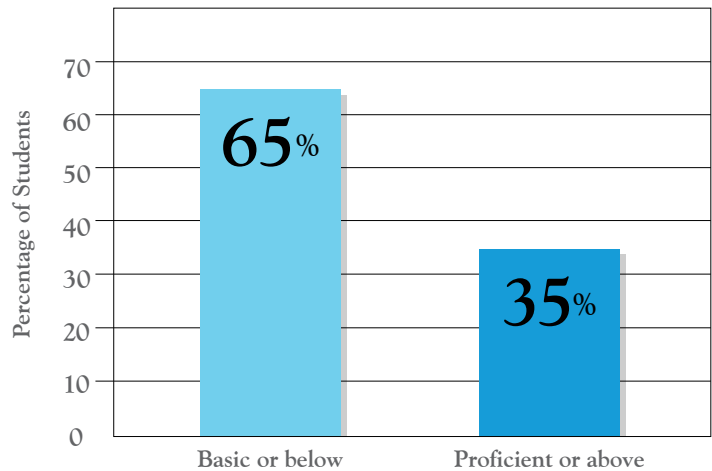


RESEARCH BRIEF

THE CASE FOR A K-2 READING PROGRAM

Teaching reading in the primary grades is the most urgent task in education today. Why? Because success in school, and in life, depends on being able to read. Yet our most recent national report card shows that nearly two-thirds of our fourth graders are not reading proficiently, and the rate of reading failure in high-poverty, minority populations is much higher (NCES, 2019). Although it was once thought that learning to read was as natural as learning to speak, a large body of research over four decades—known as the science of reading—has proven otherwise. We now know the skills children must master in kindergarten, first grade, and second grade in order to read well, and we know what constitutes effective instruction. If the evidence about reading instruction is readily available to us, why aren't all of our children learning to read? Putting evidence into practice—and doing so in K-2—is the key.

2019 fourth-grade NAEP reading achievement-level results



First Things First

To build the neural connections necessary for reading, beginning readers first need to be taught the relationship between letters and sounds—phonics—explicitly and systematically. Research has demonstrated that *systematic, explicit* phonics is the most critical component of beginning reading instruction (Adams, 1990; McCardle & Chhabra, 2004; Christensen & Bowey, 2005; Ehri et al., 2001; Foorman et al., 1998; Foorman & Torgesen, 2001; Moats, 1998; NICHD, 2000; Snow et al., 1998; Rayner et al., 2001; Tunmer & Nicholson, 2011).

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Phonics instruction is systematic when all of the major letter-sound correspondences are taught thoroughly and explicitly in a clearly defined sequence. Conversely, with opportunistic phonics instruction, letter-sound correspondences are taught as they arise in materials children are reading rather than being explicitly taught in a specific sequence.

Measures of both word-attack and comprehension skills show that children who receive *explicit, systematic phonics instruction* outperform children who receive implicit or opportunistic phonics instruction (Christenson & Bowey, 2005; Mehta, et al., 2005; Foorman et al., 1998). Research has also shown that phonics instruction has the greatest impact when taught in the early grades and when accompanied by extensive *application to decodable text* (Jenkins

et al., 2003; Cheatham & Allor, 2012; Mesmer, 2001). Finally, research findings support the conclusion that systematic phonics is most effective when it is *integrated with all the language arts*, not taught as a separate subject or add-on to an existing program (Grossen, 1997). In sum:

A large body of research evidence shows that with appropriate, intensive instruction, all but the most severe reading disabilities can be ameliorated in the early grades and students can get on track toward academic success.... The methods supported by research are those that are explicit, systematic, cumulative, and multisensory, in that they integrate listening, speaking, reading, and writing (IDA, 2018).

Children must deeply understand and apply the alphabetic code so that they reach decoding automaticity, the first step in reading fluency. When children reach automaticity and fluency, brain energy is freed from the task of conscious decoding and available for the task of comprehension. In the intermediate grades, the demands for comprehension of sophisticated content, academic language, and complex text increase dramatically. Children who enter third grade reading with accuracy, automaticity, and fluency can confidently tackle grade-appropriate, complex text.

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The Urgency of Early Instruction

The foundational understanding of letter-sound relationships needs to happen early on in the acquisition of reading:

From the first day of kindergarten to the last day of first grade, most children go through an extraordinary transformation as readers. If all goes well, children at the end of first grade know the sounds of all the letters and can form them into words, know the most common sight words, and can read and comprehend simple texts. The K-1 period is distinct from other stages of reading development because during this stage, children are learning all the basic skills of turning print into meaning. From second grade on, children build fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary for reading ever more complex text in many genres, but the K-1 period is qualitatively different in its focus on basic skills (Slavin, et al., 2009, p. 3).

Success in beginning reading is a key prerequisite for success in reading in the later years. Longitudinal studies (e.g., Juel, 1988) have shown that children with poor reading skills at the end of first grade are unlikely to catch up later on, and are likely to have difficulty reading throughout their schooling. The

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research is also compelling that students who do not learn to read by the end of second grade will likely struggle with reading throughout their lives (Vaughn & Linan-Thompson, 2003). Children who do not read proficiently in third grade are four times less likely to graduate from high school on time (Hernandez, 2012, p. 6).

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Research shows that students who are held back or who drop out of school are often those with poor reading skills (Feister, 2010). Conversely, “Students who are above grade level for reading in grade 3 graduate and enroll in college at higher rates than students who are at or below grade level” (Lesnick, et al., 2010, p. 2).

Our most vulnerable children especially need effective reading instruction.

Effective beginning reading programs are important for children of all backgrounds, but for disadvantaged and minority children and for children with learning disabilities, who particularly depend on school to achieve success, effective beginning reading programs are especially important (Slavin, et al., 2009, p. 3).

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What About Intervention?

Playing catch-up in third grade and beyond is not the answer. A longitudinal study by McNamara and colleagues (2011) concluded, “As children progressed from kindergarten to Grade 3, those in lower ranks of reading achievement were likely to remain in the lower ranks, and furthermore, at each progressing data collection point, struggling readers fell further behind their grade-level reading peers.” In other words, as each year passed, the variance between strong and struggling readers increased significantly. The authors hypothesized that this finding is consistent with the “Matthew effect,” whereby the rich get richer while the poor get poorer” (p. 421). In fact: “Third grade is an important pivot point in a child’s education, the time when students shift from learning to read and begin reading to learn. Interventions for struggling readers after third grade are seldom as effective as those in the early years” (Hernandez, p. 6).

The real, long-term solution is not remediation and intervention in the intermediate grades. The answer lies in prevention, effectively teaching the fundamentals of reading and writing in the primary grades. The evidence is clear that with research-based instruction, the percentage of first graders below the 30th percentile can be reduced to 4–6% (Foorman et al., 1998; Mathes, et al., 2005; Vellutino, et al., 2007; Torgesen, 2002). It is critical to choose the best instructional materials and methods to get it right the first time.

Conclusion: The Split Adoption

This compelling research often leads schools to undertake split adoptions, enabling teachers to choose what’s best for their students. In a split adoption, primary and intermediate-grade teachers are empowered to pick the programs that best accomplish their distinct goals and meet the unique needs of their students. Primary teachers have the autonomy to pick a program that enables them to send real readers into the intermediate grades. An evidence-based, K–2 program with phonics at its core provides developing readers exactly what they need.

STATE STANDARDS AND K–2

All state standards provide a rigorous set of end-of-year expectations designed to ensure that all students are college- and career-ready by the end of high school. Much of the emphasis in the middle and upper grades is on the close reading of complex text, literary analysis, and higher-order comprehension. None of these is possible without mastery of the foundational skills of reading in the primary grades.

Children will be able to meet the demands of rigorous standards in the intermediate grades and beyond only if they know how to read accurately, fluently, and with understanding by the end of second grade. The development of print concepts, phonological awareness, phonics, and fluency are the foundation upon which children’s ability to read is built.

Standards are clear that students are to use text of appropriate complexity at each grade level; quantitative measures of text complexity are typically not provided for kindergarten and first grade because children in these grades should be focused on understanding the alphabetic code.

Using decodable text in the primary grades allows children to apply the alphabetic code and get reliable results when they meet new words in a text. Reliable, automatic decoding is a critical strategy as readers encounter more sophisticated text with multisyllabic and unknown words.

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