

SPOTLIGHT



—Julie Bennett for Education Week

Kindergartners Jaylen Rivers, Jalisha Lee, and KenmaJ Shell, left to right, practice literacy skills with their teacher, Diane Daniel, at Southside Primary School in Selma, Ala. Educators credit teacher professional development for the state’s reading gains.

IMPROVING READING IN SCHOOLS

EDITOR’S NOTE

Schools are implementing various strategies to improve reading among struggling learners. In this Spotlight, learn how educators are intervening on behalf of dyslexic students in reading and math, when students with low proficiency should be retained, and how research can reshape instruction.

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Math, Reading Hurdles Drawing Joint Scrutiny

Conference builds researcher connections

By Christina A. Samuels

ARLINGTON, VA.

Are reading and math difficulties two sides of the same coin?

Researchers are finding that students with dyslexia—defined as difficulty in reading accurately and fluently—often also have trouble with math fluency. Reading and math struggles often manifest themselves in the same part of the brain, and interventions that help in one area, such as math fluency, may also boost a student's word skills.

A recent two-day National Science Foundation-sponsored conference here brought together experts in brain research, learning disabilities, and math and reading education to talk about the connections in their worlds.

Among the findings shared at the conference: an unpublished study of Finnish elementary students found that 40 percent of the group scoring below the 16th percentile on a reading achievement test also scored below the 16th percentile on a math test. That study also showed that it was particularly difficult for interventions to make a significant improvement in the group of students who showed struggles in both areas. A separate study of a group of American elementary students also showed that many students had overlapping reading and math difficulties.

Difficulties sometimes show up well before children start school. For example, research has shown that children who struggle with vocabulary as toddlers are at risk of developing math difficulties later.

But some interventions showed success in tackling both challenges at the same time. For example, a study of elementary students conducted by

researchers from Vanderbilt University showed that children who spent 30 minutes in a reading intervention and 15 minutes in a math intervention had better results in reading than children who got the 30-minute reading intervention alone.

Practical Challenges

The challenge is getting all these interventions to schools. Several presenters said that schools generally focus on reading interventions, and helping students who also struggle in math takes a back seat.

“When we say ‘learning disabilities,’ we are mostly talking about reading,” said Rose Vukovic, an associate professor of educational psychology at the University of Minnesota. Vukovic, who has done research on groups of elementary-age students with reading difficulties, showing that many of them had problems with math as well.

“We have to pay attention to other facets as well,” she said. “We can’t do reading to the exclusion of everything else.”

There also are challenges when it comes to translating research-based practices to schools, said Nicole Bucka, the response-to-intervention coordinator for the Cumberland district in Rhode Island.

For example, for middle schoolers, there was little time in the school day to receive both a math intervention and support on the other goals outlined in their individualized education programs, she said.

And, for older students, there was no way to ignore behavior as a component of the intervention, Bucka said. Older students have often had so much experience with failure that teachers had to be explicitly taught how to address math anxiety and learned helplessness. Positive self-talk had to be embedded in the interventions as well, Bucka found.

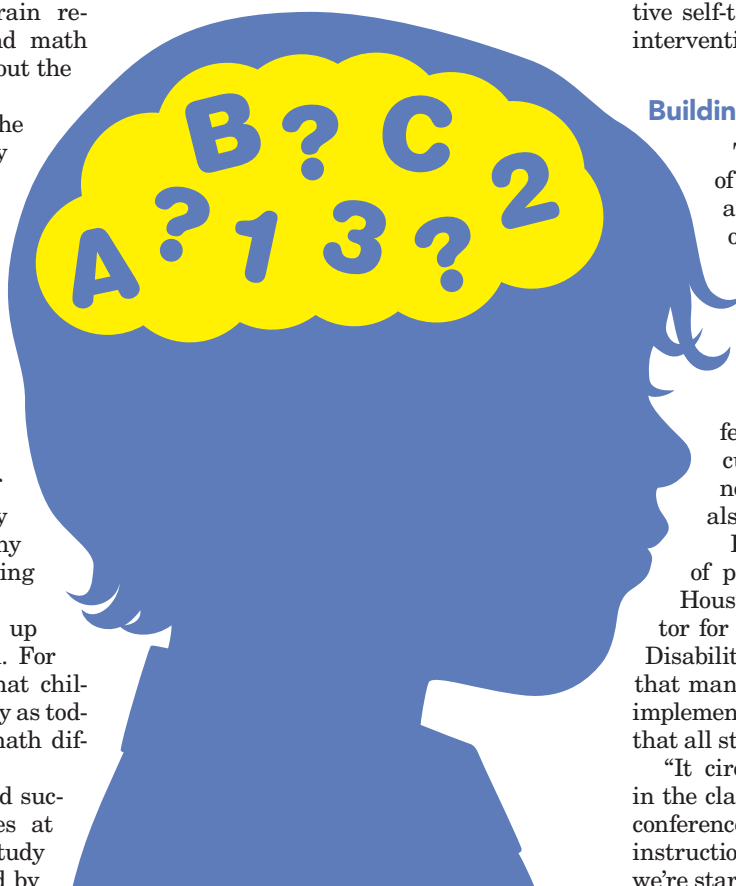
Building Collaboration

The two-day event was born out of the federal Research Excellence and Advancement for Dyslexia, or READ Act.

That act, passed in 2016, requires that National Science Foundation to make grants related to dyslexia research, specifically in the area of early identification, professional development, and curricula development. Science, technology, engineering and math is also a focus of the READ Act.

But Jack Fletcher, a professor of psychology at the University of Houston and the principal investigator for the Texas Center for Learning Disabilities, said during his presentation that many schools are still struggling to implement the strong reading instruction that all students need.

“It circles back to what’s happening in the classroom,” Fletcher said after the conference. “If we don’t have strong core instruction in reading, math, and writing, we’re starting at a deficit.” ■





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Alabama Reading Intervention Stands Test of Time

Multiyear professional-development effort is tied to reading gains

By Stephen Sawchuk

SELMA, ALA.

Diane Daniel's classroom here at Southside Primary School is a steady hum of productive activity.

Some of her kindergartners are playing word games on computers; others are chatting as they complete an exercise on the reading rug, and a handful are busily writing, some already using full sentences that incorporate words about trains—"engine," "passenger"—that Ms. Daniel has hung up on one of her corkboards.

The teacher herself is in a small group, reading a short book out loud with her pupils. As they take turns reading, she intervenes occasionally, helping them sound out a word here and there, at other points pushing her young charges to think beyond the page—to make inferences based on context and to reason out what might happen next in the story.

"I will take that little book and have a thousand questions for them before they finish," Ms. Daniel said.

Ms. Daniel's evident skill in reading instruction, which enables her to cater to pupils' varied learning needs, speaks directly to the central aim of the Alabama Reading Initiative. The program, launched 17 years ago in response to poor literacy scores, aspires to give all the state's students an equal opportunity to learn the fundamentals of reading and writing.

In particular, the ARI aims to help students of color from disadvantaged families, like most at this K-2 school in Dallas County. As if to remind visitors of the state's history of inequality, Southside Primary sits minutes from the Edmund Pettus Bridge, the site of a brutal 1965 attack on civil rights marchers.

Unlike many early-reading efforts, the ARI is not a prescribed curriculum package or pedagogical framework. At heart, it is a statewide professional-development initiative that uses specially selected and trained teachers, deemed building coaches, to imbue research-based reading instruction in classrooms across the state.

Alabama officials credit the initiative with dramatically boosting state scores in 4th grade reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, often called "the nation's report card." From 2002 to 2011, Alabama's 4th graders' scores went from well below par to statistically indistinguishable from the national

average on the NAEP reading scale, where they have stayed since. Racial achievement gaps in the scores have also narrowed.

"Alabama has made a huge commitment to literacy, and we feel that we've gotten a return on our investment," said Judy Stone, an Alabama education department official who serves as the state's ARI coordinator.

From a research perspective, it's difficult to link increases in NAEP scores to any one policy or instructional change. But anecdotally, the ARI's supporters say the initiative has systematically reshaped teacher practice in the early grades in a way that has had a clear impact on pupils' reading development.

Today, the ARI continues to offer lessons on literacy instruction, even as it faces its biggest challenges yet: heavier demands on the coaches, who are now also working in the upper grades, coupled with a period of financial belt-tightening.

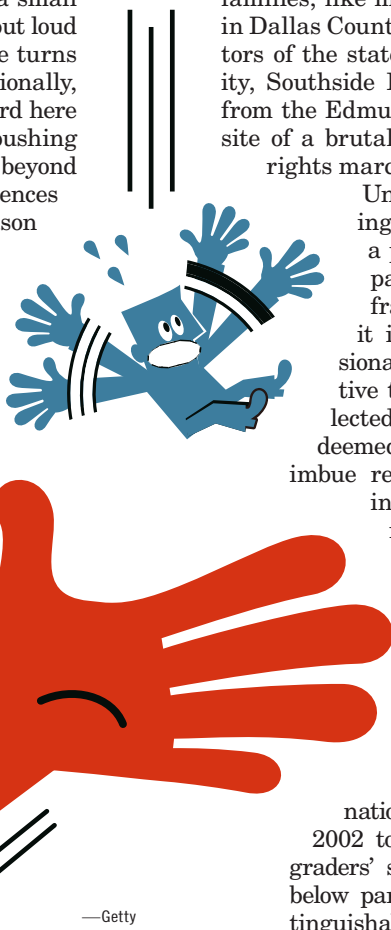
Coaching Teachers

Teachers are the engine of the Alabama Reading Initiative. More than 95 percent of the program's current \$48 million annual budget is spent to pay for some 750 coaches, all former classroom educators, who work in schools and have day-to-day contact with reading teachers. They're charged with observing teachers and modeling lessons, providing feedback, and devising plans to improve each teacher's instructional effectiveness.

In addition to the building-level coaches are the 68 regional coaches, who debrief the building coaches and craft larger-scale intervention plans as necessary.

On a day-to-day basis, the ARI is best described as a collaborative exercise in solving instructional problems in reading classrooms.

When they observe, the coaches aren't principally focused on how teachers deliver their content. Instead, they track how the students are faring, including by



—Getty

monitoring their levels of engagement in class activities, their verbal interactions with peers, and their work products.

One day after spring break last school year, for example, Southside's building coach, Christy Mathiews, determined after a morning's walk-through that she'd like to see better student engagement in the 1st grade classes.

In a debriefing session, the regional coach for the district, Allison Kelley, gave her some advice on addressing the problem. "Pick a small number of classes to visit the rest of the week and collect data about how many are in whole group versus small group," Ms. Kelley said. Small groups are an important part of early literacy in Alabama, since they help facilitate techniques such as conversations, "turn and talk," and paired reading, all ways of ensuring all students remain engaged with language and on task.

Ms. Kelley then shared her own observation. Perusing pupils' notebooks in one 1st grade classroom, she saw evidence of student writing, but not a lot of feedback on that writing from the teacher.

"I think you may want to have that conversation with all of [the teachers]," she told Ms. Mathiews.

Ms. Mathiews will use the evidence they've discussed when meeting with each teacher—a technique that makes what can be delicate conversations about instruction more objective and, therefore, supportive rather than punitive.

As the coaches visit classrooms, they will sometimes briefly step in alongside the classroom teacher to provide a pedagogical refresher. During a separate walk-through at Reeltown High School, a K-12 school in rural Tallapoosa County, Vickie Chappelle, one of 11 ARI regional directors, watched as one 1st grade teacher conducted a read-aloud with the children in her small group.

A page or two in, Ms. Chappelle asked the pupils: "Can you change your voices a little more when you read?" She demonstrated, the timbre of her voice rising at the end of an interrogative sentence. Soon, five little voices eagerly chirped along with her. (Reading with expression, experts say, is an important aspect of fluency instruction that builds children's awareness of syntax.)

Even small issues warrant coaches' attention. During its walk-through, the ARI team visiting Reeltown noted that several teachers reviewing initial sound-letter correspondence inserted an "uh" sound known as a "schwa" in sounding out words

beginning with a hard consonant—an artifact of the Southern drawl. It's a seemingly nitpicky detail, but for a struggling reader, that extra sound can get in the way of later language development, causing him or her to spell "cat" as "cu-at," for instance.

The ARI team conferred briefly, and ultimately, decided that it's a topic for the school's building coach, Regina Porter, to address at the school's next grade-level meeting.

Borrowing From Football

The ARI started in 1998 partly out of the sheer force of will of Katherine Mitchell, a former Alabama education department official who is still spoken of in glowing terms by ARI staff.

With state officials from the governor on down desperate to improve the state's reading scores, Ms. Mitchell cobbled together \$1.5 million in initial support for a new instructional initiative from both conservative philanthropies and the Alabama Education Association, among others—enough to finance implementation in 16 initial schools.

Possessed with a politician's knack for generating appeal, Ms. Mitchell carefully avoided the term "literacy" in favor of the more approachable "reading" in naming the program. And to describe the role of the teacher trainers, she selected a term dear to Alabamans' hearts—one that has since become nearly ubiquitous in K-12 education.

"Frankly, I chose 'coach' because Alabama is a football state," said Ms. Mitchell, now retired, from her Atlanta home. "I think it is the key. These teachers have got an advocate for them in the building."

Lawmakers from both political parties threw their support behind the program, and for the 1999-2000 school year, the legislature set aside funds to begin expanding it statewide.

The ARI predates the influential 2000 National Reading Panel report, but its foundational elements are similar. They include systematic and explicit instruction in phonics and phonemic awareness, alongside vocabulary and comprehension.

The early days of the ARI were rocky, Ms. Mitchell acknowledged. With schools still reeling from the "reading wars" over the appropriate balance of instruction in word-level alphabets with less systematic, so-called whole-language approaches, she found just one professor among the state's teacher colleges who had a background in phonics. And because of varia-

Alabama's Reading Gains

On the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP, Alabama's 4th grade students' reading performance rose from well below average to statistically indistinguishable from the national average by 2011 and it has stayed there since. That means its students have outperformed those in other states with similarly high rates of child poverty, including California, Arizona, Louisiana, Mississippi, and New Mexico.

Alabama's black and Hispanic 4th graders have caught up with their national counterparts as well.

State test-score data from Dallas County, where Southside Primary School is located, showed strong gains as well, particularly among black students.

tions in curricular quality—Alabama permits districts to choose their textbooks—reading coaches dragged suitcases of their own materials to their schools.

Teachers were initially resistant, demanding to know why they were being observed. "I can't tell you how many days I came home crying," said Ms. Kelley, the Dallas County regional coach.

Today, coaching still isn't uniformly embraced, but it has gained currency with the state's teaching force, partly because all the building coaches have teaching experience, usually many years of it.

Southside's Ms. Daniel said the program has been invaluable to her. When she entered teaching, kindergarten literacy rarely went further than ensuring pupils could recognize all 26 letters of the

alphabet by the end of the year.

Nearly every technique she uses now to teach more advanced reading and writing skills was honed through the ARI's coaching system.

"I get to look at the children's strengths and weaknesses, and I'm driven by that," Ms. Daniel said.

If the ARI remains obscure outside the state, that may be partly because its features have been extensively copied elsewhere.

After Alabama began using reading coaches, many other states followed suit, with varying degrees of success, under the \$1 billion-a-year federal Reading First program. Alabama was also among the first states to use a 90-minute reading block in K-3 schools and to require use of a tool to gauge growth in students' decoding skills and oral fluency.

Evolving Focus

Even today, the program's structure remains influential. An early evaluator of the ARI for the state education department, Ed Moscovitch, now runs the Bay State Reading Institute, a nonprofit that uses a similar teacher-coaching model to improve reading in 44 schools in Massachusetts. When holding meetings to discuss student data, for instance, principals and coaches both celebrate the gains of students who have improved and strategize to help those who are still struggling.

"The approach we take to the meetings comes right out of their script," Mr. Moscovitch said of the ARI. "You can't be successful changing adult behavior if you're looking down on teachers. You have to get them to trust you, to like you, and to have confidence in you."

Alabama's consistency of approach seems to be one factor in the ARI's success, even as attention to reading in other states has varied or waned. The ARI's staff has maintained the program's core features, while working to keep its curriculum current and responsive to lessons learned.

There's a general consensus, for example, that external pressure initially caused some schools to focus too heavily on discrete skills such as oral fluency. Local newspapers had a habit of printing schools' performance on the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills, or DIBELS, the progress-monitoring tool that until recently all schools in the state were required to use.

"We focused a lot on the system of print," said Timothy Cobb, a regional

coach in Tallapoosa County. "But we didn't spend as much time on the system of language and the system of meaning."

Nowadays, DIBELS—which had come under criticism for its focus on such skills as nonsense-word fluency—is no longer mandated, and some schools have adopted monitoring tools with more-sophisticated comprehension measures. Program materials are incorporating insights from literacy scholars like E.D. Hirsch that emphasize the importance of content-rich reading materials to build students' background knowledge and comprehension.

Take vocabulary instruction, which at one point was taught largely in isolation.



We focused a lot on the system of print. But we didn't spend as much time on the system of language and the system of meaning."

TIMOTHY COBB

REGIONAL COACH, TALLAPOOSA COUNTY, ALA.

"We used to throw words on the board, and kids would study them," said Daphne McClendon, a coach in the 11,000-student Elmore district. "But the vocabulary needs to be relevant to what they're talking about, so it's not a random list of words they need to know for a test."

The ARI has also become the state's front-line approach to providing professional development on the Alabama College & Career-Ready Standards for English/language arts, its version of the Common Core State Standards. In recent months, the ARI coaches have worked with teachers on key elements of the standards, including text complexity, evidence-based writing, and focusing on greater content rigor.

Meeting New Standards

"Teachers in the lower grades tend to simplify, so that students can understand the concept," said Ms. Stone of the state education department, "but that doesn't

pay off for us if they don't acquire the language to talk about those concepts."

As the ARI begins to approach its 20th year, its supporters are doing some soul-searching about where the initiative needs to go next.

Partially in response to the demand of the new academic standards, the state education department, in 2012-13, expanded the reading coaches' work to include secondary grades as well. There are some benefits to the new arrangement, Alabama officials say. Since the coaches are working across subject areas in secondary schools, it gives currency to the idea enshrined in the new academic standards that literacy development at the secondary level is the responsibility of all teachers, not just those teaching English/language arts.

But there are legitimate worries, too, about whether expanding the initiative's scope risks overtaxing the instructional coaches.

"I'll be honest with you: It can be overwhelming. When I was in K-3, I could get in there, and I knew my babies," said Ms. Porter, the building coach at Reeltown. Coaching secondary-level teachers requires a different approach, she said: "I don't go in and pretend in any way to be an expert in their content, but I do work on how to incorporate small groups and boost student engagement."

The demand on the coaches is increasing even as resources are scarcer. Funded at a height of \$64 million in fiscal 2008, the program was scaled back after the state was badly hit in the Great Recession. Each building once had its own reading coach; most now are split among schools.

State officials underscore that they are grateful to the state legislature for a continued appropriation for the ARI, but acknowledge that a fresh infusion could help balance the weight of all the new responsibilities. And they're on tenterhooks waiting for the results of the most recent administration of the reading NAEP to appear this fall. In the 2013 administration, Alabama's 4th grade scores dropped slightly—not enough to be statistically significant, but enough to be concerning. This fall's results will be closely watched.

As Ms. Mitchell notes, literacy is a moving target: There will always be next year's entering class, many of whom will need sustained support.

"We are not at the national average with wealth in our state, or with students' experiences, or with exposure to language," Ms. Mitchell noted. "It is very hard work." ■



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Should 3rd Grade Be the Pivot Point for Early Reading?

Research questions the wisdom of retaining students who struggle to read

By Sarah D. Sparks

It's become a truism in education policy that reading is the gatekeeper to later academic success. In hopes of ensuring that success, a rising number of states bar promotion for students who do not read proficiently by 3rd grade.

In 2004, only Florida and Ohio used 3rd grade reading as a gatekeeper to promotion. Today, 16 states and the District of Columbia require—and three others allow—schools to retain 3rd graders based on reading performance.

Yet even as retention gains traction among state policymakers, new research questions both the effectiveness of holding back students and the timing of reading development itself.

“Not being able to decode is different from phonological fluency, which is different from not understanding what words mean,” said Shane R. Jimerson, the chairman of counseling, clinical, and school psychology at the University of California, Santa Barbara. “Just repeating a grade is not going to magically solve all those problems, and it adds the consequences psychologically of being left behind.”

'Reading to Learn'

The theorized cognitive shift from “learning to read” in 3rd grade to “reading to learn” in 4th grade may not be as clear-cut as traditionally thought, some experts say.

“I think that a lot of the basal-reading programs grabbed onto that and structured their curricula so there was a clear shift in 4th grade, to move on from word work,” said Donna J. Coch, the principal investigator for Dartmouth University's Reading Brains Lab. “It became a self-fulfilling prophesy.”

In a 2014 study in *Developmental Science*, Ms. Coch and her colleagues tracked the brain activity of students in grades 3-5, as well as college students, as they saw a mix of actual words like “bed,” pseu-

dowords like “bem,” and strings of random letters or symbols.

In one test, they circled the real words on a written test, to measure how well they consciously understood the words, while in another test, they saw one letter at a time, which allowed researchers to measure how quickly they processed real words and meaningless series of letters or symbols.

At a conscious level, the 4th and 5th graders were as accurate as adults at identifying what was a word and what was not a word, but in brain scans, they continued to process pseudowords like real words through 5th grade. While on a paper test, they looked like adult readers, the scans showed they processed words differently from adults well past 4th grade.

While 4th and 5th grade teachers often move to higher reading and content skills,

“our study shows the lower-level skills are still developing [in students] through elementary school,” Ms. Coch said.

The concept of children's continuously developing reading brains also plays out in the Common Core State Standards, which call for students to begin “reading to learn”—that is, drawing information from text—as early as kindergarten. There is no clear break between learning to read and reading to learn.

“There isn't this magic age that, if you don't catch a kid by that age, you lose them forever,” said Timothy Shanahan, a distinguished professor emeritus specializing in literacy research at the University of Illinois at Chicago and a lead writer of the common-core language arts standards. “It's harder if a kid is six years behind to catch him up than if he's two years behind, but it's not because he's stupider or loses the capacity to learn; it's just a greater distance.”

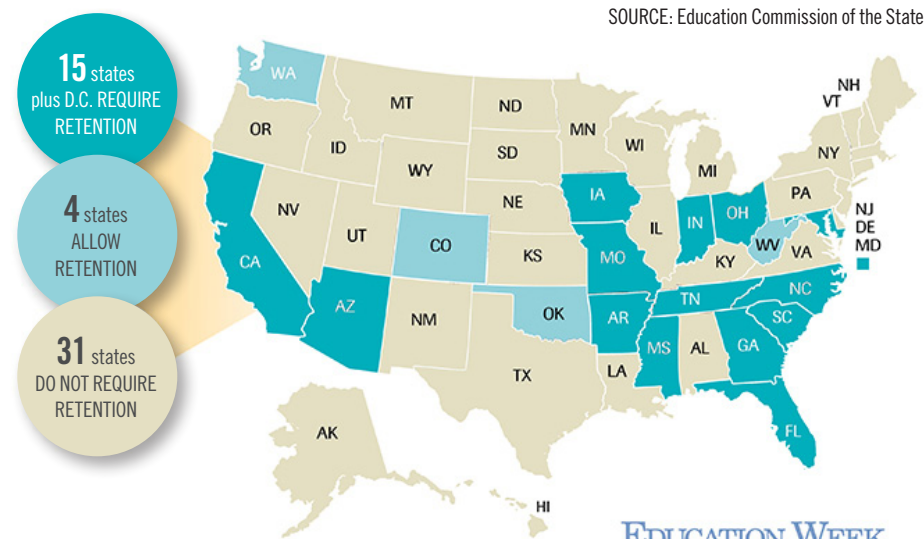
And the opposite also holds true: “Just because you catch a 7-year-old up and get him to his class average, that's terrific, but that doesn't guarantee his future, either,” Mr. Shanahan said. “What you tend to see is [retained students] fall back over time.”

Catching Up or Falling Behind?

Until the mid-2000s, not much evidence has supported holding students back because of low reading skills.

STATES' 3RD GRADE READING RETENTION POLICIES

Schools in 19 states and the District of Columbia can bar promotions for 3rd graders who are poor readers.



Multiple studies and meta-analyses have found that students held back in a grade show academic and social problems later on, including being at higher risk for ultimately dropping out of school.

“And, the single most negative effect of retention is in what area? Reading,” said Mr. Jimerson of UC-Santa Barbara. “If it’s not contra-indicated for any other reason, it is for that. There are a lot of empirically supported strategies. Retention is not one of them.”

Those who support asking students to repeat a grade say an extra year gives the children more time to mature, both cognitively and socially, and provides them more time to practice and master critical skills.

Just Read, Florida!, one of the nation’s highest-profile retention programs, requires any 3rd grader who fails the reading portion of Florida’s state test to attend summer school and then repeat the grade under a high-quality teacher.

In multiyear evaluations of the initiative, researchers Marcus A. Winters of the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs and Jay P. Greene of the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville found struggling readers who repeated 3rd grade significantly outpaced low-performing-but-promoted peers in reading, mathematics, and science through 7th grade.

Similarly in 2009, the RAND Corp. evaluated New York City’s reading-related retention initiative, which required students in grades 3, and later in grades 5 and 7 also, to pass a reading test in order to be promoted, but provided supplemental reading help for students who were retained.

The evaluation found students showed academic gains and no social-emotional problems after being held back.

Pinning Down Cause

Yet critics and the authors themselves noted there is no way to separate the value of retaining students from the value of other supports given in Florida and New York City.

“When I look at those studies, there’s no question that kids who are being retained are making gains, but you are stuck saying, ‘Yeah, but isn’t it what you did with that extra time?’” Mr. Shanahan said. “[The researchers] don’t have any data from a group that just got retained; they all got retained within that system.”

Separately, RAND researchers found in a research analysis that all the retention initiatives that improved student

achievement included early assessments and significant, intensive interventions for the students who were retained.

“I’m a big fan of increasing the amount of instruction, but it’s not really an [intervention], it’s the measure of the amount” of the intervention, Mr. Shanahan said.

Even among states that require struggling readers to repeat 3rd grade, there’s no consensus on what happens to them on their second try.



When I look at those studies, there’s no question that kids who are being retained are making gains, but you are stuck saying, ‘Yeah, but isn’t it what you did with that extra time?’ [The researchers] don’t have any data from a group that just got retained; they all got retained within that system.”

TIMOTHY SHANAHAN

PROFESSOR EMERITUS, THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT CHICAGO

A majority of states requiring retention allow students to be promoted if they participate in summer school, the Education Commission of the States found in a 2014 study, but district and state budget cuts have changed programs or limited access to some programs since 2008.

Seven states require students who are repeating 3rd grade to be assigned to a different teacher from the one they had their first time through. A majority of states also call for retained students to

receive supplemental instruction in or after school, but those programs can differ significantly from one district to another.

Aligning Interventions

Linda M. Sullivan-Dudzic, the director of elementary and special programs for the 5,000-student Bremerton district in Washington, recalled following one retained 3rd grader for a day to get a sense of his interventions.

“That little guy went to seven different people doing seven different things. All of them were well intentioned, but seven different things in one day—that’s where you have to watch out,” she said. “Your interventions have to be aligned with what you are teaching, or you are just confusing students who are already struggling.”

Third grade reading policies notwithstanding, the number of K-12 students being retained may have peaked. A 2014 analysis in *Educational Researcher* found that the retention rate across all 50 states fell from 2.9 percent in the 2004-05 school year to 1.5 percent in the 2009-10 school year, with declines across the board.

However, these numbers do not include more recent retentions following the tougher common-core reading tests that were rolled out since 2010.

One possible reason for the discrepancy between states’ stepped-up actions and actual retention rates: Educators may be working hard to help students avoid retention. For example, in Washington, which until this spring required schools to retain most 3rd graders who fail a state-wide reading exam, Ms. Sullivan-Dudzic said she works to help parents understand their children’s reading difficulties and support them before retentions happen.

Bremerton, on Puget Sound, has six high-poverty elementary schools—with 57 percent to 83 percent of students receiving free or reduced-price meals—and in 2001, the state reported that only 4 percent of district kindergartners entered knowing the alphabet.

Bremerton Program

To avoid leaving at-risk readers with a “potpourri of things to plug holes” in reading skills, Ms. Sullivan-Dudzic said the district streamlined its reading interventions this year.

Every 3rd grader who scores “below basic” in reading a month after school starts gets an additional reading session each day with a reading specialist targeted to a weak area, such as phonics or fluency. In



Strengthening Reading Instruction with Data

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"Data-driven instruction is where we need to be," said Stephanie Brownfield, Principal of Truth or Consequences Elementary School (TCES). "This helps us focus in on what each child needs."

For TCES in New Mexico, taking this approach to data-informed instruction greatly improved the school's end-of-year test results.

Before beginning with Istation, 3rd graders at TCES had a proficiency score of 14.8% in English Language Arts (ELA) on the PARCC — the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers. After one year with Istation, ELA proficiency scores nearly doubled to 28.4%!

Brownfield was astonished at the students' growth and believes that

Istation is what made it happen. "The only difference from one year to the next was Istation," Brownfield said. "We kept the same curriculum and had the same teachers."

Getting Teachers' Approval

Teachers at TCES were at first reluctant to try something new, but they quickly accepted Istation after seeing how much students liked the program. Istation helped alleviate the testing anxiety some students felt. The online games captivated students' attention, and the characters brought learning to life in fun, new ways.

The Importance of Progress Monitoring

Waiting until December to identify what students were struggling with often left too little time before year-end testing for intervention that could have made an impact on student performance. Having Istation's monthly, real-time, personalized data helped teachers substantially impact student growth when they used the data to lead small groups and provide intervention throughout the month to students in need.

Easy-to-Use Data

Teachers loved Istation's user-friendly online portal. "If teachers need to find activities or lessons on short vowel sounds, all they do is log in, search 'short vowel sounds,' and instantly they will have access to a variety of valuable supplemental materials," Brownfield said.

Istation's On Demand Assessment feature helps teachers reassess particular students if they feel that something prevented a student from performing their best on assessment day.

At TCES, if a student remains in Tier 3 for several months in a row, parents or guardians are notified and start to meet with their child's teacher to discuss challenges and opportunities for improvement.

Educators in the district are excited to expand Istation's reading assessment and instruction to more grade levels.

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January, teachers meet with the parents of students who are still struggling to plan activities and supports at home and in school.

A morning tutorial, in which students get an additional 45-minute session four to five days a week, has proved particularly popular with the district's rising homeless-student population.

"That's been a really nice intervention for our students in crisis," Ms. Sullivan-Dudzic said. "They get to come early and get breakfast and a little additional practice with a certified reading teacher."

Even those who fail the final reading test later in the spring can be promoted if they participate in an intensive summer school program.

"We don't just want to do this because it's the law; we want to help all our kids who are struggling," she said.

In the end, politics may play as big a role as pedagogy in the continued use of retention as a reading intervention.

Florida was one of the earliest states to adopt 3rd grade reading as a gatekeeper, as part of then-governor and Republican presidential hopeful Jeb Bush's statewide reading initiative. Mr. Bush and the Foundation for Excellence in Education, the nonprofit group he launched, were active in promoting retention laws in other states, and reading remains part of his platform as he seeks his party's presidential nomination.

The pressure for students to master literacy in the early grades is likely to increase as common standards increase the rigor of early grades, said Barbara T. Bowman, a child-development professor and a co-founder of the Erikson Institute, a Chicago-based education research center.

That may reduce the impetus to retain struggling readers, if significantly more students failed the more-challenging 3rd grade English/language arts tests.

A separate analysis by the Education Commission of the States calculated that nationally, it costs an average of more than \$10,000 to retain one student. If, for example, districts held back all the roughly 10,000 3rd graders who failed the reading portion of the Florida state tests in 2014, taxpayers would be on the hook for another \$100 million. ■

COMMENTARY

Published May 2, 2018 in Education Week Teacher's Teacher in a Strange Land Blog

Are the Reading Wars 'Settled Science'?

By Nancy Flanagan

It was on 'Morning Edition,' a few weeks ago—a cheery little piece on how we now know just how to teach students with dyslexia how to read. Interesting, I thought, expecting to hear about some new breakthrough technique in reading pedagogy. Instead, what I heard was this:

Dyslexia is the most common learning disability, affecting tens of millions of people in the United States. But getting help for children who have it in public school can be a nightmare. "They wouldn't acknowledge that he had a problem," says Christine Beattie about her son Neil. "They wouldn't say the word 'dyslexia.'"

Wow. Not true in my school. We talked about dyslexia and reading instruction endlessly. I found it hard to believe that parents who sought help for a genuinely dyslexic child would find the process 'nightmarish.' I spent most of my career in one school district, but teachers there expended a great deal of effort and analysis in teaching kids to read, and reinforcing 'reading across the curriculum' in upper grades.

Because I taught in the same district over four decades, I experienced several revisions to reading programs, and countless teacher conversations about how to incorporate new pedagogical thinking into their own practice. But teachers refusing to identify the issues with a student who struggled to read? Never.

Turns out, the Morning Edition piece wasn't really about a new, proven strategy for helping kids with reading disabilities. It was about a decades-old series of lawsuits against a school district in Ohio, wherein parents weren't really targeting help for their dyslexic kids, but forcing the district to change their reading program. The program was fanning the flames of the always-politicized Reading Wars:

Research shows that they learn to read better when they are explicitly taught the ways that sounds and letters correspond. And research shows that even students without dyslexia learn better this way. Upper Arlington had to retrain its teachers, who had, for the most part, learned whole language-based methods in their teacher-preparation programs. "I have started to call it not dyslexia but 'dysteachia,'" Tingley says. "It's the teachers who are not giving the right kind of instruction."

The last, collective lawsuit around reading instruction in this Ohio district was settled in 2011. So this was a victory lap, a chance to poke at public education, teacher training and teachers themselves. Again.

I studied the so-called Reading Wars (which have been going on for over 100 years) in graduate school, largely because I had witnessed local school boards tearing themselves apart in the 1990s, in an effort to determine which reading program was 'the best.' Many of these bitter arguments were framed



as “Phonics” vs. “Whole Language,” but anyone who’s studied the acquisition of literacy knows that’s a simplification so gross as to be useless.

Was it studying engaging texts, like Harry Potter books? Is it about making meaning, rather than decoding text? Was it about using as many available methods as necessary—either a ‘balanced’ approach for all children, or relying on teacher judgment to discern which combination works best for her particular students?

A national panel, convened by a government department with an agenda, put forth a major report, designed to settle the question, once and for all—but the lone practitioner on the panel strongly disagreed with the methodology and policy implications that rolled out, post-report—if not with the actual findings. So, hardly a consensus among teachers.

Then the heavy hand of accountability pushed the discussion—the professional work of reading teachers—out of the classroom, and into whatever place it is

that reading programs are measured by their efficacy in raising test scores. And possibly forcing children to repeat the third grade.

I am sincerely happy to know that students identified with dyslexia, which is a very complex and multi-layered diagnosis, seem to be successful in learning to read, using a phonemic awareness/phonics-intensive program. Still, I am putting my faith, as always, in the discernment of the teacher.

As yet, there is no certifiably best method for teaching children who experience reading difficulty. Reviews of research focusing solely on decoding interventions have shown either small to moderate or variable effects that rarely persist over time, and little to no effects on more global reading skills. Rather, students classified as dyslexic have varying strengths and challenges, and teaching them is too complex a task for a scripted, one-size-fits-all program. Optimal instruction calls for teachers’ profes-

sional expertise and responsiveness, and for the freedom to act on the basis of that professionalism.

It’s worth mentioning—again—that formal reading instruction in Finland does not begin until students are seven years of age, long after some children in the United States have been identified as dyslexic or learning disabled, because they’re unable to decode at age 6.

In a back-and-forth on Twitter, the author of the Morning Edition piece, Emily Hanford, claimed that the superiority of phonics/phonemic awareness instruction for all children—and the failure of whole language programs—was settled science, ‘like climate change.’

I certainly hope there’s never a rigid, unchanging agreement on the One Best Way to teach people of any age to read. All scholarly disciplines should undergo regular re-assessment, as research reshapes knowledge. There are still classrooms in the United States, after all, where evolution is not settled science. ■

COMMENTARY

Published February 14, 2018 in *Education Week’s Education Futures: Emerging Trends in K-12 Blog*

Reading With Your Ears, Writing With Your Voice

By Eric Price

In a world where so much communication is done through writing, literacy has long been considered an essential skill for success in life. However, one in five students is affected by dyslexia or another language-based learning disability, which makes it much harder for students to acquire this skill. Struggling to read hurts students’ self-confidence, and makes it difficult to enjoy school—or any type of learning, for that matter. That being said, as educators, we need to ask ourselves: should our focus be teaching these students how to read or teaching them how to learn? I think the key is teaching them how to learn.

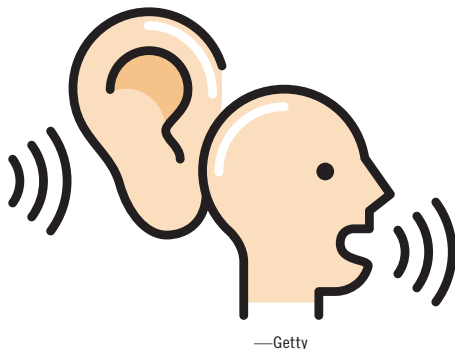
Many successful people have been dyslexic, from Albert Einstein to Steve Jobs, and they came up with their own coping

mechanisms to help them through it. I don’t think dyslexic kids necessarily have a disability, they just have a different learning style, and we need to find ways to work with them. Luckily, we couldn’t live in a better time for kids who struggle with reading. There are so many tools out there that can enable these kids to still learn at high levels, even if they are poor eye readers.

A Personal Connection

I grew up as a struggling reader. I didn’t realize what was going on at the time. In the 90s, dyslexia wasn’t talked about the way it is now, if at all. My parents and teachers told me I didn’t have a good attention span, and that I just needed to focus more and I’d do better. Well, I worked really hard in school. I struggled because I didn’t understand why I wasn’t like everyone else, and it affected my self-esteem. Eventually I found I had different strengths. I read out loud to myself and I could listen to things really fast, so I figured why spend time struggling through a book when I can get the info audibly?

Three of my four kids have been diagnosed with dyslexia, and are currently on IEPs. One of my daughters is more severely dyslexic. Third grade was when it got particularly rough. She faked being sick to skip school because she was having so



—Getty



Empowering Students Through Literacy

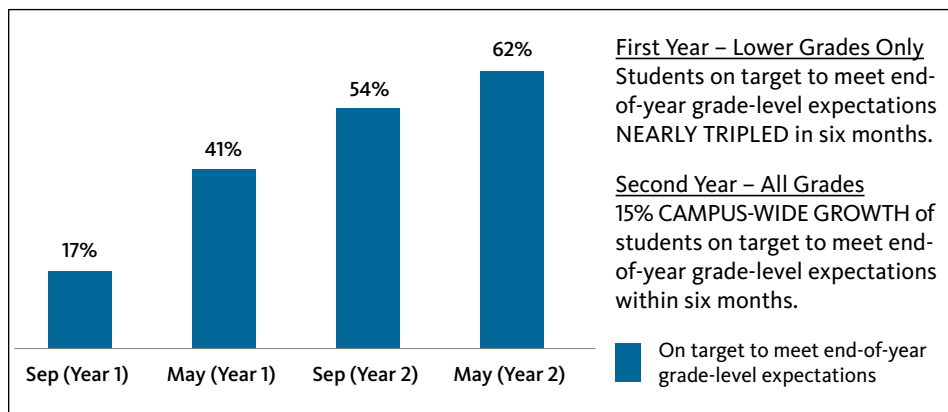
Campus Initiative Helps Students Believe in Themselves at School and at Home

Thanks to an innovative campus-wide focus on early reading, students at a low-income school were motivated to take charge of their learning and logged more than one million minutes on the Istation program in just one school year.

By extending literacy learning from school to home, Oak Grove Elementary School in Florida nearly tripled the number of students on target to meet end-of-year grade-level expectations in just six months. School leaders emphasized a growth mindset and adopted motivational intervention and engaging instruction with Istation Reading.

With over 90 percent of Oak Grove students living in poverty and more than half of their families not speaking English, neither the school nor its students' parents could easily support reading at home. Administrators made it their mission to get parents interested in using Istation's computer-adaptive instruction at home. So they set out to see how many families would commit.

In the first year, about 30 percent of Oak Grove's families used Istation at home. The following year, the school



expanded the program and saw more than 665 students log in to Istation off campus, accumulating more than one million minutes of adaptive, interactive instruction. The number of students on target to meet end-of-year grade-level expectations in reading grew 15 percent in just six months.

For families without a computer or internet at home, Oak Grove worked with local Boys and Girls Clubs, daycare centers, libraries, and after-school programs to provide access to Istation off campus. Additionally, the school began opening its own computer labs at 7 a.m. for families to come in early and use Istation. Campus leadership noticed that students were starting out a

little higher every year and then climbing higher still.

Oak Grove implemented Istation's intervention and instruction with initiatives and incentives designed to drive fidelity.

From goal setting and progress monitoring to data-driven conferences with parents using Istation's personalized data profiles, school leaders saw 100 percent buy-in from the staff. They also saw a noticeable increase in enthusiasm from struggling readers. Even parents were more engaged in what their kids were doing and learning and were interested in learning more about what to expect as their children learned to read.

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much trouble reading. I began to look into tools to help her and my other children keep up with their peers. My wife, who is also dyslexic, was involved with Decoding Dyslexia in Utah. She invited me to speak at the Wasatch Reading Summit. Preparing for that presentation helped me reflect on my kids' struggles and my own struggles in school, and inspired me to look at new ways to help kids with dyslexia.

Tools for Struggling Readers and Writers

As an adult, I've become a big fan of audiobooks. At one point, I realized I was sometimes listening to three books a week. I'd never done that before, but had always wanted to. Audiobooks are great because students don't have to worry about returning them. Overdrive offers free audiobooks through libraries, and of course there's always programs like Audible, Learning Ally, and Bookshare. Kids don't have to read the book with their eyes to understand plot, setting, or theme. One of my daughters has "ear-read" more than 148 books this school year.

Dyslexia affects not only reading skills, but also writing. At my school, we also have kids who are struggling writers, who struggle to spell. We teach them how to use voice-to-text so they don't spend hours trying to figure out one word, which holds up their learning process. Assistive technology isn't limited to people with learning disabilities, though. It can help everyone. Some people are verbal processors, so it's just easier for them to say something out loud than to type it all out. I once knew an English teacher--the best writer I know--who used the voice-to-text feature just because that's how he preferred to work. At our school we also had a kid with a broken arm, so he used voice-to-text to write while he healed. No matter your ability level, if these tools get you to where you need to go faster and more efficiently, why not use them?

A Shift in Perspective

It's a mental shift, trying to get teachers to see alternative ways to help kids be successful.

I have regular conversations with the Special Education department at my school, identifying students who need interventions and tools, and working together to get them access. This way of thinking isn't schoolwide, but the more we get kids using these tools, the more teachers buy into it. My daughter has been a great ex-



ample for teachers. She can listen to books at a very fast pace. She ear-read more than 10 books over winter break.

This being said, the struggle is not always teacher buy-in, but parent buy-in. Sometimes it's tough for parents to understand--it was tough for me for a while too--given that there's so much emphasis on reading in education these days. Of course we still need to teach reading, but if the focus on eye reading is hindering students' ability to keep up with the learning of their peers, we need to ensure that we are providing adequate assistance for these students in the meantime. After all, there are very few things these days that have to be read, considering how many tools are out there that will read things to you, such as Claro ScanPen Reader, Prizmo Go, and Google Read and Write, along with many others that come standard on most devices.

You never see a parent who doesn't want their kid to read, and to read at a high level. Parents are often stuck in the mindset that if their child can't read well, they won't be successful, which is untrue. Even if kids struggle to read, that doesn't mean they can't learn. There are numerous tools that can be of crucial assistance in keeping struggling readers learning at the same level as their peers.

Assistive technology isn't cheating when it comes to teaching dyslexic students to read; it's a completely necessary tool. You wouldn't tell a kid that they couldn't read just because they need glasses, would you? If it's a tool they need, why tell them they can't have it? We should absolutely be teaching kids to read and write, but just because they struggle in these areas doesn't mean their learning should come to a halt while they improve these skills. Assistive technologies open doors for struggling students and help them to keep up with their peers while they build on their own unique strengths. The key is to get kids to understand that they're not dumb, they just struggle with something, and they can overcome that struggle with hard work and the right tools. ■

Eric Price, M.Ed., spent several years as a teacher and administrator in Title 1 schools in the Houston, Texas, area prior to taking his current position as a middle school assistant principal in Utah. Price has an M.Ed from Lamar University in educational administration and a bachelor's degree from Brigham Young University in history education. He shared more of his insights in the webcast "Don't Stop the Learning: Assistive Technology in the Classroom," which was part of last year's Reading Horizons Online Dyslexia Summit.

COMMENTARY

Published January 17, 2017 in Education Week's Teacher's Teaching for the Whole Story Blog

Understanding Students With Broken Relationships to Reading

By Ariel Sacks

One factor in our students' reading abilities that often gets glossed over is their past experience with reading--those experiences that drew them toward reading and those that have repelled them. Teachers know that our work with readers depends as much on their reading attitudes as their reading skills, and that these two pieces are intertwined.

I think of my own daughter, who is not yet two. Each night I read to her before bed, in an enjoyable and loving ritual that many young children experience. I get to see her relationship with books, words and stories develop right before my eyes.

Although I'm aware of the body of research that shows the importance of early literacy experiences, I truly didn't realize how much the simple act of reading together would draw my daughter to books. She "reads" them herself at other times, turning pages, naming items in pictures and speaking a combination of words and babble. I've never directed her to do this, but books are a part of her world and her repertoire of things to explore, and babies and toddlers explore what's around them. Also, books have a positive connotation for her. Through her experiences, she's connected reading with love. Take away this association, and she might not be especially drawn to books.

We influence our children so much through the activities we do with them with love. My husband has a lot of music recording equipment in the house. Our daughter explores instruments, buttons and cables alongside him while he works, and she's learned to associate these items with love, too. I had friends growing up who, unlike me, played basketball with a parent every evening. They loved basketball and were so much better at it than I was when we played in school. Even though I was coordinated enough and willing to learn, I just did not have much experience. I remember that it was kind of embarrassing not to

be able to play well, and I never really got past that feeling.

Many of our struggling readers did not grow up with a consistent reading ritual at home; instead, they were exposed to books mostly in school. What was that context like for them? Was it an enjoyable, affirming first experience? Or was it embarrassing, like me with basketball? Was the focus on their deficits or their interests? Were they able to connect to the enjoyable experience of a good story?

It would be easy to place blame on families who don't develop their children's reading-- but I see no reason that school-age children are too old to be introduced to reading for the first time. However, the quality of that introduction and the ensuing reading relationship will be "make or break," so to speak. I mean, I don't think anyone wants to stare at a bunch of symbols on paper unless they associate this with some kind of pleasurable experience that is answering their needs, the way reading with a parent is for very young children. The responsibility is on us to be guides AND participants in developing our students' positive experiences of reading, no matter the age.

I'm concerned with the trend in public schools today, NYC included, of rushing students to read. Those who enter kindergarten without letter recognition are labelled "behind," and children must now read before first grade or be considered "at risk."

What happens to a child who has had little experience reading before September of kindergarten, and is suddenly judged a failure? How does he or she experience reading in that scenario? Is she invited, gradually, into one of the most exciting and powerful tools of her life--or is she isolated and repelled by experiences that she can't connect to? I'm sure practices vary widely across classrooms and schools; but I also know, that by middle school, many students have floundered as readers despite years of reading interventions.

I just wonder, what would happen if we gave students who are "behind" in their reading--and even older struggling readers--a solid year of organic exploration of reading with a caring adult, without being rushed toward objectives or forced to practice particular strategies? Here's one example of such a thing, from veteran Oklahoma teacher, Claudia Swisher, who created an elective course called Reading 4 Pleasure for high school students. In my own classroom, I alternate between giving students choice in their reading and student-driven whole novel studies.

Too many children are moving through the grades with broken relationships to reading. I don't think there's just one way to change this, but I know we would draw many more students toward books if our main goal was to help them have lots of positive experiences with reading. I think the rest follows much more easily from there. ■

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