

PREVENTING Reading FAILURE

The Right Instruction at the Right Time

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The data are in and, for the third year in a row, the reading scores for third- and fourth-grade students are not where school principal Marti H. knows they need to be if her students are going to succeed in middle and high school. Her first inclination is to set up a meeting with the third- and fourth-grade teachers to review their reading and language arts curriculum. She opens her calendar, then pauses, wondering, “Is the problem really with the third- and fourth-grade curriculum?”

Reading is the single most important skill—the foundation—for all future learning. Failure to read on level by third grade impacts negatively upon future academic success as well as on social and emotional development. This principal is not alone in her concern about third- and fourth-grade reading scores. Our most recent national report card shows that nearly two-thirds of our fourth graders are not reading proficiently, and the rate of reading failure in high-poverty, minority populations is much higher (NCES, 2019). Children who enter third grade without proficient reading abilities are four times less likely to graduate from high school on time (Hernandez, 2012, p. 6). In fact, research shows that children who do not learn to read by the end of second grade will likely struggle with reading throughout their lives (Vaughn & Linan-Thompson, 2003).

Although it was once thought that learning to read was as natural as learning to speak, an extensive and rigorous body of research has proven otherwise. We now know how children learn to read; the skills they must master in kindergarten, first, and second grade; and what constitutes effective reading instruction.

“ How children are taught matters a great deal: it can affect whether they become readers or not, their level of reading skill, and the extent to which they enjoy and seek out the experience. In order to teach children effectively and make this essential skill available to as many people as possible, we need to know how reading works. ”

—Seidenberg, 2017, p. 13



EFFECTIVE READING INSTRUCTION: WHAT WE KNOW FROM RESEARCH

Decades of research has resulted in clear, scientifically based approaches to early reading. To build the neural connections necessary for reading, beginning readers first need to be taught the relationship between letters and sounds—phonics—explicitly and systematically. Research has demonstrated that phonics is an essential component of skilled reading in every language and writing system (Seidenberg, 2017; Yoncheva, Wise, & McCandless, 2015; Taylor, Davis, & Rastle, 2017). Yet the gulf between science and education persists, and methods commonly used to teach children to read are incompatible with what we now know about how the brain learns to read.

Research has also shown that phonics instruction has the greatest impact when taught in the early grades and when accompanied by extensive application to meaningful

“ *...the phonological pathway develops more rapidly in beginning readers and...learning proceeds much more slowly if the use of phonology is discouraged (as when phonics instruction is superficial or withheld).* ”

—Seidenberg, 2017, p. 126

(Heibert, 2017), decodable text (Jenkins et al., 2004; Cheatham & Allor, 2012; Mesmer, 2001). It is essential for struggling readers, students with learning disabilities, and students for whom English is a second language (Allor et al., 2014; Fredrick et al., 2013; Lemons et al., 2012; Nishanimut et al., 2013; Vadasy & Sanders, 2012). Finally, research findings support the conclusion that 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 (Moats, 2011).

INTERVENTION OR PREVENTION?

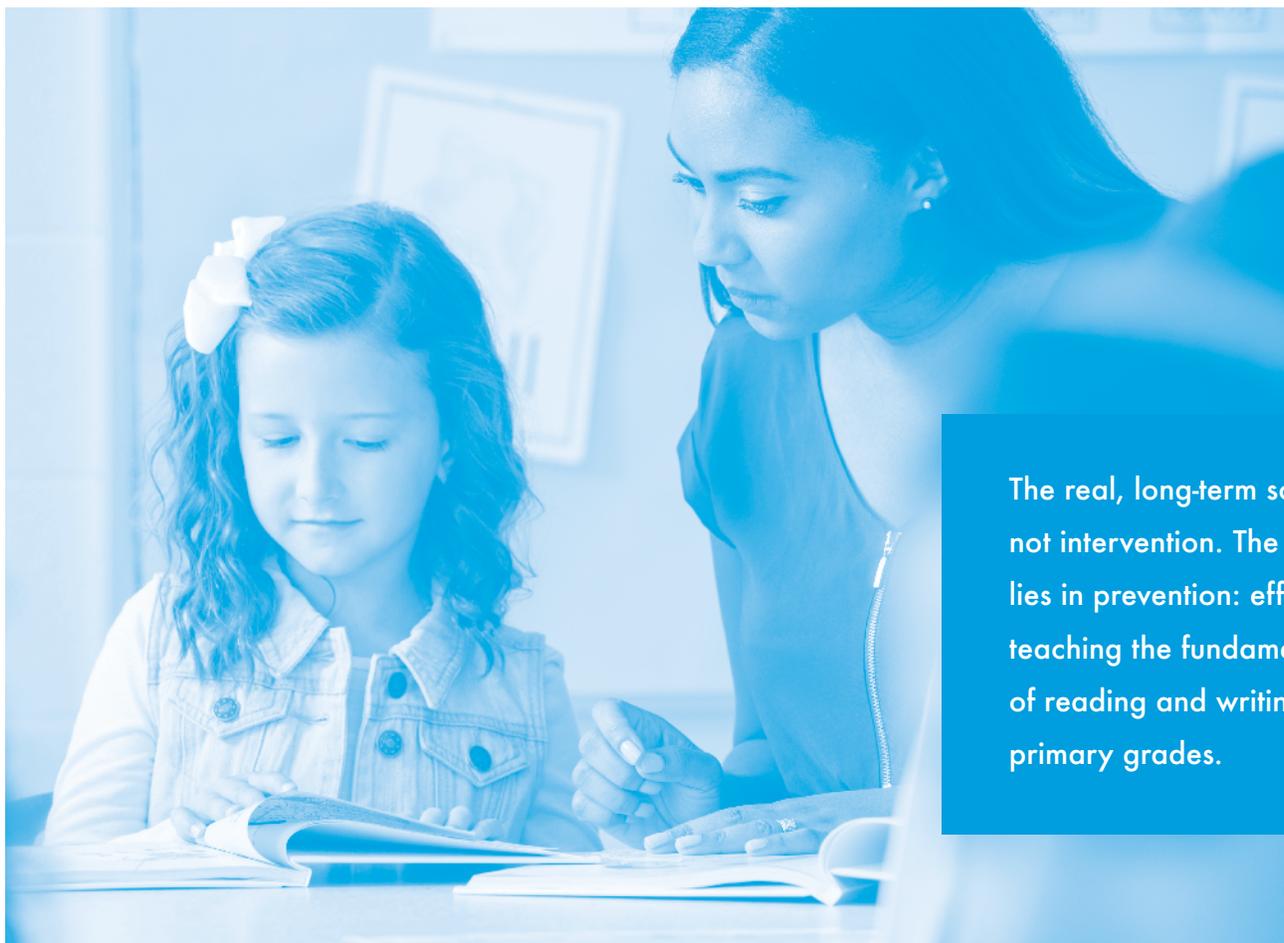
Is playing catch-up in third grade and beyond the answer? Is it even possible? A longitudinal study by McNamara and colleagues (2011) concluded, “As children progressed from kindergarten to Grade 3...at each progressing data collection point struggling readers fell further behind their grade-level reading peers” (p. 421). Each year, the variance between strong and struggling readers increased significantly. “Interventions for struggling readers after third grade are seldom as effective as those in the early years” (Hernandez, 2012, p. 6). According to an ACT report, only one in ten students scoring below the benchmark in reading who were “far off track” in reading in fourth grade were ever able to catch up (Doughtery & Fleming, 2012).

The real, long-term solution is not intervention. The answer lies in prevention: effectively teaching the fundamentals of reading and writing in the first three years of school. The evidence is clear that with research-based instruction, the percentage of first graders below the 30th percentile can be reduced to 4–6% (Mathes et al., 2005; Vellutino et al., 2007; Torgesen, 2002).

“ *The high percentage of students who are below college and career readiness achievement targets at all grade levels—and the difficulty of catching them up—should lead educators and policymakers to focus on the importance of an early start and an emphasis on prevention over remediation.* ”

—Doughtery & Fleming, 2012, p. 28

The impact initial reading instruction has on future reading achievement should not be underestimated. Putting scientific reading research evidence into practice—and doing so in K–2—is the key. A critical task of administrators is to ensure that teachers are knowledgeable and motivated to choose the best instructional materials and methods to *get it right the first time.*



The real, long-term solution is not intervention. The answer lies in prevention: effectively teaching the fundamentals of reading and writing in the primary grades.



WHAT IMMEDIATE ACTION STEPS CAN BE TAKEN?

To ensure that all of your students get the best possible first instruction:

- Know the research. Clear and compelling evidence shows what has to happen in the early years to prevent reading difficulties. As professionals, we need to ensure that evidence guides our instructional choices. Check out the sources in the references list at the end of this paper. Find fellow educators to form a professional learning community. Subscribe to peer-reviewed journals. Join listservs and follow blogs that deal with the science of reading. Share your questions and share your expertise.
- Find a solid core program with strong efficacy results. Teach it with fidelity. Devote 90–120 minutes daily to language arts instruction. Carve out at least 30 extra minutes a day for intensive instruction for those children below grade level who need acceleration.
- Use a reliable assessment to determine how students are progressing. Look at the data and make instructional decisions early on to help catch children before they fall behind.
- If you are a principal, make literacy for all the focal point of your school. Prioritize blocks of time for reading. Support implementation of a core program and ongoing professional development. Know what is happening in your classrooms and support change when necessary. Recognize the important role you play in student achievement.

WHERE DOES THE REAL PROBLEM LIE?

Like Marti H., many principals faced with similar drops in scores at the third- and fourth-grade levels look to the teachers and programs of those grades for answers. Much time and many valuable resources are devoted to solving a problem whose roots lie elsewhere.

Research has demonstrated the most effective components of early reading instruction. If these components were consistently employed in all classrooms, far fewer students would become reading casualties. Thousands of studies have been published in academic journals, and many large-scale reports have been compiled. The result? Similar findings across different educational settings and even countries yielding consensus about the essential components of reading instruction. And what are those components? What constitutes a highly effective reading program? Reflect on this statement from Dr. Sally Shaywitz, neuroscientist at Yale University and author of the best-selling text *Overcoming Dyslexia*.

“Highly effective prevention programs...are now a reality. Common threads run through each of these programs.... Systematic and direct instruction in phonemic awareness— noticing, identifying, and manipulating the sounds of spoken language; phonics—how letters and letter groups represent the sounds of spoken language, sounding out words (decoding), spelling, reading sight words, vocabulary and concepts, and reading comprehension strategies; practice in applying these skills in reading and in writing.... Powerful and proven reading programs incorporating these features are now bringing cutting-edge science directly into the classroom.... My recommendations are for total ‘off-the-shelf’ comprehensive programs rather than so-called eclectic ones that are stitched together by a child’s teachers.... I would not want to take such a risk with my child; rather, I would want to stay with a proven, cohesive program that leaves nothing to chance” (Shaywitz, 2003, p. 262–263).



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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Laura Stewart is the chief academic officer for professional development for the Highlights Education Group. Laura has been in education for more than 25 years, working as a classroom teacher, building and district administrator, adjunct professor, and director of numerous professional development initiatives. In addition to directing the professional development for Reading First in Wisconsin, Laura directed long-term projects in Los Angeles, New Orleans, Milwaukee, and El Paso on topics from PreK literacy to differentiated instruction. She presents throughout the United States and internationally and is the author of 12 children's books, numerous teacher's guides, journal articles, and dozens of training workshops. Laura is co-author of the book *The Everything Guide to Informational Literature, K–2: Best Texts, Best Practices* (Corwin Press, 2014).

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