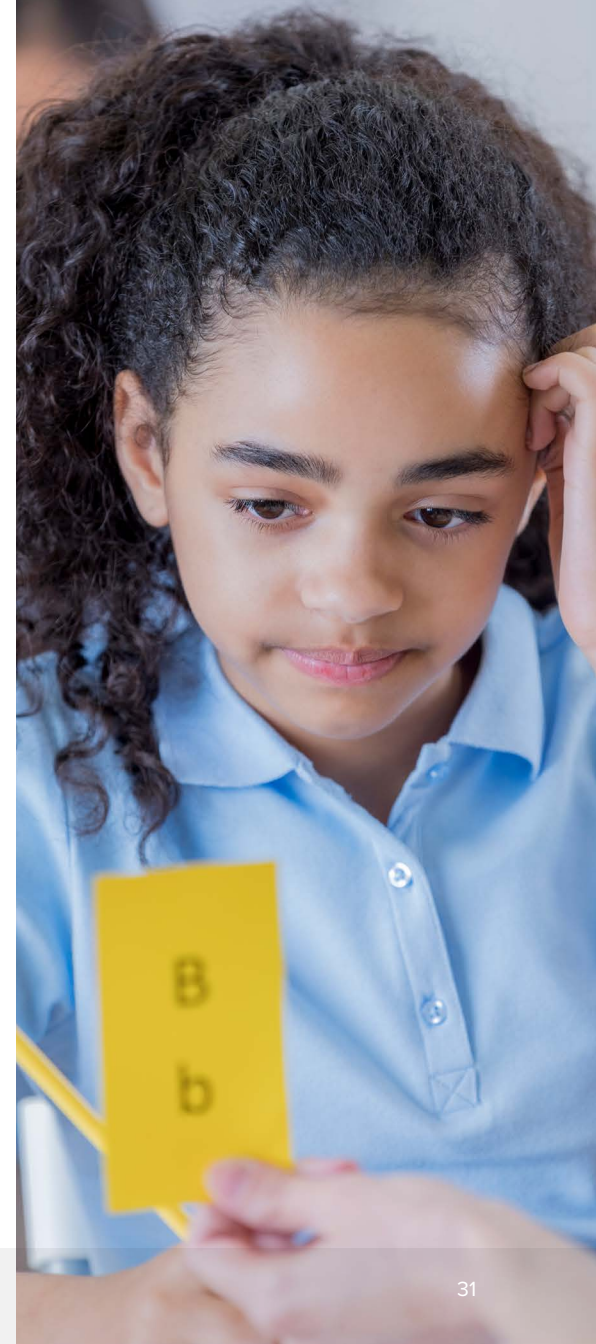
## EXPERT: Dr. Alejandra Estrada-Burt



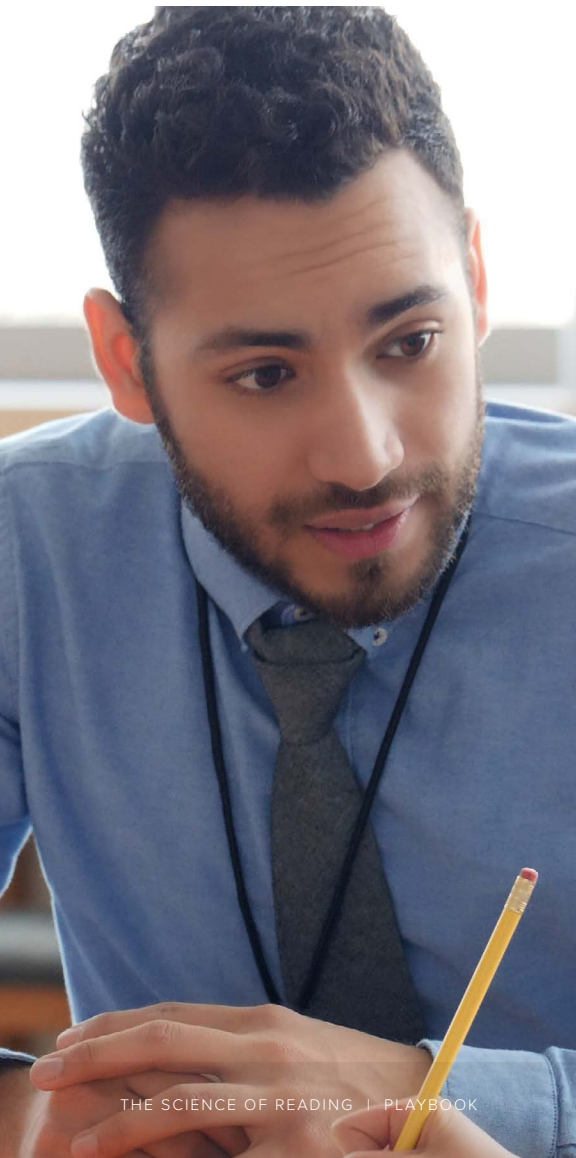
Based on the Simple View of Reading by Gough and Tunmer, 1986

If you can't decode the symbols in a sentence, you can't read it—even when you know the language in which it is written. This is a heavily researched body of work that has demonstrated consistently that printed word recognition is essential for the development of reading comprehension.

However, decoding skills are not enough to achieve reading comprehension. The second domain, language comprehension, has huge implications for ELs. If a student cannot decode English, they cannot comprehend it. If students cannot comprehend English oral language, they cannot comprehend written English either because they also need vocabulary, background knowledge, and language structures to access meaning.



## EXPERT: Dr. Alejandra Estrada-Burt



Often when our youngest learners begin to learn to read, they have acquired oral language spoken in their home language and/or they are emerging bilinguals who are learning two languages simultaneously. In order to effectively differentiate instruction for ELs it is essential to understand the relationship between word recognition and language comprehension. Learning the phonics system of an alphabetic code in any language requires that students build connections between the orthographic processor and the phonological processor of the brain. Because reading takes place at the neurological level, the process is the same for all learners.

Word recognition is the foundation of language comprehension. The phonological and orthographic processors need to be activated before a student can activate meaning. Thus, early foundational word-recognition skills should be priorities for assessment and instruction. However, foundational skills will continue to be priorities for struggling readers at any age. Even if you have slight issues with one domain, the whole equation falls apart. Both domains are essential to ensure reading comprehension. According to Cain (2011), both are necessary, but neither on its own is enough.

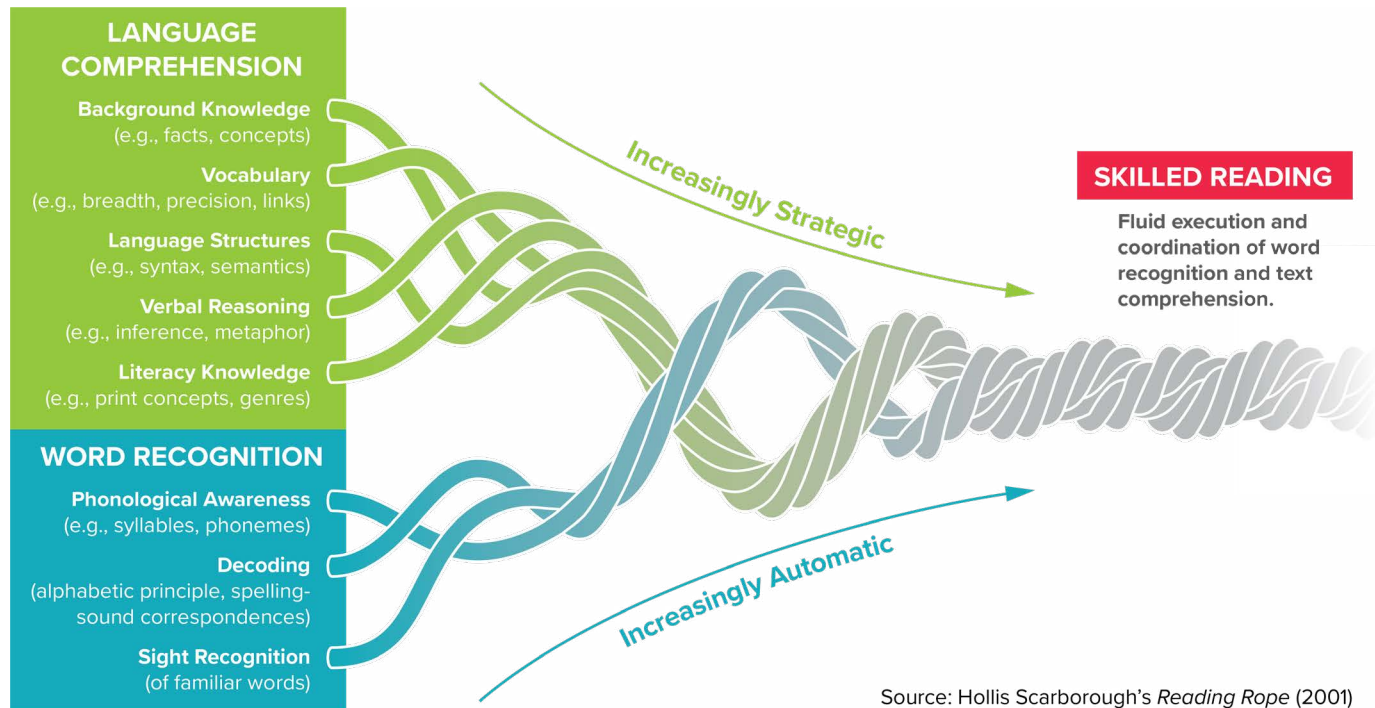
In the early years, word recognition skills are the greatest influence on reading comprehension. They need to be explicitly and systematically taught. As word reading skills increase, language comprehension skills play a more critical role. It is essential that teachers have a deep understanding of the Simple View of Reading so optimal instructional decisions are made to address both domains for ELs.

What has also emerged from this body of research is that reading is a multifaceted skill acquired over years of instruction and practice. Many strands are woven into skilled reading. For example, Hollis Scarborough (2001), created The Reading Rope to demonstrate the many skills and interdependence among the strands that influence reading development and the attainment of skilled reading comprehension.



## What's the Connection Between Language and Literacy for ELs?

Research with ELs in the primary grades demonstrates that measures of phonological processing ability are more strongly related to word reading ability than are measures of oral language proficiency, such as vocabulary and grammatical sensitivity.



Source: Hollis Scarborough's *Reading Rope* (2001)

## EXPERT: Dr. Alejandra Estrada-Burt

Consequently, it is essential to develop and implement a comprehensive assessment plan in order to be responsive, adapt instruction, and monitor student progress over time. To ensure linguistic equity, a complete picture of the child’s language skills in each language as expressed through different modalities (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) along with literacy assessments provides critical information—especially when this can be tracked over time.

According to Dr. Louisa Moats (2019), language proficiency and literacy skills are strongly related to one another, especially after fourth grade. There is strong correlating evidence that students with delayed poor language acquisition skills will have poor reading and writing skills (Catts, Adlof, & Weismer, 2006). However, ELs are an extremely diverse group of students and there are many causes of reading struggles as students acquire a new language. Structured literacy instruction paired with a comprehensive assessment plan are essential to ensuring linguistic equity for ELs. Moreover, learners with low vocabulary knowledge must be identified as early as possible and provided with effective, explicit instruction in vocabulary, especially academic vocabulary. Teachers—and those who support them—need training on language and literacy development in the context of an early intervention model that includes a comprehensive language and literacy screening and assessment system.

### **Move Beyond the EL Label: Achieve Linguistic Equity & Excellence Through Assessment**

In this whitepaper, Dr. Estrada-Burt dives deeper into the role of assessment in helping ELs achieve English proficiency. Read it to learn more about:

- Challenges teachers face in supporting ELs
- The role of assessment in EL instruction
- Using English assessment measures with ELs
- Building a comprehensive EL assessment plan

[Read the Whitepaper](#)

## EXPERT: Dr. Alejandra Estrada-Burt

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#### **Alejandra Estrada-Burt, Ph.D.**

*Dr. Estrada-Burt currently serves as Co-Principal at Robbinsdale Spanish Immersion (RSI) in New Hope, MN, part of Robbinsdale Area Schools. Her previous teaching roles include Elementary ELL and Behavior Interventionist.*

# FAQS AROUND CREATING A SCIENCE-BASED SCHOOLWIDE READING IMPROVEMENT MODEL

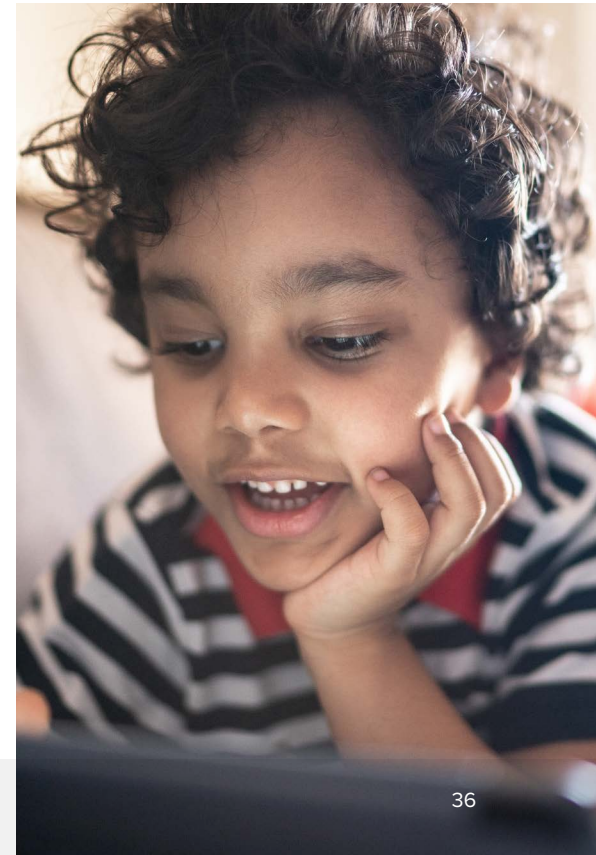
## Lessons I've Learned During My Years as a Practicing School Psychologist and Education Consultant

Since earning my Ph.D. from the University of Massachusetts (UMass) Amherst in 2002, I have made a career as a consultant to districts and schools seeking to improve students' literacy outcomes. During my time practicing school psychology and visiting schools striving to address their high rates of special education referrals something became strikingly clear: Focusing on prevention and early intervention for students struggling with reading was critical to everything else that needed to take place to improve their schools. During my visits, here are some questions I frequently received from educators seeking to provide students with a high-quality, evidence-based reading curriculum and assessments for schoolwide reading improvement.

**Q** What is schoolwide reading improvement?

**A** A schoolwide reading improvement model is effectively a tiered model of instruction for reading.

At its core, it is a continuous improvement model based on the science of reading and a structure which supports active problem solving. It's data-driven, collaborative, comprehensive, and prevention-oriented. In the end, it's about ensuring all students get the reading support they need to succeed.



## EXPERT: Dr. Judy Loughlin

**Q** Why is a schoolwide reading improvement effort important?

**A** A strong schoolwide reading improvement model brings teachers and leadership together as they study best practices and make decisions about where their district or school should head.

Teachers can make a much bigger impact on students and their families if everyone is moving toward the same goals. It's critical that everyone—from the central office to paraprofessionals—speaks the same language so that from year to year students start a new grade with great preparation, and that great preparation is followed up by consistent expectations and instruction.



**Q** What is the most important first step toward school-wide reading improvement?

**A** First and foremost, you must have involvement from district leaders who understand that schoolwide reading improvement models are best implemented at the school level.

This requires that each school somewhat customize the route they are going to take. To customize their model, the school staff needs to create a roadmap and timeline for implementation that carefully plots each step in the process. Start thinking about this roadmap and timeline by answering some basic questions:

1. Is a schoolwide reading improvement plan needed at this time?
2. What evidence do we have that it's needed?
3. What do we hope to accomplish by implementing it?
4. Is this the right time to take this work on?

Developing and implementing a schoolwide reading improvement model takes time. If you've just purchased a new science curriculum, say, or you're in the middle of launching a positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) program, for instance, you may need to delineate the different model components and determine which ones you can realistically get in place in a specific timeframe.

**Q** What components are needed to build a successful schoolwide reading improvement model?

**A** Our early efforts harkened back to a six-component, heuristic model based on the work of Kame'enui, Simmons and others:

1. Develop a set of clearly defined and communicated **goals**.
2. Put effective **evidence-based reading assessments** in place so you can determine where you are now and plot where you are headed.
3. Ground your schoolwide reading improvement model in a **high-quality, comprehensive core literacy curriculum based in the science of reading**.
4. Plan for providing **ongoing professional development** around using the curriculum and administering assessments and interpreting the data.
5. Use that data to establish a strong, tiered model of instructional delivery and facilitate instruction and intervention planning in **collaborative team meetings/professional learning communities**.
6. **Ensure leaders are as well-versed** as every other member of the endeavor and be actively engaged in order to make everything come together. Each administrator must commit to the adage, "If I expect, I INSPECT!"

**Q** How do you measure students' reading skills before, during, and after implementing a schoolwide reading improvement plan?

**A** It's critical to have formative and summative assessment systems that work together.

With your formative assessment system, you need to be able to conduct an overall literacy screening and gather baseline data on all foundational early literacy skills such as phonemic awareness and alphabetic knowledge, as well as oral language development, vocabulary, and comprehension. Student profiles will help inform your tiered model of instructional delivery and provide feedback on the results of supplemental or intensive interventions to students in each tier.

Your system should include [progress monitoring](#) so you can measure student progress toward learning goals within Tiers 2 and 3. When looking at progress monitoring measures, consider ones that are brief, valid and reliable, easy to administer, and highly sensitive to growth so you can make timely modifications to your supports if needed.

## EXPERT: Dr. Judy Loughlin

**Q** What impact can schools expect to see with a plan like this in place?

**A** It all depends on where you have decided to focus your efforts, and the efforts you focus on will be different at various stages of implementation. However, you should see a steady impact over time.

One of your first steps will likely be introducing formative assessment, and as time goes on, you are all going to become more adept at interpreting and understanding the data. Pretty quickly you'll be able to identify your areas of need and begin to learn how to determine solutions. You may bring in different materials and train educators in using those. Or you may examine the efficiency with which instruction is being provided.



**Q** What else should educators who are interested in schoolwide reading improvement know?

**A** It's all about improving the instructional delivery of every person working with your students.

- To make schoolwide reading improvement successful, you must have a strong vision and strong leaders who are out and about within the school making sure teachers are supported and teaching in a highly effective way.
- Your school must have a dedicated literacy block. Put a schedule and plan in place for deploying all possible instructors to provide the necessary reading instruction to children at each tier.
- Deep modeling and coaching are often overlooked until the third or fourth year of schoolwide reading improvement, when it should be addressed right away.
- You can get game-changing results that help every one of your students beat the odds stacked against them when everyone is providing excellent instruction.



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### Judy Loughlin, Ph.D.

*Dr. Loughlin worked with countless districts and schools across New England seeking to improve students' literacy outcomes. She also served as an adjunct instructor at UMass Amherst College of Education and worked as a teacher and school psychologist.*

# CHALLENGE ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT WHY STUDENTS AREN'T ABLE TO READ

## Open Your Mind to the Research Around How Students Learn to Read

Just six years ago, I began my career believing the primary issue holding students back from reading success was a lack of interest and representation in books. As a multi-racial African American woman whose own experience with literature wasn't always representative, this seemed a natural conclusion.

I started teaching high school students with these assumptions—assumptions that privilege some students, inadvertently cause teachers to label other students as behind or needing remediation and see students through a deficit lens. These assumptions are particularly harmful to students who depend on school to teach them things they would otherwise not be exposed to.

It didn't take long for me to see the effects of the instructional inequity plaguing our schools, especially the disparities in teaching the fundamentals of skilled reading: decoding and background knowledge. I also quickly realized I was assuming my high school-aged students had the benefit of explicit and systematic reading and writing instruction, and that reading words on a page was effortless.

This was not the case.







## Reading is Not Automatic

Ensuring high-quality Tier 1 instruction is the first step toward ensuring every child can read, but teachers in secondary schools are often faced with not knowing how or what to do when the students come into classrooms not having those fundamentals. Skilled reading requires many components of both language comprehension and word recognition. And while decoding becomes more automatic with explicit and systematic instruction, language comprehension is *increasingly strategic* and requires explicit teaching.

Though this may be the case, many educators are trained to do the opposite. Course work and professional development is rife with sayings such as “children can’t learn from people they don’t like,” “when students need to, they’ll become readers and writers,” and the ever pervasive, “it’s all about relationships.” This advice, while of good intention, results in a fundamental misunderstanding of how skilled reading actually works. It also results in students not receiving the intervention and support they need to be successful, starting in the early grades and continuing through high school.

## Redefine Reading Instruction

Nearly **half** of our nation’s elementary education programs still don’t teach educators the science of reading, and research has shown that even if a student’s knowledge base is equal, less-skilled readers still have more trouble generating knowledge-based inferences. In other words, students with poor comprehension construct incomplete representations of texts because they are not successfully integrating the correct pieces of information to make inferences. Words on a page will not magically blend together, nor will dense complex syntax parse itself just because the reader shares an identity marker with the author. The evidence for how children learn to read and how they can read better has little to do with interest, and more to do with prior knowledge and exposure.

EXPERT: Ms. Jasmine Lane

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*We can't assume just because we read to students, or because they have read a text themselves, that knowledge floating around will automatically integrate itself and fall into place.*

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Even with shared knowledge, we still must teach students how to construct meaning from words. This first begins with ensuring students have a fluid and automatic recall of words. As a high school English teacher, by the time students reach my class I should be able to assume they are proficient decoders and the majority of my work can focus on teaching literary analysis, but this is not the case.

Just as there is no point at which we have arrived at the end of the pursuit of justice, we should actively interrogate what we were taught in our teacher preparation programs and what is reinforced in continuing professional development. Methods we learned may have to be unlearned, and assumptions we hold may have to be corrected in order to provide all students with the skills and knowledge to become strong readers.



## How to Support Adolescents Struggling to Read

Much of the conversation around reading intervention is seen through the lens of “if we just get students to love reading, everything will fall into place”. As an English teacher and someone who loves reading, I know the feeling of wanting kids to have the same experience with books as I do. The issue is that the approach of focusing on the love of reading doesn’t solve the underlying problems.

Tim Rasinski [concludes that word recognition and fluency](#) are major contributors to reading deficiencies early on, but when students do not master these fundamentals, reading difficulties are likely to not only continue in later grades but have a profound and adverse effect on overall reading achievement.

For the adolescent students below the 30-35th percentile, a reading program that provides systematic instruction and that offers at least some explicit phonics instruction is needed. Students reading two to three grade levels below need more work with grade-level texts in the classroom.

To ensure students have success with grade-level texts, you can do the following:

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Read and annotate your article or passage for analysis and note key vocabulary, background knowledge, and “sticky” comprehension points ahead of time (points where if students don’t understand, they may get lost).

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Note points to chunk and summarize the text followed by a text-dependent question to check for understanding.

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Plan high-low paired reading, a low-stakes fluency practice meant to give low or struggling readers an opportunity to listen to a proficient and expert reader (the high reader) and then practice reading.

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Have students re-read small sections of text, and gradually release them to reading longer passages on their own.

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Do teacher “read-alouds” of difficult sections of text, from which prosody can aid comprehension of struggling decoders.



**Jasmine Lane**

*Jasmine Lane is a first-generation college graduate who now teaches high school English in Minneapolis, MN.*

# CONCLUSION

## Data Is Key to Getting All Students on Track to Being Strong Readers

More and more educators are adopting instructional practices grounded in the science of reading. Following this approach, which identifies five critical skills everyone must master in order to read proficiently, most students can and will become strong readers.

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*However, if you don't know which specific skills students are struggling with, you can't be as effective in helping them grow and develop as readers.*

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Assessment is a critical component to ensure equitable, evidence-based literacy instruction. The FastBridge formative assessment solution combines Computer-Adaptive Tests (CAT) to screen students, identify skill gaps, and offer proven recommendations for instruction and intervention. FastBridge's highly sensitive Curriculum-Based Measures (CBM) enable educators to monitor the effect of interventions and reading growth over time.

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