

Policy Backgrounder: Reading Instruction

Revamped Across the Country

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In the past decade, almost three-quarters of US states have established new laws to revamp reading instruction; most legislative action has taken place following the COVID-19 pandemic. Some states are seeking increased funding for these initiatives in this year's state budgets now being discussed in legislatures.

- The transformation in reading instruction is likely [a response to pandemic learning loss](#), which was demonstrated through a historic, 30-year decline in student achievement on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) in 2022.
- This shift is bipartisan, with both Republican and Democratic state leaders driving a shift toward an approach to reading instruction termed the “science of reading.”
- The movement is both widespread and state led. It includes the states with the [five highest levels of public school enrollment](#): California, Texas, Florida, New York, and Illinois.
- The approach is driven by learnings from [brain development science](#) revealing that reading must be taught explicitly, unlike the natural development of language in the right environment. This departs from some prevailing practices that minimize explicit, traditional instruction.

The Science of Reading

The Impetus

In 2022, the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) results caused alarm when it recorded the [largest decline in student achievement](#) on the national exam in 30 years. Reading scores declined in 30 states and remained stagnant in 22, which represented the largest decrease in [state-level progress](#) in 30 years. The drop in achievement on the NAEP was universal, including within the high achieving student group whose scores were experiencing an upward trajectory prior to the pandemic. Unfortunately, the greatest declines were among traditionally lower performing students, students in high-poverty schools, and Black and Hispanic students, thus widening historic and persistent performance gaps between student groups.

The scores offered a first national snapshot of student performance following the global pandemic – a theme of CED's [Solutions Brief](#) last year on responses to pandemic learning loss – and validated concerns about student learning loss during the COVID school closures. However, the findings only accentuated ongoing academic downturn in the US, already evident in the 2019 NAEP findings prior to the pandemic when [scores declined in half the states](#) and only one-third of 4th and 8th graders scored at the “proficient” reader level.

Globally, US student reading levels for 15-year-olds surpass the average scores of 81 international education systems according to the 2022 results of the [Program for International Student Assessment \(PISA\)](#), an academic exam administered across the globe for a comparative study. However, US students [trail peers](#) in eight major economic competitors, including Singapore, Japan, and South Korea, in

reading scores. Higher levels of both reading and numeric literacy are essential for the tech-propelled workforce that the next generation must fill.

The [2019 NAEP results](#) likely spurred momentum around transforming reading instruction as eight states adopted legislation that year to shift the approach to teaching reading. The 2019 results also shone a [surprising spotlight](#) on the state of Mississippi, which conversely saw improvements on the exam and had adopted an approach akin to the “science of reading” years prior. However, the pandemic forced a sense of urgency that propelled the movement into high gear resulting in new legislative and school district policy efforts in more than half the country.

A Protracted Debate

Debates on how to best teach reading have [persisted](#) in America for over a century. Though the nuances of particular strategies have changed with time, debate has principally centered around the [degree to which phonics](#) (the relationship between letters and sounds) should comprise reading instruction. While the need for phonics is widely accepted, some view a focus on phonics as [too narrow](#) or even boring, leading to student disengagement. Some reading education strategies have [minimized phonics instruction](#) and instead focused on immersing students in print-rich environments to foster a love of reading. Phonics has also been [criticized as confusing](#) for the English language because of inconsistencies in some letter sounds and the myriad words that break the normal rules.

However, [research has consistently demonstrated](#) that phonics is a foundational skill for literacy development and requires explicit instruction. At the same time, the research also cautions against a sole focus on phonics.

The Reading League [defines](#) the “science of reading” as “a vast, interdisciplinary body of scientifically-based research about reading and issues related to reading and writing . . . [it] has culminated in a preponderance of evidence to inform how proficient reading and writing develop; why some have difficulty; and how we can most effectively assess and teach and, therefore, improve student outcomes through prevention of and intervention for reading difficulties.” The “science of reading” is not a singular method or one-size-fits-all approach but rather a commitment to use research on how the brain learns to read to drive K-12 instruction.

The latest research on brain development reveals that learning to read requires significant interaction among different areas in the brain, as no one area is solely [responsible for reading](#). While language development [occurs naturally](#), reading therefore requires direct instruction to spark the necessary connections between the brain’s regions and lobes involved in the process. Incorporating the “science of reading” attempts to [prioritize phonics](#) along with phonemic awareness (individual letter sounds), reading fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension for more robust reading instruction.

New State Policies on Reading

State and local leaders throughout the country have offered a renewed commitment to invest in evidence-based reading instruction in public schools in a shift toward using learnings from the “science of reading.” Over the past decade, [37 states and the District of Columbia](#) have passed laws to adjust reading instruction. In the majority of states (30), legislative action followed the unprecedented learning disruptions and academic declines deepened by the pandemic. The [movement](#) is both bipartisan and state-led. New state policies on teaching reading move to make reading instruction more explicit; some new [laws ban](#) a popular “[three-cuing](#)” method where students are directed to guess a word based on context clues as opposed to teaching phonics (among other strategies) to decode new words. The new laws address a range of factors that influence student learning and include provisions for teacher preparation, teacher certification and licensing renewal, professional development and coaching, assessment, curriculum materials, and instruction and intervention. Some states also include a controversial retention policy to retain students who are not proficient readers by third grade, normally the year when elementary students transition from [learning to read and begin reading to learn](#).

Several Governors have made specific investments to expand research-backed practices in an effort to improve reading proficiency. In [New York, Governor Kathy Hochul](#) proposed a \$10 million investment to train 20,000 teachers in "science of reading" instruction during her 2024 State of the State Address. [Massachusetts Governor Maura Healey](#) proposed \$30 million in her FY 2025 budget to launch a new initiative focused on expanding evidence-based reading instruction starting at age 3 through grade 3. [Georgia Governor Brian Kemp](#) dedicated \$11.3 million in his recent budget proposal to bolster reading efforts in the state, including literacy coaches and screening tests. [Governor Mike DeWine](#) in Ohio launched a program last year that funds instructional materials, professional development, and literacy coaching to advance "science of reading" practices throughout the state, including within private schools.

School closures also laid bare academic challenges and curriculum deficiencies to parents during virtual learning or the lack of it. Parents began to demand schools [abandon methods they believed were failing](#) children and [fix reading education](#), particularly [parents of students with dyslexia](#). Advocacy and civil rights organizations, including [the NAACP](#), have also rallied for a shift in reading instruction by uplifting the concerns of local parents. Further, the topic of reading and the science involved has [been heavily covered](#) by writers and media outlets, elevating the conversation into a national dialogue.

Mississippi's Progress Influences the Movement

The focus on the "science of reading" is largely attributed to significant progress witnessed in Mississippi. While the state historically stands at the [bottom of national rankings](#) across multiple quality of life indicators, Mississippi students have [made steady progress](#) on the NAEP exam, growing from 50th in 2013 to 21st in 2023, in contrast to the decrease in achievement nationally during the same period. In 2019, the state achieved the largest gains on the NAEP, and in 2022, Mississippi students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds outscored their peers across the country.

While a number of actions in the state across several years have been linked to the better testing results, the state's [2013 Literacy-Based Promotion Act](#) has received the most credit. The law controversially required schools to hold back students who were not reading proficiently by third grade. Critically, it partnered the mandate with significant supports to enable reading success in K-3 students as early as possible. The act prioritized statewide teacher training on "scientifically based reading instruction and intervention" and secured reading coaches to foster effective teaching. The initiative also directed early identification and intervention for K-3 students with reading deficiencies, individual reading plans for identified students, communication and supports for parents, and targeted interventions for students who get retained. Many states are replicating each of these components, including [the teacher training program](#), to some degree through the new laws and district initiatives.

Conclusion

For many states, the new shift toward the "science of reading" [represents a breakthrough](#), and small but [promising results](#) are beginning to emerge. However, the move has also faced criticism and [opposition](#) from some key stakeholders. Some worry that it is yet another mandate, in some instances [unfunded](#), being forced on teachers. Others view the movement as simply [another cycle](#) in an age-old debate around teaching reading. Even proponents admit that putting the science into [practice is complex](#). Time will reveal the true value of this growing trend across states. Perhaps more important than the adoption of a new approach to reading is the ability of those who will implement the new policies to remain agile and address shortfalls as they are discovered to maximize success and minimize unintended consequences. The educational success of the rising generation, and the nation, relies on getting this right.

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