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the education blog

Literacy for all:
How to build confident,
lifelong readers

nwea

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Reading has the power to change lives.

According to [research by the Annie E. Casey Foundation](#), strong readers are more likely to graduate from high school, less likely to become teen parents, and better positioned for success in the workforce. Yet the [2019 NAEP Reading Assessment](#) shows that literacy rates are going down—and that children of color are disproportionately affected. That was before COVID-19 school closures interrupted reading instruction for countless young children.

Literacy cannot be a privilege. It must be a right.

Learn more about how kids learn to read, addressing gaps in reading instruction, and [MAP[®] Reading Fluency[™]](#) from our [Teach. Learn. Grow.](#) authors.

Partnering to help all kids learn[®].



Let's talk equity: Reading levels, scaffolds, and grade-level text

by Cindy Jiban

Our students already had quite a spring. Now, they are having what looks to be quite a summer. COVID-19 introduced some serious challenges to equal educational access and opportunity. Now, we are entering an overdue era of increased awareness about another [serious challenge to equal educational outcomes](#): systemic racism. More than ever, we owe it to our students to do the hard work of fighting for equity in all that we do.

So let's talk about equity. And to talk about equity in literacy instruction in particular, one topic we need to address is reading levels.

What a reading level is not

When assessment data indicates the level at which a student is reading, here's what that data does not mean: "Daniel is reading at level 4, so I'll send him to a group where all literacy instruction is in level 4 texts. He's not ready for the level 7 books that most of his peers will be taught from." Equity is not about lowering expectations.

Here's what else it does not mean: "I'll just report that reading level up the chain to the district, and then continue with my usual whole-class instruction in level 7 books, so it's the same for everyone." Equity is not about teaching the very same for everyone, regardless of needs.

Equity is not about lowering expectations.

Helping kids “see over the fence”

Think back to what we do know about equity. Remember the [metaphor of the solid fence](#)? Tall people can already see over it, so they have access to the show on the other side. Shorter people need a step stool, and people using wheelchairs need a ramp. Otherwise, they're stuck looking at nothing but a knot in the wood of that fence all afternoon.

Reading levels should not be about denying access; they should be understood mostly as indications of what it takes to grant access to complex, grade-level text.

In part, reading levels are just like that. They tell you the size of the stool or ramp you need to provide for each student to access complex, grade-level text. Reading levels should not be about denying access; they should be understood mostly as indications of what it takes to grant access to complex, grade-level text.

Equity = access to complex, grade-level text

Misusing reading levels is an equity issue. You deny students the right to improve their reading comprehension if you don't grant them access every day to some meaty grade-level text. Here's why: Students develop their comprehension—of language, of genres, and of the world—by working with written texts full of challenging words and syntax. They learn new words not by reading words they already know, but by accumulating exposure to new ones. They learn to figure out compound complex sentences, some of them with strange grammatical interruptions like this one, by engaging with these kinds of structures in written text. We know from research

that oral language—conversations, teacher lectures—is not rich or varied enough in the vocabulary or syntax it presents. Written language at higher and higher levels of complexity is what kids need. This is why text complexity features so strongly in how academic standards advance across grades.

Access = appropriate scaffolding

Now here's a good question: How do we give equal access to meaty texts when some kids have less (or zero) decoding fluency? The answer is scaffolding. Just like painters or window washers might need scaffolding to get to the third-floor exterior of a building, less fluent readers will need scaffolding to be able to access harder texts. This means that teachers' lessons around a complex text will include planned attention to what makes the text difficult. Are there difficult vocabulary words? Talk through and define them ahead of the reading. Are there pieces of world knowledge that might be missing, which would facilitate comprehension? Address those before reading the text. Is the decoding too challenging for some kids? Structure some paired, repeated reading to build fluency with the text, before discussing comprehension.

In some cases, reading the text aloud to students is the appropriate level of scaffolding. While this is common in kindergarten and first grade, the practice is critical for letting kids see over ever taller fences in later grades as well. The goal is to help kids to engage with making meaning from that complex written language. Reading aloud to students—even readers with stronger skills—gives them access to language that goes beyond the limitations of their own decoding fluency.

What a reading level is for

When students have a reading level that is lower than grade level, that means scaffolding is needed to help them access grade-level text. A reading level is a gauge of how substantial that scaffolding should be.

Certainly, a reading level also indicates where to start in making choices for independent reading. If we want students to read for pleasure at home, getting them text at an

appropriate level matters. But don't forget that interests matter, too. Daniel might be at a level 5 or 6 when it comes to books having anything to do with pirates marauding on the high seas if he's months and months into a pirate obsession.

Let's keep having hard conversations about equity in literacy instruction. It's well past time to get real about where inequity lives in our own practice. **TLG**





The power of prosody: Why faster reading isn't always better reading

by Cindy Jiban

Last night, I was listening to an audiobook and thought to myself, “Now that’s some fluent reading—and so darned accurate, too!” OK, I just lied. I would never think that, because there’s no such thing as an audiobook with poor fluency or weak word accuracy. When we’re listening for meaning, we insist on excellence—100%, please—on both accuracy and on that smooth, fluent delivery. In literacy circles, that’s called prosody.

So if that’s what reading sounds like for adults, how exactly are kids going to get there? What does it mean to become more fluent, and how does that change over time?

From automaticity to prosody

For our earliest readers, we want to see kids developing some automatic word recognition. As they grow in this, we can watch that growth in both reading rate and reading accuracy. While those words correct per minute (WCPM) are growing, we are witnessing gains in automaticity. That’s exciting stuff. Automaticity means that kids aren’t spending all their brainpower decoding each word, so there’s some power available for making meaning.

But then what? Eventually, they hit a rate that is roughly good enough. We certainly don’t need kids who talk slowly to read faster than they talk. So at some point, we start to be interested in something else, eventually even more than how fast they read: prosody. Prosodic reading sounds smooth, expressive, and full of meaning. When you hear a student reading with good prosody, you can hear that they understand the text.

How prosody helps us comprehend

It turns out that prosody is pretty interesting. First, it doesn't just happen in oral reading; when we read silently, we apply the same kinds of tools. We mentally bracket phrases that hang together. We stress particular words more within those phrases. We pause at commas, and we pause at periods. This is so that we can integrate the words into an ongoing model of comprehension. We're monitoring our understanding all the while.

Sometimes, we lean into prosody as a strategy. Think of yourself reading along, realizing you missed the meaning of what you just read, and then backing up. You probably try it again with feeling. Kids who can read a text out loud with prosody are letting you spy on something that actually helps them make meaning.

Prosody is something we want kids to always apply. They don't need to overdo it unless they are on the stage, but they need to be able to apply very solid prosody skills—even silently—to maximize comprehension. Being able to reach 100% in prosody is like being at 100% in accuracy. We always want that, across all kinds of texts and for all kinds of purposes.

How we tune rate for comprehension

Rate, on the other hand, is not like that. We care about automaticity, and we want kids reaching a threshold that demonstrates really solid automatic word recognition. But we don't always want 100% of a kid's top reading speed. After a point, faster reading is not better reading. In fact, better reading is often consciously slower, when a student is tuning that rate to the comprehension demands at hand.

Last night, I realized that I needed to dial back the speed a bit on that audiobook. I

often listen at around 1.5 times the regular speed, but that's because I often read plotty page-turners. The rate I had it set at was not going to work for this current book. Like many readers these days, I'm picking up tougher books, thought-provoking ones that help me go deeper with understanding the structures of inequity.

Many important reads are not 1.5-times-regular-speed books. They call for a little more time with each phrase, each sentence, and each paragraph. They call us to repeat, to try that one more time with feeling, to work harder to integrate more new understandings.

Students, literacy, and big thoughts

Our students in the middle grades and the secondary grades are grappling with a lot these days. Like many of us, our students need to make sense of systemic racism and our public health crisis. At the same time, their experiences out in the world are much more constrained by pandemic precautions. Our kids deserve the superpower of broadening their worlds and deepening their understandings another way: through reading. They deserve tools for reaching further and deeper, for getting into consequential ideas.

We can teach students about pushing prosody to 100%, about tuning rate so that we have time to process big thoughts. Let's empower them to read deeply from Nikole Hannah-Jones and [The 1619 Project](#). Let's set them up to really engage with Dr. King's [Letter from a Birmingham Jail](#).

Let's keep our eyes on the right target: What we want for our next generation is not faster and faster reading. What we want for them is a literacy of liberation, equity, and power. **TLG**



A brand-new yardstick for measuring growth in oral reading fluency

by Cindy Jiban

When you're a little obsessed with good measurement, you might find yourself a bit excited when someone gives you a brand-new measurement tool. It might even make you whistle the happy birthday song a little.

Because of our partnership with [MetaMetrics®](#), [MAP Reading Fluency just got a shiny new yardstick](#): the [Lexile® Framework for Oral Reading](#). It gives us an exciting and overdue new metric for gauging growth in oral reading fluency. The test itself is unchanged: reporting still includes key data showing how kids are doing with rate, accuracy, and literal comprehension. But the addition of the Lexile oral reading measure in reporting is a major step forward for framing overall growth in fluency. The new measurement places three components of oral reading onto a unified scale, which lets us see growth regardless of the specifics of how a student is improving their oral reading.

Let's unpack that a little. Have you ever noticed that I like to talk about [cars](#) or [speed](#) when I'm really talking about reading fluency? I'm about to do that again to explain this new metric, so buckle up.

What makes a good driver?

My son has just mutated into the scariest kind of offspring anyone could possibly parent: the new driver. I've taken him out to practice just a few times. He sticks to parking lots and wide, deserted roads, and he keeps the speedometer hovering around 12 or 13 mph. When it's time to drive home, I take over.

“Do you think Grant drove this road on the way to our house?” he recently asked while I drove. It’s a 45-mph stretch, and I could see that he admires his just-older cousin for being able to handle such a thing. Being able to go fast is clearly my son’s current metric for spotting better driving. And I’m with him, to some extent. I don’t want to be the mom responsible for that annoying slow car on the two-lane highway with no passing, the car that makes your road trip about 30% more road than trip.

But what do I really want to see? Precision, control, adaptability. Knowledge of how to handle sudden lightning + hail + high-speed winds during our Minnesota summers. Skill at driving through blowing snow and on roads coated with ice in the winter.

When we think about how to measure improvement at driving, the ability to go fast is not really all there is that matters. The same is true of reading.

What makes a fluent reader on the Lexile oral reading measure?

So how does this relate to the new Lexile Oral Reading framework? When we measure a student’s oral reading with this new yardstick, their Lexile oral reading measure will place their performance on a scale, based on these three things:

1. **Rate:** How many words were read correctly per minute? We know rate matters because it gives us a great view into increasing automaticity, that ability to immediately know a word instead of having to sound it out. That’s why MAP Reading Fluency has always provided data on rate. Let’s imagine two students, Shoua and Ahmed, who both show scores of 80 words correct per minute (WCPM).
2. **Accuracy:** What percentage of words were read correctly? Let’s imagine Shoua got 80 out of 120 words right as she read, while Ahmed got 80 out of 83. They show scores of 66% and 96% accuracy, respectively. While they share a WCPM score, they are two very different readers in terms of accuracy.
3. **Text difficulty:** What is the oral readability of the text itself? If a student can read a college-level text at 80 WCPM with good accuracy, that’s quite a bit different from reading a second-grade text at 80 WCPM with good accuracy. Text difficulty matters, just as more difficult driving conditions matter when I gauge whether my son is becoming a good driver.

How will different kinds of growth be captured by this new scale?

This new three-factor yardstick is a gift because it lets us see and report growth for all the students we are helping, regardless of whether they are increasing their rate, their accuracy, or the text complexity they can handle.

A higher WCPM isn’t always the right focus as we think about improving a particular student’s fluency. But meaningful growth is always what we want.

Imagine that highly inaccurate Shoua has a Lexile oral reading measure of 130L. We want her to get better, and as we work with her we see that accuracy is where to focus. With the right instruction, soon she’ll be able to read at that same rate—80 WCPM—but with as much accuracy as Ahmed. Even though her WCPM doesn’t show growth, her Lexile oral reading measure will. It will go up significantly

because she is becoming significantly better at oral reading.

Now imagine Ahmed again. We want him to get better, too. His Lexile oral reading measure can go up if he gets faster, but it can also go up if he starts to be able to read harder text at that same 80 WCPM with that same good accuracy.

Growth is more than just speed

A higher WCPM isn't always the right focus as we think about improving a particular student's fluency. But meaningful growth

is always what we want. This new yardstick measures a more multi-factor kind of growth so we can better capture whether kids are growing in ways that add up to becoming fluent readers: automatic, accurate, and able to handle difficult terrain. Thank you, MetaMetrics!

And now, just a thought for you: any chance you could design a multi-factor yardstick for new drivers? **TLG**





Slides and ladders: The importance of fluency with older readers during COVID-19

by Cindy Jiban

This summer, my city's public pools have been closed. I've missed sitting at the pool's edge in sunglasses with a friend, and my boys have missed the high dive. We've all missed the big waterslide, perfect for a hot July day.

But there's another kind of slide every summer, one that's much less fun: learning loss resulting from time away from school. I wish that were the one our cities could close down. It's one nobody would miss at all.

Oral reading fluency norms show a "summer slide"

The slide that didn't get shut down this year is the fallback in academic skills that occurs for many kids while they are out of school. In a regular year, this slide occurs over summer vacation. In oral reading fluency, here's what that typically looks like: kids in elementary come back to school in the fall reading 10 or 20 fewer words correct per minute (WCPM)

than they managed the previous spring. That means they come back with less automatic word recognition, so they have to work harder to decode words than they did before the summer.

[National norms for oral reading fluency](#) have long been established. Those norms show that third-graders at the 50th percentile start school in fall at 83 WCPM. That's a slide backward from their spring-of-second-grade

rate: 100 WCPM. Young readers regress to about where they were in winter of second grade. The norms show that climbing back up from that slide takes half of third grade. That's under normal circumstances.

Enter COVID-19. As Dorothy might say to Toto, if she were a statistician: "I have a feeling we're not in Normal anymore."

The COVID slide: What could we see?

Not only did the typical summer reading slide not get shut down this year, but it's also been compounded by COVID-19 school closures. A [critical study by researchers Megan Kuhfeld and Beth Tarasawa at NWEA](#) examined how existing data on summer slide might inform our estimates of the learning loss to expect during the pandemic by fall, across subjects in grades 3 and above. How might we think about reading fluency specifically?

We know that students' access to quality, interactive distance learning was highly constrained and [highly inequitable across race and socioeconomic status](#) this spring. Were kids getting literacy instruction? Unfortunately, a troubling number were not. This fall, too many students will return to school having had essentially no engagement with reading instruction since mid-March.

What will that look like? If a second-grade student was at the 50th percentile in oral reading fluency before schooling stopped for them, they were probably not yet at the spring norm of 100 WCPM. It was only March, so they were probably reading about 90 WCPM. Their rate before the big break from instruction was lower than typical. Then they spent almost twice as long as a normal summer break away from regular instruction. Their

downward chute has been longer. What if their oral reading decay has a slope similar to that of a normal summer? We could see kids who were average readers in second grade entering third grade at levels we typically flag as "at risk." The same is true for other grades. For kids who received little to no literacy instruction after schools closed in the spring, [fall of second grade could look more like fall of first grade](#), and fall of fourth grade could look more like fall of third grade.

We need to assess fluency at higher grades

While many schools might ordinarily consider fluency to be an assessment focus only through third grade, this fall is not ordinary. This year, many students in fourth and fifth grade are more likely to be at risk in reading fluency, and we need both assessment and instruction to be at the ready. To meet this need, we have expanded [MAP Reading Fluency](#) to include assessment of older students. We have made some important changes:

- Passages for oral reading now range through 1000L in English and 800L in Spanish on the Lexile® text measure, making it possible to assess on grade-level text even beyond fifth grade.
- An interface more appropriate to older students is available to help them stay engaged.

The automated speech scoring already standard in MAP Reading Fluency still makes it feasible to assess a whole class simultaneously in about 20 minutes—both in the classroom and remotely. This helps teachers of any grade level assess fluency while protecting that increasingly valuable instructional time.

How to teach fluency more intensively

With MAP Reading Fluency data in hand, teachers can be better prepared to differentiate instruction and tackle the reading learning loss suffered by their students this year. A significant portion of them are going to need a focus on oral reading fluency. Luckily, we have solid, research-based practices to draw from. Expert participants in the recent NWEA Literacy Leaders Council describe excellent approaches. To learn more:

- Visit [Timothy Rasinski's site](#). He's a professor of literacy education at Kent State University and directs their reading clinic. Also check out [one teacher's action research](#) as she implemented Rasinski's classic fluency development lesson with her fourth-graders, and read [Meredith Liben's successful approach with second-graders and families](#).
- At UnboundEd, [listen to David Paige](#) describe how repeated reading of challenging text can help build fluency, including with older students.

Closing opportunity gaps in fluency development is about equity

This spring and summer, students have clearly been offered strikingly different opportunities by ZIP code, family resources, and race and ethnicity. As a result, reading fluency has been on a long downward slide for some. Until we figure out how to shut down that kind of slide—and keep the waterslides at the city pools open instead—we'll need to get to work on building those ladders upward to opportunity. This fall, let's fight for equity by getting ready to build students' reading fluency. **TLG**



4 ways to focus on phonological awareness and tackle COVID reading loss

by Lynne Kulich

I'm a former elementary teacher and parent of three children. My youngest son will be a senior in high school this fall. While working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic, I felt fortunate he was old enough to manage his online learning without any intervention from my husband and me. We were out of the woods—at least in that regard!

Throughout the spring, I kept wondering how families with little ones learning to read were navigating phonological awareness and phonics instruction from home. And I worried about how remote instruction (or lack thereof) will impact those kids this fall.

Early readers transform just like that hungry caterpillar

Educators understand pre-K-3 is a critical learning time that directly [correlates with academic success and impacts graduation rates](#). A solid, early reading foundation helps ensure every child a successful path forward for years to come.

While we're inclined to bundle these grades together, reading instruction actually looks

and feels much different for each grade. A sort of metamorphosis takes place as students begin playing with phonemes in pre-K, manipulating graphemes in kindergarten, and decoding sentences in first grade. In some states, students earn their wings with a reading proficiency score at the end of third grade. But in order for that proficiency to be reached, we must be willing—and able—to revisit skills that haven't been perfected yet.

The five skills of a proficient reader

Early childhood educators are well versed in the [Big Five reading constructs](#) identified by the National Reading Panel in 2000: phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. The systematic development and application of these constructs are vital and must be part of every solid core reading program.

Phonological awareness is the precursor skill. Students can begin playing with sounds before they need to differentiate between the letter B and the letter D, for example. Phonological awareness and phonics instruction can occur in tandem, but pre-K students who are able to rhyme and play with

sounds are better prepared to tackle phonics, or sound/symbol correspondence. For this reason, educators encourage families to play rhyming games and spend time reading and talking with their young children to develop background knowledge, vocabulary, and a literate lifestyle.

Regardless of your state, [you'll be hard pressed to find a second-grade classroom teacher teaching and assessing phonological awareness](#), however. Why? Well, the assumption is that phonological awareness has been secured by then, so it is no longer included in state standards beyond first grade. The chart below shows the Big Five reading ideas and the focus of instruction for grades K-3.

BIG FIVE SKILL	GRADE			
	K	1	2	3
Phonological awareness	[Teaching focus area: Phonological awareness, decreasing from K to 1]			
Phonics	LETTER SOUNDS AND COMBINATIONS	[Teaching focus area: Phonics, increasing from 1 to 2]		MULTISYLLABLES
Vocabulary	LISTENING	[Teaching focus area: Vocabulary, increasing from 1 to 2]		READING
Fluency	[Teaching focus area: Fluency, increasing from 1 to 3]			
Comprehension	LISTENING	[Teaching focus area: Comprehension, increasing from 1 to 2]		READING

Source: <https://www.slideserve.com/calla/the-critical-links-between-oral-language-development-early-literacy-and-reading>

Let's not assume, especially following COVID school closures

The assumption that students will not need instruction centered on phonological awareness after first grade does not match reality. Each fall, second-grade classrooms are filled with young children reading below grade level, and while teachers may initially assume fluency and comprehension are the reason, foundational skills like phonological awareness are often what's causing the trouble. Many of these children reading below grade level still have gaps in phonological awareness and rudimentary phonics that, left unchecked, will likely cause them to struggle along the road to reading proficiency.

Megan Kuhfeld's [research on summer slide for early learners](#) suggests notable reading loss for students during the summer. Forecasts are pointing to a [summer slide like no other following COVID-19 school closures](#). So what's your plan for young children entering second grade this fall and lacking phonological awareness skills?

Practical tips for helping second-graders read

This fall, despite state reading standards, second-grade teachers will likely need to assess phonological awareness skills and close those gaps to help accelerate learning. Here are some things to try.

- 1. Screen early to identify skills levels.** Administer a foundational skills screener like [MAP Reading Fluency](#) to identify students with skills gaps in phonological awareness.
- 2. Create learning groups based on skill level.** Once students have been screened, analyze the data to devise instructional groups based on kids

with similar gaps. Reference the phonological awareness development continuum highlighting the progression of skills from easy to difficult. Some students will need work on rhyming, for example, while others will be ready to manipulate phonemes.

- 3. Enable first-grade teachers to become coaches.** Not all second-grade educators are well versed in phonological awareness instruction, but their first-grade colleagues can provide support. Recruit them as coaches. Rethink professional learning to address any instructional gaps, too.
- 4. Consider multi-age learning groups.** Instructional resources for phonological awareness skills may need to be shared or reallocated. Multi-age learning groups can help you get the most from the resources you have.

[I]n order for [reading] proficiency to be reached, we must be willing—and able—to revisit skills that haven't been perfected yet.

If you're a second-grade teacher, we get it. You didn't sign up to teach phonological awareness skills! But since doing so may be part of your new normal, there are things you can do to ease the burden and keep your students front and center. Look to your principal and first-grade colleagues for support. **TLG**



How to help third graders meet reading requirements

by Lynne Kulich

Ask any K-3 teacher about phonics or phonological awareness and, well, be careful what you ask for! You're likely to take a deep dive into the bowl of alphabet soup that is reading instruction and get a taste of phonemes, onsets, rimes, and diagraphs, just to name a few.

No one understands early childhood literacy better than a K-3 instructor. They'll tell you that [comprehension is the ultimate goal of reading](#) and that when any one of the [five foundational reading constructs](#) is jeopardized—including phonics or phonological awareness—the reader is less likely to derive meaning from the text.

So before even thinking about achieving reading proficiency, it's important to truly understand what it requires.

The role of comprehension

Kids need to be able to understand what they read. Consider, for instance, students who decode inaccurately, which leads to a

minimal understanding of the author's intent and misinterpretation. Or students who read word-by-word and thus lack automaticity, resulting in difficulty comprehending the meaning of a whole text.

Conversely, a reader who decodes rapidly may not focus on deriving meaning from a passage, and students with poor prosody are likely to group words into inappropriate phrases or apply expression without fully understanding the contextual meaning of the words. Let's not forget to mention a reader's background knowledge and personal experiences. [Culturally diverse experiences or lack thereof can impede a reader's ability to comprehend a text.](#)

In each of these incidences, students go to great pains to understand what they're reading, but they're not always able to achieve full comprehension. This can have lifelong effects on kids as they move through the K-12 system and on to college or the working world, effects third grade retention policies aim to address.

When third graders don't understand what they read

Currently, [more than a dozen states and Washington, DC, require retention in third grade](#) if students aren't reading proficiently by the end of the year. Several other states allow retention at the teacher's discretion.

Imagine you're a third grade teacher with students who aren't reading at grade level. What is the gap and how do you close it? That can be a very difficult question to answer. Here's why.

Third grade students who are reading below grade level often have [gaps in early foundational skills](#), e.g., phonics and phonological awareness. And while phonemic awareness is the number one precursor to reading success in later years, you probably won't find any mention of it in state third grade reading standards. These constructs are typically targeted for instruction in grades K-1.

So if a third grader doesn't achieve a proficient reading score by year's end, they can be held back. But when they repeat third grade, they'll likely have the same fluency and comprehension instruction they had with third grade level texts they couldn't read the first time. That student's real problem—a gap in early foundational skills—might never get addressed. They'll continue to struggle and inevitably move on to fourth grade without having mastered the skills needed to be a strong reader. And nobody wants that.

How assessment can help

Reading teachers understand the need for holistic, multi-dimensional oral reading fluency assessments that measure the five foundational reading constructs in concert. So do reserachers.

The right assessment lets educators identify reading gaps long before third grade.

In "[How can children be taught to comprehend text better.](#)" Michael Pressley and Katherine Hilden state that assessments that only measure single constructs, e.g., oral reading rates, do not measure reading comprehension. And in "[She's my best reader: she just can't comprehend.](#)" Mary DeKonty Applegate et al. caution against judging the reading proficiency level of a student according to charts denoting rate, accuracy, and prosody without any consideration given to comprehension.

The right assessment lets educators identify reading gaps long before third grade. [MAP Reading Fluency](#) focuses on all the essential components of reading and measures oral reading fluency, literal comprehension, and foundational skills. It lets teachers evaluate an entire class of students in approximately 20 minutes so they can spend less time evaluating reading and more time teaching.

Learn more about it in our recent webinar, "[A time-saving tale: MAP Reading Fluency.](#)" Or read about the difference it's making for a charter network in the Midwest in our [case study](#). **TLG**



How to reach older struggling readers

by Christine Pitts

According to the [National Assessment on Educational Progress \(NAEP\) Reading Assessment](#)—also known as the nation’s report card—average reading scores for both fourth and eighth graders were lower in 2019 than 2017. In addition, there have been no significant improvements for grade 8 students since 2009.

The good news? Literacy experts aren’t shying away from having meaningful conversations about how to reverse this trend. And there are things we can do about it.

Conversation starter

NAEP’s data, released in October 2019, created fodder for an ongoing national conversation among literacy experts and practitioners about the science of reading instruction and its implementation, or lack thereof, in schools. So in late January, both the [Council of Chief State School Officers \(CCSSO\)](#) and [NWEA](#) hosted panels of esteemed reading experts.

Among them was Emily Hanford, a reporter who has worked to shed light on [how our schools are failing kids with dyslexia](#), communicate [the facts about the role of](#)

[cognition in learning to read](#), and debunk the myths behind [disproven theories of reading instruction](#). Sue Pimentel, founding partner of Student Achievement Partners (SAP), attended the NWEA panel. She was recently interviewed about [SAP’s new report on popular US early literacy curricula](#) for an episode of the [Educate](#) podcast.

At both panels, we had transparent dialogue about strategies to overcome the misconceptions surrounding flawed theories of reading instruction and move toward a robust national implementation of literacy practices grounded in the science of reading

and cognition. Many important questions came up during all of these conversations, but the one that stuck with me the most is this one: How can we reach children in need of more explicit instruction and interventions once they've reached higher grades?

The case for a different approach

How to meet struggling older readers where they are is an underdiscussed and misunderstood challenge facing school improvement leaders and literacy coaches.

Research indicates that phonological awareness and phonics typically continue to develop in readers beyond first grade. We don't usually teach those skills much past first grade, however, and students often move on to subsequent grades whether they've mastered phonological awareness and phonics or not. In fact, a [recent national survey of educators](#) released by *EdWeek* elucidated a common misconception about the role phonics plays in becoming a fluent reader: "More than half of survey respondents say it is possible for students to understand written texts with unfamiliar words even if they do not have a good grasp of phonics."

The science of reading disagrees. It suggests that learning to read fluently requires attention to letters and letter sounds and how they connect in text.

Students become fluent readers, including attention to their rate, pace, and prosody, by practicing reading without stopping frequently to sound out words. If students are challenged with on-grade-level texts even when they're not ready for them, per many of the curriculum shifts in the CCSS and related state standards, older readers who haven't mastered phonological awareness and phonics will almost certainly be faced with difficulty.

Expert [David Kilpatrick](#) explains that these students will "struggle to connect parts of spoken language to their alphabetic forms" when they encounter multisyllabic words in more complex texts. Traditional phonics instruction simply won't prepare them to access longer words that require more complex decoding strategies.

To address this issue there are two areas of phonics-related instruction that can help older students: multisyllabic word reading and structural analysis. Education leaders, reading specialists, and upper elementary and middle school teachers need to apply strategies like these into reading interventions to better help older struggling readers.

Make multisyllabic reading and structural analysis part of your practice

Multisyllabic decoding is a reading strategy in which students break words into syllables and identify the vowel patterns in each syllable to read the word. Structural analysis is similar, but instead of breaking words into syllables, students focus on specific word parts, like prefixes, stems, and suffixes.

The step-by-step process for teaching using these methods can be found in many [online instructional resources](#). Here are some useful strategies that will help you tackle these lessons:

- Work in small groups so you can give students as much explicit instruction as necessary.
- Make tools like whiteboards, sticky notes, markers, and highlighters available so students can truly work with words.
- Double-check understanding of syllables by having students count the number of syllables in words.

- Make the common syllabic vowel patterns visible so students can use them when decoding and blending syllables
- Read and repeat each word aloud to students and have them read it back to you
- Follow the order of operations to decode a word: Underline each vowel that makes a sound. Chunk the word into syllables. Circle prefixes and suffixes. Read each syllable independently. Scoop each syllable with a pencil and blend. Check for accuracy

Shift the paradigm

In so many ways, our current system for teaching reading—from teacher preparation to curriculum and assessment—is designed to serve students who come from homes filled with books and family members who have

the time and resources to prioritize reading at home. The reality is that many underserved students can't reap the benefits of homes like these. And when serious reading challenges, like dyslexia, develop, their families are much less likely to be able to afford the additional support that is needed.

[O]ur current system for teaching reading [...] is designed to serve students who come from homes filled with books and family members who have the time and resources to prioritize reading at home.

Let's use the science available to us to approach reading instruction in a more equitable way: a way that meets struggling readers where they are, no matter their age or background, and makes it easier for all students to become confident, competent, lifelong readers. **TLG**



How to make your kindergartener a bookworm

by Derrick Vargason

This fall, my five-year-old daughter started kindergarten—and learning how to read. While she had plenty of practice with letters and their sounds in preschool, she'd never sounded out words before.

Like any parent, I want to support and encourage her reading at home, but don't really know how. Luckily, many of my NWEA colleagues are experts at understanding how kids learn. I turned to [Cindy Jiban](#), our principal academic lead for [MAP Reading Fluency](#). She has a PhD in educational psychology and is an expert in how kids acquire foundational reading skills.

I'm excited to share Cindy's advice with others who may be wondering how to help their young reader.

I want to help my daughter build the basic skills to be an adept reader while also cultivating her love of reading. How can I do that?

First of all, yay, Derrick, for leading with the love! Luckily, your two goals don't have to be at odds at all. And if they start to feel like they *are* at odds, just err on the side of love.

Have snuggly times with interesting books: you read aloud, she sees where you are reading from, and you both pause to chat with each other about the story along the way. It's quality time, where you get to exchange thoughts. "I'm a little worried about that snowball. But maybe he has a refrigerated pocket?"

Follow her lead on what to read, most times, too. Hit the library together!

But how about those letter sounds, that sounding-out-words type stuff? Sure, have

a little fun with that now and then, too. Just keep it safely in the zone of playful and fun. This is where some parents can get a little flashcard-y, which turns this reading stuff into work. And work is not what kindergarteners like to do. They do like *pretending* to work, especially if it involves a hat or apron!

What should families know about the research on how young students learn to read?

The recipe for good reading has just two big ingredients: [language understanding and decoding](#). Those start off as separate pieces. But eventually, they come together in reading with understanding.

Kids develop their *language* skills when people talk with them, listen to them, and read to them. For a kiddo whose family only speaks another language at home, or a kiddo who had chronic ear infections or hearing loss, English language development can be an especially critical focus in school. But for all kids, a language-rich, interactive home life helps language development.

[T]he skill of hearing and manipulating individual sounds is important, too, even when there is no printed text around at all. [...] Play with sounds.

Decoding is what most parents think of as learning to read: it's breaking that "code" of squiggles on the page and turning them into language. To get a good start, kids need to know their letters and what sounds they make, but they also need to be able to separate sounds in spoken words (like s-a-l-t) and blend them back together.

Most parents know that learning the letters and their sounds is a thing. Fewer

parents know that the skill of hearing and manipulating individual sounds is important, too, even when there is no printed text around at all. Those sound skills are called *phonemic awareness*.

Do you have any tips for helping to develop decoding skills at home?

Yes! And so does her teacher, by the way. Ask her teacher for a new idea anytime.

Tip 1: Go for fun. Tip 2: Set up lots of successes. Here are some specific ways to go about that:

- Play with sounds, even without text. Make a special secret language by stretching out spoken words into their individual sounds. Ask her to "Please pass the s-a-l-t" at the dinner table. Wonder aloud what people's names would be if every one had to start with a B sound. (We would be Berrick and Bindy.)
- Play with pairing letters with those sounds. Have a contest to label the most things that start with D in two minutes. You have to put a Post-it on each one, with a D on it. (Will the dog cooperate?) If that's too easy, find things that have the E sound in them, like in *red*: a bed, a fence, a blender.
- Get a clipboard and fat markers for both of you, and write notes. As she sounds out words that she wants to write down, she's getting some of the best practice with these skills. Don't worry about correct spelling in kindergarten. When she writes *PNTBUDR* for *peanut butter*, that's OSUM because she's captured all the sounds. (Pro tip: Frame that writing and hang it on the walls, alongside her drawings. You will cherish it forever.)

Her mom and I have noticed that when she’s working to sound out new words, she gets fatigued. How long is reasonable for young children to focus on sounding out words? How can we help build her stamina?

Sounding out words is really, really demanding. It takes all of her mental energy, and she has none left for taking in the meaning or enjoying the story. And remember: kindergarteners are like puppies—they would always rather be playing. So, if she just read the word *hop*, take a moment to play. Say, “Show me how you hop!” If you’re reading a book, take turns. But her turn might only be one sentence, because that is a big enough challenge for now.

Eventually, she will start to recognize words and just say them more automatically as she comes to them. That automaticity is critical, down the road, because that’s how she will make room in her brain for taking in the meaning. It’s also what makes it possible to read for longer.

You know how your daughter can drive you crazy by choosing the same book YET AGAIN, that book that you now could recite for me on the spot? (I feel your pain: I can still recite *I Love Trains!* to this day, and he’s in high school this year.) Well, it turns out that repeating books is a good thing. As she learns to sound out words, repeating the same ones over and over is super helpful. It’s not cheating to have some memorization helping—it’s real practice. We want to set up lots of successes because this is tough stuff. So, yeah, read that same favorite book with her AGAIN. Sorry about that.

I’ll be honest: when my daughter doesn’t want to read or isn’t engaging in an activity, I feel like I’m failing. What words of wisdom do you have for when kids are aggressively exerting their sense of free will?

Well, when my son “exerts his free will” too much, I start threatening to dance in front of his friends. But hmm... Kindergarten... I guess dancing might be a reward, in your case!

Remember that kids have a LOT of play to do, to learn how to be bigger people. They are developing their motor skills, learning to regulate various emotions, figuring out how to make and tend to friendships. Reading is just one of many things they need to play on. (Not *work* on, but *play* on.)

Does she like to ask you things, sing, play games, have her toys talk to each other, listen to a podcast while she plays with her Legos? Those are all helping language development. And while those aren’t decoding, we have plenty of research evidence that they are helping her future reading comprehension. Notice those language-filled times and remind yourself: we’re building a great reader here.

Derrick, just remember: You’re the guy who leads with the love. Stick with that love of reading, love of fun and play, and love of your child. You can’t go wrong with that! **TLG**

About our authors



Christine Pitts

Christine Pitts, policy advisor at NWEA, is an educator, leader, and researcher by training. She collaborates with researchers, policymakers, and state leaders to study and advocate for policies that advance equity in education. Her policy research focuses on elevating diverse stakeholder narratives through network analysis and mixed methods research. Dr. Pitts earned her PhD from the University of Oregon and previously worked as a teacher and school administrator.



Cindy Jiban

Cindy Jiban has taught in elementary and middle schools, both as a classroom teacher and as a special educator. She earned her PhD in educational psychology from the University of Minnesota, focusing on intervention and assessment for students acquiring foundational academic skills. After contributions at the Research Institute on Progress Monitoring, National Center on Educational Outcomes, and Minnesota Center for Reading Research, Cindy joined NWEA in 2009. She is currently principal academic lead.



Lynne Kulich

Lynne Kulich is a senior account executive for Early Learning Solutions at NWEA and a former professor, teacher, data coach, and curriculum and instruction director from Ohio. She holds a bachelor's degree in foreign language education, master's degree in elementary education, and doctoral degree in curriculum and instruction. Early childhood literacy is her passion. When not at work, Lynne loves spending time with her children.



Derrick Vargason

Derrick Vargason is a senior manager of content strategy at NWEA. A former journalist and English language instructor overseas, he has nearly 15 years of experience informing educators about NWEA assessments and how to use them to help kids learn. He is endlessly curious and passionate about the challenges that educators at all levels face each day and what NWEA can do to help solve them.

Read more at



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