

Top 10 Reasons to Focus on Primary Reading Instruction

Teaching reading in grades K–2 is the most urgent task in education today. Converging research from the fields of education and neuroscience supports this stance—and tells us how to best support teachers and students in the primary grades.



10 The reading achievement gap in the U.S. is wide and persistent.

According to the 2017 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), nearly two-thirds of fourth graders are not reading proficiently, and the rate of reading failure in high-poverty, minority populations is much higher.

The percentage of fourth graders scoring below proficient on the NAEP reading assessment was 63% in 2017, 64% in 2015, 65% in 2013, and 67% in 2011, 2009, and 2007.

“Low skills costs the U.S. \$225 billion or more each year in terms of workforce non-productivity, crime, and loss of tax revenue due to unemployment.”

—National Council for Adult Learning, 2015

9 Illiteracy has far-reaching effects on society.

Illiteracy results in economic loss, and it is linked to higher crime rates, higher incarceration rates, more prisons, increased alcohol and drug use, and generational learning problems.



8 Success in beginning reading is a prerequisite for success in reading in later years.

Students who do not learn to read by the end of second grade will likely struggle with reading throughout their lives (Vaughn & Linan-Thompson, 2003). NAEP testing data show that fourth graders don't catch up by grade 8, and eighth graders don't catch up by high school graduation.

“Students who are above grade level for reading in grade 3 graduate and enroll in college at higher rates than students who are at or below grade level.”

—Lesnick, et al., 2010

“Within his brain, the child is literally building the neural circuitry that links the sounds of spoken words, the phonemes, to the print code, the letters that represent these sound.”

—Shaywitz, 2003

7 Instruction counts.

The brain is not hard-wired for reading. Students must learn how to read, and how they're taught makes a difference. The right instruction can help develop the regions of the brain essential for proficient reading.

6 Systematic, explicit phonics is essential.

Research has demonstrated that systematic, explicit phonics is a critical component of reading instruction. Students benefit from carefully sequenced, direct instruction and an emphasis on practicing and using that knowledge in the context of meaningful reading.

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Systematic, explicit phonics instruction improves students' word recognition, spelling, and reading comprehension skills (National Reading Panel, 2000; Shaywitz, 2003; Yoncheva, Wise, & McCandliss, 2015).

“As an instructional strategy, the teaching and text cannot be separated.”

—Mesmer, 2001

5 Alignment of decodable text to instructional sequence is paramount.

Effective phonics instruction includes sufficient practice in decodable texts that have 1) a high proportion of words with phonetically regular relationships between letters and sounds and 2) a close match between the letter-sound relationship represented in text and those that the reader has been taught.



4 Building students' capacity to read complex text starts with early exposure to different kinds of text.

Beginning readers not only need to secure their decoding skills with decodable text, they need read-aloud experiences to build content knowledge, vocabulary, and listening comprehension. As their competence grows, students also need to read grade-appropriate complex text, with teacher mediation as necessary.

“Reading richer texts benefits children by exposing them to a wider variety and volume of words as well as a greater range of concepts. Both variety and volume of text would seem necessary for the development of good decoding and comprehension skills.”

—Kuhn, et al., 2006



“A deficiency in any of the component skills has the potential to affect the development of other skills and, ultimately, the development of the child as a proficient reader.”

—Hudson, Torgesen, Lane, & Turner, 2012

3 Integrated language arts supports literacy development.

Systematic phonics is most effective when it is integrated with all the language arts, not taught as a separate subject or add-on to an existing program. It is especially critical that both encoding (spelling) and decoding (reading) are practiced in the beginning stages of learning to read.



2 Early success with reading has lasting effects on motivation.

Success is critical for motivation. Students who struggle to decode begin to avoid reading, setting off a cycle of reading difficulties. Students who experience early success believe in their ability as readers and continue to read and reap the rewards of intrinsically motivated reading.

Phonological processing ability and letter-name knowledge...not only predict subsequent reading performance but also academic self-concept and reading self-efficacy (Chapman & Tunmer, 2003).

1 Prevention in the primary grades is the key to closing the reading gap.

Research tells us that we can prevent reading failure for the vast majority of students with evidence-based instruction; the percentage of first graders below the 30th percentile can be reduced to 4–6% (Foorman et al., 1998; Mathes et al., 2005; Vellutino, et al., 2007; Torgesen, 2002). The right instruction and the right materials at the right time really matter.



“A large body of research evidence shows that with appropriate, intensive instruction, all but the most severe reading disabilities can be ameliorated in the early grades and students can get on track toward academic success.”

—Moats, 2011



The Superkids Reading Program

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