

# POLICY STATEMENT ON THE “SCIENCE OF READING”



National Education Policy Center and  
Education Deans for Justice and Equity

March 2020

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## Acknowledgements

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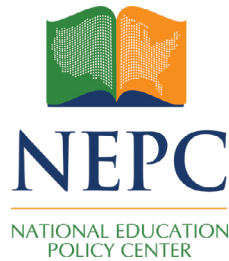
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Since late 2018, a flood of media has reignited the unproductive Reading Wars that have been ongoing since before the so-called “whole language” approaches took hold in the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> That movement was itself a pushback to the overemphasis on early code emphases (i.e., vocabulary, decoding words, and pushing the reading of literature into the background). Less than two decades later, as set forth in the scandal-ridden<sup>2</sup> “Reading First” component of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, whole language itself was pushed aside in favor of phonemic awareness and phonics instruction. In doing so, NCLB repeated the phrase “scientifically based reading research” more than 110 times.<sup>3</sup> While that phrase could have easily supported a sensible, evidence-based set of approaches to teaching reading, it instead was used to promote systemic skills instruction. Meanwhile, all of this got caught up in larger politics, with Deweyan progressives embracing whole language, and conservatives seeing mushy-headed liberalism in any emphasis on comprehension and becoming “lifelong readers.”

This back and forth, however, was never helpful for children or meaningful in terms of classroom instruction. As David Pearson wrote in 2004:

Interestingly, the debate, accompanied by its warlike metaphors, appears to have more life in the public and professional press than it does in our schools. Reporters and scholars revel in keeping the debate alive and well, portraying clearly divided sides and detailing a host of differences of a philosophical, political, and pedagogical nature. Teachers, by contrast, often talk about, and more important enact, more balanced approaches. For example, several scholars, in documenting the practices of highly effective, highly regarded teachers, found that these exemplary teachers employed a wide array of practices, some of which appear decidedly whole language in character (e.g., process writing, literature groups, and contextualized skills practice) and some of which appear remarkably skills oriented (explicit phonics lessons, sight word practice, and comprehension strategy instruction). Exemplary teachers appear to find an easier path to balance than either scholars or policy pundits.<sup>4</sup>

This “balanced literacy” approach, which stresses the importance of phonics and of authentic reading – and which stresses the importance of teachers who are professionally prepared to teach reading using a full toolbox of instructional approaches and understandings – is now strongly supported in the scholarly community and is grounded in a large research base.

But the recent flare-up of the Reading Wars has again embraced the old NCLB “science of reading” framing that emphasizes “phonics first” (*APM, Education Week, New York Times, etc.*). These publications have often distorted the research evidence on teaching reading, and currently policymakers across the U.S. are promoting and implementing policy based on such misinformation.<sup>5</sup> Some states are implementing approaches that expressly require phonics instruction for elementary-aged students.<sup>6</sup>

To be clear, there are valid concerns voiced in this new wave of reporting, about educational equity and access to high-quality reading instruction.<sup>7</sup> Also, students with dyslexia have indeed been ill-served in our schools, in part because they have been under-identified or ignored, especially in schools serving diverse populations and under complex accountability demands.<sup>8</sup> All involved in this discussion probably also agree that schools need better funding and more resources for early reading supports and interventions.<sup>9</sup>

But outside these important areas of agreement, we are concerned that the “science of reading” advocacy has been grounded in some very troubling patterns:<sup>10</sup>

- Failing to place the current concern for reading in a historical context.<sup>11</sup>
- Overemphasizing recent test scores and outlier data instead of longitudinal data with greater context (for example, NAEP).<sup>12</sup>
- Misrepresenting the “science of reading” as settled science that purportedly prescribes systematic intensive phonics for all students.<sup>13</sup>
- Overstating and misrepresenting the findings of the National Reading Panel report of 2000, without acknowledging credible challenges to those findings.<sup>14</sup>
- Focusing blame on K-12 teachers and teacher education without credible evidence or acknowledgement of challenging teaching and learning conditions and the impact of test-based accountability policies on practice and outcomes.<sup>15</sup>
- Celebrating outlier examples of policy success (in particular, the Mississippi 2019 NAEP data<sup>16</sup>) without context or high-quality research evidence for those claims.<sup>17</sup>

It’s time for the media and political distortions to end, and for the literacy community and policymakers to fully support the literacy needs of all children. Much of the legislation beginning to emerge is harmful, especially to students living inequitable lives and attending underfunded, inequitable schools.

Since several states have passed or are rushing to pass education legislation *targeting reading practices and policies*, here are guiding principles for what any federal or state legislation directly or indirectly impacting reading **should** and **should not** do:

- **Should not** fund or endorse unproven private-vendor comprehensive reading programs or materials.<sup>18</sup>
- **Should not** adopt “ends justify the means” policies aimed at raising reading test scores in the short term that have longer-term harms (for example, third-grade retention policies).<sup>19</sup>
- **Should not** prescribe a narrow definition of “scientific” or “evidence-based” that elevates one part of the research base while ignoring contradictory high-quality research.<sup>20</sup>
- **Should not** prescribe a “one-size-fits-all” approach to teaching reading, addressing struggling readers or English language learners (Emergent Bilinguals), or identifying and serving special needs students.
- **Should not** prescribe such a “one-size-fits-all” approach to preparing teachers for reading instruction, since teachers need a full set of tools to help their students.
- **Should not** ignore the limited impact on measurable student outcomes (e.g., test scores) of in-school opportunities to learn, as compared to the opportunity gaps that arise outside of school tied to racism, poverty, and concentrated poverty.<sup>21</sup>
- **Should not** prioritize test scores measuring reading, particularly lower-level reading tasks, over a wide range of types of evidence (e.g., literacy portfolios and teacher assessments<sup>22</sup>), or over other equity-based targets (e.g., access to courses and access to certified, experienced teachers), always prioritizing the goal of ensuring that all students have access to high-quality reading instruction.
- **Should not** teacher-proof reading instruction or de-professionalize teachers of reading or teacher educators through narrow prescriptions of how to teach reading and serve struggling readers, Emergent Bilinguals, or students with special needs.
- **Should not** prioritize advocacy by a small group of non-educators over the expertise and experiences of K-12 educators and scholars of reading and literacy.
- **Should not** conflate general reading instruction policy with the unique needs of struggling readers, Emergent Bilinguals, and special needs students.

And therefore:

- **Should** guarantee that all students are served based on their identifiable needs in the highest quality teaching and learning conditions possible across all schools:
  - Full funding to support all students’ reading needs;
  - Low student/teacher ratios;<sup>23</sup>
  - Professionally prepared teachers with expertise in supporting all students with the most beneficial reading instruction, balancing systematic skills instruction with authentic texts and activities;

- Full and supported instructional materials for learning to read, chosen by teachers to fit the needs of their unique group of students;
- Intensive, research-based early interventions for struggling readers; and
- Guaranteed and extensive time to read and learn to read daily.
- **Should** support the professionalism of K-12 teachers and teacher educators, and should acknowledge the teacher as the reading expert in the care of unique populations of students.
- **Should** adopt a complex and robust definition of “scientific” and “evidence-based.”
- **Should** embrace a philosophy of “first, do no harm,” avoiding detrimental policies like grade retention and tracking.<sup>24</sup>
- **Should** acknowledge that reading needs across the general population, struggling readers, Emergent Bilinguals, and special needs students are varied and complex.
- **Should** adopt a wide range of types of evidence of student learning.
- **Should** prioritize, when using standardized test scores, longitudinal data on reading achievement as guiding evidence among a diversity of evidence for supporting instruction and the conditions of teaching and learning.
- **Should** establish equity (input) standards as a balance to accountability (output) standards, including the need to provide funding and oversight to guarantee all students access to high-quality, certified teachers; to address inequitable access to experienced teachers; and to ensure supported, challenging and engaging reading and literacy experiences regardless of student background or geographical setting.
- **Should** recognize that there is no settled science of reading and that the research base and evidence base on reading and teaching reading is diverse and always in a state of change.
- **Should** acknowledge and support that the greatest avenue to reading for all students is access to books and reading in their homes, their schools, and their access to libraries (school and community).<sup>25</sup>

At the very least, federal and state legislation should not continue to do the same things over and over while expecting different outcomes. The disheartening era of NCLB provides an important lesson and overarching guiding principle: Education legislation should address guiding concepts while avoiding prescriptions that will tie the hands of professional educators. All students deserve equitable access to high-quality literacy and reading instruction and opportunities in their schools. This will only be accomplished when policymakers pay heed to an overall body of high-quality research evidence and then make available the resources necessary for schools to provide our children with the needed supports and opportunities to learn.

## Notes and References

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**Update: In the two years since this policy statement was published, a number of reports have been released. They include:**

### Dyslexia

Johnston, P. & Scanlon, D. (2021). An examination of dyslexia research and instruction with policy implications. *Literacy Research: Theory, Method, and Practice*, 70(1), 107-128. Retrieved January 26, 2022, from <https://doi.org/10.1177/23813377211024625>

### Misrepresentations of “Science”

Yaden, D.B., Reinking, D., & Smagorinsky, P. (2021). The trouble with binaries: A perspective on the science of reading. *Read Res Q*, 56(S1), S119-S129. Retrieved January 26, 2022, from <https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.402>

### Misrepresentations of Balanced Literacy and Whole Language

Semingson, P. & Kerns, W. (2021). Where is the evidence? Looking back to Jeanne Chall and enduring debates about the science of reading. *Read Res Q*, 56(S1), S157-S169. Retrieved January 26, 2022, from <https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.405>

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Filderman, M.J., Austin, C.R., Boucher, A.N., O'Donnell, K., & Swanson, E.A. (2022). A meta-analysis of the effects of reading comprehension interventions on the reading comprehension outcomes of struggling readers in third through 12th grades. *Exceptional Children*, 88(2), 163-184. Retrieved January 26, 2022, from <https://doi.org/10.1177/00144029211050860>

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Hanford, E. (2018). Why are we still teaching reading the wrong way? *New York Times*. Retrieved March 15, 2020, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/26/opinion/sunday/phonics-teaching-reading-wrong-way.html>

The “Getting Reading Right” series in *Education Week* includes several articles taking a similar approach to Hanford’s (online at <https://www.edweek.org/ew/projects/getting-reading-right.html>)

For one response to this recent discussion, see *Conversation about the reading wars, sparked by a new documentary about literacy instruction: Q&A with Elizabeth Moje, Dean of the University of Michigan School of Education*. Retrieved March 15, 2020, from <https://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/newsletter-reading-wars-112918>

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