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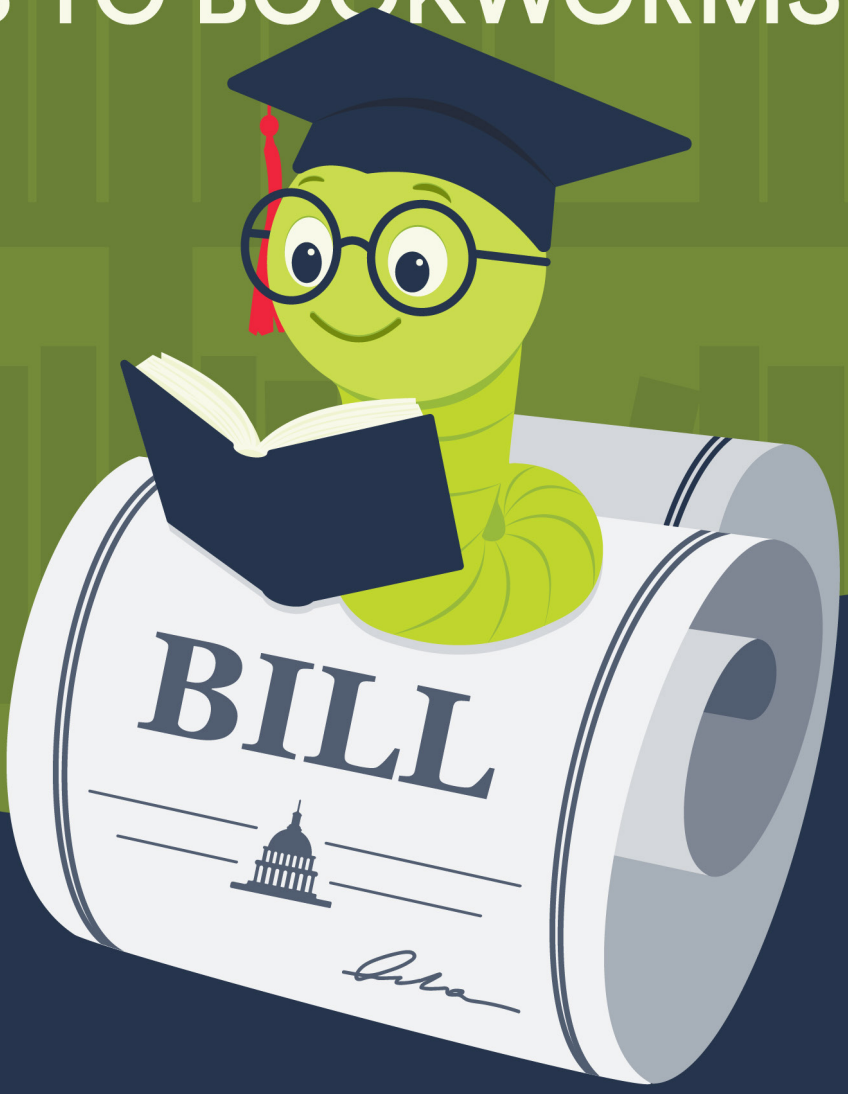
BOOKWAYS

FROM BILLS TO BOOKWORMS



Next Steps for the Science of Reading

A 50CAN POLICY BRIEF

JUNE 2026

If there is one task that is universally expected of schools, it is that they teach children to read.

That task, in turn, helps schools turn children into readers, thinkers, and doers throughout childhood and into adulthood. Currently, there is tremendous energy around the group of policies known as "the science of reading," but more must be done for this energy to lead to a nation of readers. We must ensure all teachers in early grades are trained in effective instructional methods, bring the work into later grades, ensure students use their reading skills regularly by reading whole books, and integrate writing throughout curricula.

This policy brief lays out seven policy problems and nineteen potential solutions for states to consider, regardless of existing literacy legislation. Our hope is that this report will help state policymakers create more schools where children not only learn to read, but become good at it – and maybe even come to like it along the way.

The State of Literacy in 2026

In 2022, **fourth and eighth grade reading scores** on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), known as the Nation's Report Card, dropped to levels not seen since the test was first administered in the 1990s. **Thirty-nine percent of fourth graders** in public schools scored below *Basic*, meaning they did not show even partial mastery of the skills and knowledge necessary for grade-level work, and only 32 percent scored at or above *Proficient*.

For a fourth-grade student to be proficient means that he or she can, among other skills, correctly interpret descriptive phrases in fiction and poetry. In the opening stanza of **one poem used** in the NAEP test, a student reads, "The old man must have stopped our car two dozen times to climb out and gather into his hands the small toads blinded by our lights…" and two stanzas later will read the final section, "But, leathery hands full of wet brown life…he just smiled and said *they have places to go to too*." The student is then asked, "In the last section of the poem, what does the phrase "wet brown life" describe?"

The choices are the mud, the old man's hands, the toads, and the falling raindrops. Yet only 31 percent of students chose "toads", the correct answer. The most popular answer was "the mud."

Also in 2022, Emily Hanford's viral ***Sold a Story*** podcast brought into the mainstream the substantial empirical knowledge base showing that explicit instruction in phonics and phonemic awareness are the most effective ways to teach children to read, whereas the popular "whole word" and "balanced literacy" approaches that had long been embraced in education aren't and don't. In other words, teach children the sounds that the letters "b", "a", and "t" make, and then teach them to blend those sounds together to read the word "bat" out loud. This is phonics instruction. Conversely, "whole-word" instruction asks children to read the sentence "Tom is up to bat." Next to the sentence is an illustration of Tom holding a baseball bat, and the teacher instructs the children to think about what word makes sense at the end of the sentence. One strategy teaches children to read, while the other teaches them to guess.

To some in the education world, this was old news. Numerous state leaders, school leaders and teachers have been raising the alarm on questionable approaches to literacy for some time. But in 2022, what had once been a patchwork of research and practice-based dissatisfaction quickly turned

into a policy and advocacy movement to make change. Now, 42 states and the District of Columbia boast "science of reading"-aligned **laws or policies**. That America faces a significant reading crisis may be the one thing everyone in education agrees on.

At 50CAN, we believe that improving the nation's literacy rates is at a critical juncture. Reforming how we teach reading takes time and sustained effort, evidenced by states such as Mississippi and Louisiana that have seen success in transforming how reading is taught statewide over the last decade. Nobody would expect results to be immediate, but neither are they guaranteed. Yes, Mississippi and Louisiana continue to outpace the nation in improvement as they also grapple with the fact that 8th-grade reading scores have not seen the same gains as 4th-grade scores, and in some cases have seen few gains at all.

In this report, we hope to make the case that those who are already working on adopting the science of reading ought to stay the course, and we'll suggest policy ideas to help focus and ballast ongoing efforts. For states or districts that are, however, at an earlier part of a literacy journey, we'll offer a few starting points, regardless of whether your state has passed legislation that mandates curriculum, teacher training and preparation, and student assessment aligned with the science of reading. The goal is for all American children to become fluent readers by third grade, the age at which the inability to read interferes with your ability to tackle more challenging material. Before you can understand that the "wet brown life" in the old man's hands must be the "small toads" from the first stanza, you have to at minimum be able to read the words. The work cannot end there, however. Fluent readers have comprehension as well (they know what toads are), and the NAEP results show there's significant work ahead on that front.

Reading Takes Multiple Skills

First, though, let's further define what we mean by "science of reading."

What is science of reading?: A commonly used definition from The Reading League **states**: "The science of reading is a vast, interdisciplinary body of scientifically-based research about reading and issues related to reading and writing." In other words, it's not just **a marketing term**, and it's also not just phonics. This **definition** from TNTP elaborates: "the science of reading is a body of evidence that tells us how students learn to read, and includes evidence supporting phonological and phonemic awareness, phonics and word recognition, fluency, vocabulary, content knowledge development, and comprehension."

What skills does a child need in order to read?: For that, we turn to **Scarborough's Rope**, which describes eight threads (background knowledge, vocabulary, language structure, verbal reasoning, literacy knowledge, phonological awareness, decoding, and word recognition) that together form a strong metaphorical rope on which a child can tug when approaching any text.

What does this mean across all grade levels?: Around third grade, students tend to switch from *learning to read* to *reading to learn*. Much of the initial national conversation around reading reform has focused on ensuring that students in these younger grades are actually learning how to read, in the sense of decoding letters and words. But we also must attend to those students in later grades who never actually learned to read but no longer receive the kinds of explicit instruction in phonics, phonemic awareness, decoding, and the like necessary to catch them up. Because of this, too many students graduate high school while **remaining functionally illiterate**.

Reading isn't just sounding out words. Scholar Maryanne Wolf explains that "learning to read is an almost miraculous story filled with many developmental processes that come together to give the child entry into the teeming underlife of a word…I like to think of the interwoven relationships among the components of reading as like music: what one ultimately hears is the sum of many players, each largely indistinguishable from the rest, all contributing to the whole. Early reading is the one time in our lives when each contributing player is more discernible, enabling those of us who have long forgotten to remember what goes into every word we read."

Literacy acquisition is not only for the early grades. In later grades, when the effort transitions from "that you read" to "what you read", the science of reading also matters. The data reveals that here, too, students are struggling: **1 in 3 twelfth-grade students** demonstrated no proficiency on the 2024 NAEP on **grade-level work** such as to "locate and identify relevant details in the text in order to support literal comprehension," "evaluate the effectiveness of an author's claim, organization, and evidence used," or "draw general conclusions based on concepts that are presented with abundant and/or explicitly stated text evidence."

Just as **skillful reading compounds gains** in literacy, poor reading compounds multiplies problems. And the gap between proficient and poor readers only **increases over time**. Students with the lowest reading scores make up a **disproportionate number** of students who never graduate high school. And many of those who do graduate and go on to higher education will end up enrolling in a **remedial English course**.

When we think about how to improve instruction for these older readers, it's crucial to recognize that many of these older students have never been asked to read in the kind of sustained, attentive way that fosters increased skill. Only **17 percent** of educators report primarily using whole texts to teach reading – defined not only as books, but poems, novels, plays, and articles. **Increasing numbers of college professors** – even at **elite schools** – complain that their students say the reading expected of them is too much. A **2015 study** found that 58 percent of *English majors* at two Kansas universities understood so little of the first several paragraphs of Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* that they would not be able to read and understand the novel on their own. All but three of the students in the study self-reported As and Bs in their high school English classes, but many admitted to relying on aids like SparkNotes to understand what they read in those courses.

No wonder, then, that even those students who have learned how to read simply don't. While 14 percent of 13-year-old students **reported** in 2023 that they read for fun almost every day, more than double that – 31 percent – said they never or hardly ever did so. (In 1999, that number was only 9 percent.) Instead, students are spending their time on screens, with the average U.S. child age 8-18 spending **7.5 hours *each day*** watching or using them.

In brief, many students in the U.S. aren't learning how to read at all, and those who can read aren't being taught – or, often, even asked – to read

better. “Laws cannot create competence,” **wrote** Robert Pondiscio and Kristen McQuillan recently. “They can create the conditions for change but not the craft of teaching itself.”

Problem 1:

The science of learning to read should be bedrock knowledge. However, many educators and administrators still do not possess this knowledge, having never learned it or having been taught an erroneous model.

Policy Solution 1A:

Provide districts with funding for high-quality educator training to equip teachers with both the why and the how behind any science of reading changes in instruction, and provide training in cognitive science to aid with teaching reading once students have mastered the basics.

Research has shown that “K–2 teachers who work in states with policies that require preservice training or professional learning in the science of reading were more likely to report using an evidence-based approach to teach reading than were teachers in states without those policies.” While many states have prescribed such training for K-3 teachers, **states should also require middle and high school teachers to take it**, given that many older students struggle with the basics of reading. Teachers, **ideally, ought to continue explicit instruction** through at least eighth grade in topics like multisyllabic decoding and building vocabulary, but need training to do so. The state of Ohio, recognizing this, recently **passed a law** requiring training in the science of reading for all public school teachers and administrators, and specifically training in advanced morphology and vocabulary for content teachers in grades 6-12. Additionally, providing training not only in the science of reading specifically, but also in cognitive science, will equip educators **to better deploy** research-backed teaching methods across multiple subjects and avoid practices based in neuromyths. At least **one-third of teachers** in high-poverty schools aren’t fully committed to the science of reading, according to recent research from the Fordham Institute, and teachers who go through in-service training on the science of reading **know more** than teachers who only learned about it

during pre-service training. Together, these data point to the importance of rigorous training for current teachers.

Policy Solution 1B:

Ensure schools of education explicitly teach the science of reading and cognitive science.

A **2023 analysis from The National Center on Teacher Quality (NCTQ)** of over 700 teacher preparation programs found that only 25 percent adequately covered all components of science of reading based instruction, while nearly half taught erroneous instructional practices. Among other recommendations to strengthen schools of education, NCTQ **recommends** that state leaders "set specific, explicit, and comprehensive preparation standards," "hold programs accountable for implementation," "require a reading licensure test… and publish the pass rates," pointing to Mississippi and Colorado as states that have successfully strengthened their teacher preparation programs. And in 2025, Florida **passed a law** requiring all teacher candidates to take a course in the cognitive science of learning principles, including cognitive load theory, working memory, and long-term memory. Teachers in states with science-of-reading-aligned licensure tests have a "**firmer grasp of reading science**," suggesting that licensure tests may be one way to push teacher prep programs towards explicit instruction of the science of reading.

Problem 2:

Implementing the science of reading takes time, focus, and sustained effort across a large swathe of stakeholders.

Policy Solution 2A:

Invest in building State Education Agency (SEA) capacity to ensure a consistent vision for statewide science of reading efforts and to keep those efforts on track.

Much of the success of science of reading initiatives hinges on changing teachers' practices, but that goal may be best supported by a strong vision and team at the executive level. "Consistency of leadership and priorities are key," stated Kymyona Burk, who led the implementation of Mississippi's nationally lauded Literacy-Based Promotion Act. "We had a dedicated literacy division that ran like a well-oiled machine, and even when interim supes came in, they didn't mess with literacy. When governors or state chiefs change, priorities change. You need someone to keep their eye on the ball to keep literacy at the core of what's happening in education policy." Burk noted that building out SEA capacity in Mississippi enabled them to deploy state-hired literacy coaches to high-need districts, monitor implementation and progress, and provide the guidance and support for which local leaders asked. Kunjan Narechania and Jessica Baghian, who helped lead Louisiana's reading turnaround, recommend that the SEAs map out an "**implementation chain**" identifying every adult involved in schooling and the 1-2 actions they need to change to bring about reading reform. Louisiana's SEA also developed a system of boots-on-the-ground accountability by sending state agents to classrooms with checklist questions – some as basic as "Did the high quality curriculum make it into the classroom? Has it been opened?" – to provide data to the SEA on how implementation was going. A strong place to start is with literacy coaches, either state-hired as in Mississippi or with SEA-hired expert coaches training locally-hired district literacy coaches.

Policy Solution 2B:

*Provide science of reading training to local leaders, administrators, and community-based organizations working with or in schools so that they can unite behind a shared vision and adequately support teachers. For example, Oakland REACH provides research-based literacy training to parents, caregivers, and other community adults as part of their **Liberator model**, which then places participants in Oakland public schools as literacy tutors. **Initial research** found students working with these tutors made significant gains compared to students who did not get tutored.*

Strengthening How Students Learn to Read

When it comes to effectively addressing how younger students learn to read, we can look to the Mississippi model as a great example. In 2013, the state's Literacy-Based Promotion Act, which built off progress Florida had seen in strengthening its reading policies, led to what's been termed the "Mississippi Miracle." Once ranked 49th in the country for fourth-grade NAEP reading scores, Mississippi's fourth-graders now top the chart after **adjustments** for demographics. "Even without those adjustments, **Mississippi** looks pretty great," **notes** Chad Aldeman. "Its Black students **rank** third nationally, and its low-income kids outperform those in every other state. Mississippi is also the only state to see gains across all performance levels over the last decade. Its average went up, but so did the scores of its highest and lowest performers. Mississippi raised the bar and the floor at the same time."

In 2023, Indiana passed a science of reading law that builds upon the Mississippi model – which in turn leveraged Florida's progress. Indiana, which also put a $170 million investment behind the law, saw a **gain of nearly 5 percentage points** on third-graders' reading scores after a single year.

The following policies – some of which Aldeman identifies as having driven the state's results, some of which we gathered based on conversations with figures who led implementation in Mississippi and Louisiana – are key places to start for any science of reading legislation package.

Problem 3:

Implementing science of reading legislation requires focus on several key components simultaneously.

Policy Solution 3A:

*Require districts to use High-Quality Instructional Materials (HQIM) – ideally ones that are **knowledge-rich** and embed writing – and offer additional funds, support, and/or coaching for selecting an approved curriculum.*

When students learn with HQIM, their outcomes **improve**, but it's important that teachers use them **effectively and continuously**. Yet only **3 states** (as of 2024) both required the use of HQIM for reading and allocated funds to districts specifically to acquire them. While there are a number of Science-of-Reading-aligned curricula available, incentivizing the adoption of a shorter list of approved, evidence-backed ones can make it easier to support district adoption, such as teacher training in how to use a specific curriculum – something only 6 percent of teachers currently **report** receiving more than a few times a year. Steubenville, OH reveals the power of a high-quality curriculum: for 25 years, the district has used the school improvement program Success for All, which includes a reading curriculum. As a result, between **93 to 100 percent of third graders** have scored proficient on state reading tests each year since 2008.

A word of caution when it comes to deciding which curricula to approve: don't rely on external validation or simply a label of "HQIM." All materials are not created equal. Steubenville yet again offers a lesson: after Ohio passed its science of reading legislation, the district nearly had to stop using Success for All because it is not reviewed by the clearinghouse "EdReports" and therefore was not approved by the state. (Ohio later reviewed Success for All on its own merits and approved the program, which is still in use in Steubenville.) **Louisiana** offers an alternative path: the state "trained a cadre of teachers to review various curricula and sort them into three tiers, simultaneously creating teacher 'ambassadors' who could spread their knowledge to others across the state. The state also made it easier for districts to buy top-rated curricula and to pay for vetted professional learning aligned to the curriculum a district was using."

Policy Solution 3B:

Make professional development more effective and support strong adoption of HQIM by backing them up with literacy coaches.

The literacy training described in Policy Solution 1 is critical, but training alone may not change teachers' practices. Providing a literacy coach who helps teachers to implement the training into classrooms is **more likely** to result in changed practices. In Mississippi, the Literacy-Based Promotion Act funded the hiring, training, and deployment of literacy coaches to the state's 50 lowest-performing schools. While all teachers across the state received training in the Language Essentials for Teaching Reading and Spelling (LETRS) professional learning program, a two-year program that included both online modules and in-person workshops, the teachers at the low-performing schools **benefited** from the added support of literacy coaches who reinforced the training.

Policy Solution 3C:

*Consider a **third-grade retention policy as part of a shift in how adults support struggling readers** before they graduate from grade 3.*

A student who has not yet mastered reading at this grade level is **four times** less likely to graduate from high school, as learning in any subject in subsequent grades becomes increasingly more difficult and more dependent on one's ability to read. One way to reach this goal is to retain students who are not reaching a certain reading threshold by the end of third grade and mandate interventions for the students who are retained – a critical step to make retention policies lead to improved reading, as studies on retention policies **indicate** it is the interventions, not the repeated grade, that actually lead to improved reading. While research on the long-term effect of retention policies is mixed, with one recent **research study** showing that retention can negatively impact adult earnings of retained students, the emphasis on refocusing adult behavior on prevention and intervention is what **leaders in Mississippi and elsewhere say** is behind the success of their retention policies thus far. Currently 18 states have some form of retention policy in place.

Florida, which has had a retention policy since 2003, **saw** students' likelihood of graduation and GPAs increase and remedial courses decrease. Another **Florida study** found that when a child is flagged for retention, their younger siblings also show improved test scores. Indiana's retention policy **led to** increases on English Language Arts and math scores, while avoiding negative impact on student attendance and discipline. Michigan

offers a potential path forward for states wary of retention policies. The Great Lakes State **repealed** its third grade retention law in 2023 but kept in place its system of support for flagged students. Retention policies may be most impactful for how they change adult behavior around supporting students as very few students are ultimately retained in states with active third-grade retention laws. As **Burk has explained**, "Retention is not the goal of the retention policy…the goal is…to prevent a student from being retained." A retention policy may be the strongest lever to achieve that goal.

Policy Solution 3D:

Administer universal screenings each year starting in kindergarten to identify students with reading deficiencies early, notify parents of the results, and create a plan for remediation.

Even as early as kindergarten students who start the school year behind on reading are **far less likely to catch up** to grade-level by third grade, with the odds declining each year. Early screenings arm educators and schools with the necessary data to identify struggling readers, while parental notification and the requirement to create an individual plan for student success ensure something is actually done about the results. As with the third grade retention policy, the screenings and accompanying parental notification are not ends of themselves, but do help to motivate adult behavior changes to ensure the student receives the required support.

Districts that have boosted early literacy – without either carrots or sticks from the state – can offer a helpful path forward. Recall the success in Steubenville, OH – a district in which nearly every student is considered "economically disadvantaged." Or look at Richmond Public Schools, which **began working on** implementing science of reading in 2019, before Virginia passed its literacy law, by first adopting a Science-of-Reading aligned curriculum, then using the pandemic to focus on providing intense professional development for teachers on using the curriculum. The district also focused on ensuring all department members who touched on literacy were trained themselves in the science of reading so that they could speak a common language to the administrators and educators, while incorporating additional training into principals' monthly professional development sessions.

One additional factor to the district's improvements? The superintendent zoned in on literacy. In Richmond, "Superintendent Kamras … made it his personal mission to ensure that when we were working on adjusting

and updating our strategic plan literacy was one of our primary focus areas," said Cassandra Bell, M.Ed., director of curriculum and instruction for Richmond Public Schools. In a reflection of this commitment, the superintendent restructured the district to have K-5 literacy leads report directly to him.

These changes have already borne fruit. Reading scores on state assessments have grown six points in the past two years, and the district's economically disadvantaged students **improved** their reading scores by 10 points over two years – compared to gains of only 2 points statewide among the same group.

Policy Solution 3E:

Provide high-impact literacy tutoring for students in K-3 who perform below-grade level based on chosen assessment tools.

There will continue to be students who need additional support, even with great classroom instruction. States should provide at least 10 weeks of high-impact tutoring (at least 90 minutes per week) for students in grades K-3 who perform below grade-level on a screener or other chosen assessment tool. The evidence on high-impact tutoring is significant; in a well-implemented program, students **can gain** 3 or more months of **additional learning**.

Problem 4:

There's little likelihood of passing science of reading legislation in a given state, or an existing SoR law lacks incentives for districts.

Policy Solution 4A:

Run a science of reading pilot for districts. Solicit a handful of districts with committed executive leaders to participate, give them funding and a set number of years to try the work, and track their results. Spotlight successful practices to other districts and use their evidence to make the case for expanded investment.

Policy Solution 4B:

Implement the components of Policy Solutions 3a-d to the extent you are able to without a law by pulling on ***already existing state levers****.*

In Louisiana, for example, state leaders flagged the bottom 40 percent of schools in need of improvement under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and used this to deploy literacy coaches. Louisiana also retooled how existing grants and other funds were used to deploy money towards literacy efforts rather than legacy uses that were not necessarily needed. This enabled the state to, among other efforts, drive the adoption of HQIM by offering to purchase the curriculum for superintendents.

Helping Older Struggling Readers

In their efforts to boost early literacy rates, states must not forget the older students who should have learned how to read, but did not. **Twenty-four percent of 6th grade students** are below what's called the "decoding threshold," **the point of reading fluency below which comprehension stagnates** due to poor ability to sound out words. In a **nationally representative survey** from the EdWeek Research Center, nearly 3 in 5 educators reported that a quarter or more of their middle and high school students struggled with basic reading skills.

But if these students are left in the lurch, it may be because their teachers have been as well: The same survey revealed that over one-third of educators had not received any training in how to support middle and high school students who struggle with basic reading skills, while only one-fifth had received this training in their teacher-preparation programs. Meanwhile, only 2 in 3 middle school teachers and 1 in 3 high school teachers received extra intervention time to work with struggling readers, and another 1 in 3 had access to screening assessments to help discern which challenges the struggling readers faced.

In other words, not only does a large proportion of older readers struggle to read, a large proportion of educators fly blind when trying to help them – unable to identify the actual problem, and unaware of effective ways to address it. "American youngsters who fall behind in the early years of their

education may never catch up in a system that insists that they can only learn to read texts at their current literacy levels," writes literacy expert Timothy Shanahan. "The idea of expecting students to read long, complex, unfamiliar texts is foreign to American reading instruction." Shanahan argues that adding more complex texts, even when challenging or frustrating for students, is necessary to improve literacy outcomes across grade levels.

Problem 5:

Even the best policies to boost literacy in the early grades cannot compensate for older students who failed to learn to read but were passed on to higher grades, where teachers are often poorly equipped to help them.

Policy Solution 5A:

*Implement **diagnostic reading screening tests** for upper-grade students that test for decoding, fluency, and morphology.*

Screening tests should be administered at entry grade levels, such as 6th grade and 9th grade, and ideally should be consistently administered to track student progress. Virginia and Indiana, for example, now **require** screening for students in grades 4-8. Students whom the tests identify as struggling should be offered the interventions described in the policy solutions that follow. Provide as much transparency as possible with the results, sharing not only with parents but with the elementary schools that taught the students previously to inform their approach as well.

Policy Solution 5B:

Support districts who want to launch structured literacy classes in the upper grades featuring explicit, systematic instruction to bridge the gaps students are missing, such as phonics instruction, multisyllabic decoding, and morphology knowledge.

For instance, Mountain Views Supervisory Union in Vermont has offered middle and high school students **additional literacy classes** to address foundational skills for over a decade, which students take along with their traditional English courses. Drawing on that model, Bow Memorial School, a New Hampshire middle school, **launched a program of structured literacy classes** for struggling readers with great success: Students in the 8th grade class who had been in the program for three years saw eight times the growth on reading assessments over that time span than peers who were not in the program.

Policy Solution 5C:

Provide training for older-grade teachers to teach literacy skills.

For example, Health Sciences Charter High & Middle College (HSHMC) in San Diego gives **daily professional development and coaching on literacy instruction** to all of its content teachers – regardless of subject matter. Marietta School District in Georgia has started providing **professional development courses** for educators on how to teach reading, geared at middle and high schoolers.

Policy Solution 5D:

Equip parents to help by offering interested parents reading toolkits that enable them to spend 10-15 minutes a day tutoring their child to become a better reader.

At one point, it was **Massachusetts state law** that parents teach their children how to read. While no longer the law, there is clearly an appetite among many parents to help remediate the learning their children should have received. However, parents may still need additional resources so they can fill in the gaps for their child. The Literacy Cooperative, for example, provides **Science of Reading Family Toolkits** for K-2 that include checklists of grade-level skills, diagnostic screener assessments, routines to support skill-building, flashcards, decodable texts, and activities and worksheets. Similar toolkits could be built specifically for parents of older readers. Another approach is to make funds available to parents to hire Science-of-Reading-aligned tutors. Louisiana's **Steve Carter Tutoring program**, for instance, provides $1,500 vouchers for families to purchase high-quality tutoring for students who are below reading proficiency.

Reading to Learn

When we think about the science of reading, we often think about applying it to the students who have not yet learned how to read and whose instructional needs include systematic phonics. But the science of reading can and should inform how students beyond third grade learn to become better readers of increasingly complex texts as well.

Teachers use **texts to teach skills**, resulting in surface-level comprehension, rather than helping students use skills to develop a robust comprehension of the text. Rather than training students to employ close textual reading to answer analytical questions, educators **tend to ask** students to perform non-analytical tasks like constructing personal responses. As one professor **explained**, "They have not been taught how to summarize what they read and make arguments about it." Take the famous balcony scene from Romeo and Juliet. A literary analysis approach might ask students to carefully study the words, consider how Shakespeare used light and dark imagery, and explain how this scene is important to the narrative. One non-analytical approach **suggests**, "have a discussion related to drugs, sex, suicide, or other issues, and ask students to think about how the issue was handled in Shakespeare's age" versus today. When full-length texts are taught – which is **rare** – there is little continuity with other classrooms; text selection tends to be **idiosyncratic** based on teachers' preferences. And very few upper-grade readers **are assessed for fluency**, let alone **taught to improve it**. In other words, not only has the assignment of full texts and classical books decreased, but the level of study of canonical texts that remain in secondary classrooms has also decreased.

Part of the problem is a system of perverse incentives. Today, many state standards are content-agnostic, focusing instead on the skills that students need to learn, not the content they need to know, and many state tests do the same. When teachers know that a high-stakes test is going to ask their students to demonstrate skills like "finding the main idea" on a previously unread passage, they are more likely to teach those things in class. And when the test is high-stakes, they are likely to spend lots of class time preparing for the exam, rather than doing things like actually reading books.

But it's reading books that classrooms should get back to, not only to create better, stronger readers for their own sakes, but also to create more knowledgeable, informed citizens. Particularly in our polarized age, it's desirable that our graduates grasp the nuances of an argument, share a common corpus of knowledge from books they have read in common (or even just one shared text), and take on complex coursework if they go on to higher education. And as anyone who has fallen in love with reading can attest, it's desirable that students learn to foster the attention and analytical skills needed to read a masterfully written book (and sometimes even a bad one) in its entirety. It's the same kind of attention and analytical skills that can serve them when they evaluate the stances and claims of a political candidate, or unravel the complexities of a tangled foreign affairs question, or withstand the echo chambers that too often fill our political debate. At its roots, forming well-read students is a fundamental aspect of our shared national, social, and political identities.

The following policies are aimed at improving English and ELA courses for higher level grades, but the truth is that many of them offer benefits for all grade levels. Similarly, many of the policy solutions mentioned above, particularly those aimed at helping struggling older readers, can be expanded to help all students improve. All of these can be tailored to support students in any community, in any state, become readers.

Problem 6:

*Few English or ELA classes **ask students to read books**, and if they do, the texts are selected idiosyncratically.*

Policy Solution 6A:

Approve only knowledge-rich curricula and/or add to the state standards a knowledge-rich book list for each grade level from which educators must choose a certain number of texts to teach each year in their entirety.

Today's growing recognition that **background knowledge is one of the major drivers of reading comprehension** means that there's a strong argument to be made for curating a list of books that all students should read by the end of a certain grade or school level. Texas is pioneering a return to a common canon of texts: the Lone Star State **recently passed a law** mandating at least one required literary work per grade level be added to the state standards. The Texas Education Agency then prepared a list of recommendations, based in part upon a **survey of Texas teachers**, then presented it to the State Board **to vote** upon.

Policy Solution 6B:

If a book list is unfeasible, auditing state standards to shift them from solely "skills-based" to knowledge-based can help drive the reading of whole texts in classrooms.

Arkansas, Florida, and Georgia have shifted to knowledge-based standards that focus more on content knowledge and canons. Georgia's standards for the eleventh grade, for instance, **call** for students to be able to "identify and discuss major authors and works of three periods of English and American literary history, including key themes and stylistic features." Similarly, Louisiana's educator-crafted **Guidebooks curriculum**, which is used in roughly **80 percent of classrooms**, means that students across the state are reading and deeply engaging with the same content-rich texts.

Policy Solution 6C:

Require all high school students to read 2 or more books over the summer.

Summer reading can help boost literacy, but few schools assign students books to read over the summer, and the ones that do vary in the rigor of the assessments they tie to the reading. Asking high schoolers to read a specific book or two builds shared knowledge and can help to combat the "**summer slide**." Providing a range of books is important so that students can select at least one book of interest to them, across a wide array of teen interest areas. The reading is the point with summer reading assignments, so give students options.

What About Writing?

No report on reading instruction would be complete without mention of the importance of writing. In today's educational policy focus, the old adage of "reading, writing, and arithmetic" seems to have changed simply to "reading and arithmetic." In many classrooms, educators **have stopped** connecting writing to reading, assessing it, or asking younger students to do it much at all. Yet writing is an essential part of becoming a deeper thinker and a better reader. One **meta-analysis** indicated that "writing about material read improves students' comprehension of it; that teaching students how to write improves their reading comprehension, reading fluency, and word reading; and that increasing how much students write enhances their reading comprehension."

Like reading, though, students **cannot just pick writing up** – they need to **learn it systematically**, to learn how to structure sentences, paragraphs, and larger compositions. They need to be given many opportunities to practice it, along with feedback on it – with a focus more on quality of writing than on quantity. And, they need to be challenged to write about robust content, ideally tying their writing to their reading.

We strongly encourage states and districts, when approving HQIM, only to approve of ones that connect explicit writing instruction with what students read.

Problem 7:

Not enough schools teach writing as a systematic, frequent, structured endeavor tied to reading.

Policy Solution 7:

When approving HQIM (see Policy Solution 3a, 6a, 7a), look for ones that connect explicit writing instruction with what students read, or for a writing curriculum that maps onto a knowledge-rich reading curriculum, and offer teacher training on implementation supported by coaching.

Louisiana's high-poverty **Monroe City Schools**, which had been using the Louisiana Guidebooks curriculum, saw students' reading strengthen even as their writing lagged. In 2018, the district offered teachers training in The Writing Revolution's (TWR) Hochman Method, funded by a federal Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy grant, with TWR coaches visiting the district throughout the year to reinforce the training. Monroe City Schools then partnered with TWR to implement TWR methods into the Louisiana Guidebooks curriculum and train Louisiana team members to train other district teachers in the methods. After the Louisiana Department of Education lauded Monroe City Schools for the students' improvements, the state launched a pilot program to bring the TWR-embedded Guidebooks curricula for grades 3-5 to more districts, and in 2022 approved it for the entire state.

Conclusion

It is rare, in our polarized age, to see states as politically disparate as Florida and California agreeing on anything. That they now agree on reading is a genuine opportunity that we should not take for granted.

It is crucial that we don't allow this unique cultural moment in education to fade without finishing the job of reforming the way students learn to read in our schools. The examples of the enterprising states in this report show that there is a path forward to a world where all students become strong readers and it is our job now to turn these promising proof points into common practice in all 50 states.

How to Get Involved

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