

# Read All About It! What States Are Doing to Ensure Kids Are Reading by Third Grade

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*The fights currently raging under the banner of “education reform” are nothing compared to those battles fought on the fronts of the “Reading Wars.” For decades now, educators, policymakers, parents, and communities have battled fiercely over how best to teach reading—phonics, whole language, or scientifically based reading.*

While we have seen pockets of demonstrable success and progress over the past decade, the overall statistics remain relatively unchanged. According to the [Annie E. Casey Foundation’s KIDS COUNT Program](#), a third of today’s fourth graders are unable to read at grade level. About the same number of students will drop out of high school seven or eight years later, as reported by [Education Week’s Diploma Counts 2012](#).

In fact, states like Arizona and California currently use fourth grade reading scores to determine future prison population planning. In terms of unemployment, 25 percent of young adults lack the basic literacy skills needed for a job. Sixty percent of adolescents who abuse drugs also have a reading problem. Seventy-six percent of children residing in poverty cannot read at a proficient level. And more than 60 percent of young prisoners are functionally illiterate.

We do not have to accept these statistics as destiny. Despite our past struggles in getting all students proficient in reading, we know what steps need to be taken. We know what is necessary to improve the learning process in our schools, close the achievement gap, and transform every child into a strong, effective reader. Yet we don’t do it. It is either too hard, too controversial, or too much of a

change from what has always been done.

## What we know

Whether one looks at the decades of research compiled through the work of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development’s Reading Research program, [the National Research Council’s 1998 Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children report](#), the [American Federation of Teachers’ Teaching Reading IS Rocket Science](#), or many other reports, there is general consensus on the most effective ways to teach young children to read.

After reviewing more than 100,000 research studies on literacy instruction, the National Reading Panel found in its [2000 Teaching Children to Read report](#) that a scientifically based reading instruction program must be based on five key instructional principles: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. Successful readers must be proficient in all of these areas, without exception.

While children may enter the reading continuum at different points, a strong and confident reader requires measurable skills in all five components. In building upon each other, these components provide a strong foundation on which ongoing reading proficiency is based.

These are matters of classroom instruction and local curriculum, right? What does state policy have to do with it? The challenge many states have faced in the past decade has been to create policy that will infuse these five proven

principles into classroom instruction. It is not enough to simply identify which components of the literacy acquisition process can and should be included. Good state policy can provide significant leadership in this area by:

- Improving the pre-service and in-service training so that all teachers (in all subjects and grades), not just reading educators, at least learn the basics of evidence-based reading instruction (right now, most of our schools of education severely lack pre-service education in evidence-based reading).
- Focusing on the instructional materials necessary to help virtually all students acquire those five skills, be it through statewide adoption processes or funding priorities.
- Providing districts and schools with information about and access to the formative and summative assessments necessary to measure skills acquisition and requiring use of such tools.
- Empowering well-trained educators by ensuring the necessary data systems and professional development supports to tailor classroom instructional practice to meet the individual needs of each student.
- Providing districts and schools with tools and data to identify those students who are most at risk for reading failure—arguably one of the most important needs a state can fill. Learning gaps don't just appear at the conclusion of the third grade. The warning signs are there before many of our youngest learners begin their first day of kindergarten.

Fortunately, **according to the book *Why Kids Can't Read: Challenging the Status Quo in Education***:

The good news is that the majority of children who enter kindergarten and elementary school at risk for reading failure can learn to read at average or above average levels but only if they are identified early and taught using systemic and intensive instruction in

phonemic awareness, phonics, reading fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension strategies. We know from research carried out and supported by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD, a part of the National Institutes for Health) that the majority of at-risk readers rarely catch up to their classmates if they are not reading by the time they are 9 years old.

### **What we do**

Knowing is not enough. If we are serious about closing achievement gaps and giving all children—regardless of race, family income, or zip code—the opportunity to truly succeed in school, we must translate this knowledge into action by building a commitment for a solution, mobilizing stakeholders, and enacting change.

How do we do it? We look to successful efforts in other states to boost reading proficiency. A few examples include:

#### *Colorado*

Earlier this year, the Colorado General Assembly passed the **Colorado Reading to Ensure Academic Development Act** (READ). This landmark legislation focuses on three key principles: 1) identifying struggling readers as early as possible; 2) taking aggressive action to implement comprehensive, scientifically based reading interventions for those students; and 3) sharing accountability for reading outcomes among all stakeholders, including teachers, parents, students, and administrators.

Under the READ Act, the state requires educators to identify struggling readers as early as kindergarten, while offering specific interventions to help young learners overcome their literacy challenges. The law requires school districts to utilize everything from all-day kindergarten, to tutors, to summer school help close the reading gaps. Equally important is that the state will provide local education agencies with \$16 million a year to fund the initiative while empowering educators to do what is necessary to get virtually every child reading by

the end of third grade.

### *Florida*

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Florida was an exemplar when it came to state policy focused on boosting the reading skills of young children. The results of these policy efforts speak for themselves. Student performance rose across the board. In particular, Latino and ELL students showed gains that other states have only dreamed of.

The **Foundation for Excellent Education** provides a plethora of information about Florida's reading instruction policy and history. The Foundation chronicles Florida's **Reading for Learning efforts**, highlighting the Annie E. Casey Foundation's longitudinal study and other data to demonstrate progress. In its simplest form, Reading for Learning established state policy mandating that all students demonstrate reading proficiency before entering fourth grade. The Foundation also **offers sample legislation**, based on Reading for Learning, that other states can tailor and adopt to focus on their early reading challenges.

### **Moving forward**

States like Colorado and Florida provide just a quick glance into what forward-looking states can do if they are serious about addressing one of the most important contributors to our horrid achievement gaps—student reading proficiency, or lack thereof. Many of the policy changes that are central to the current education reform debates—implementing teacher evaluation systems, increasing school choice, or targeting additional resources at the communities that need them the most—offer great potential to transform public education and improve student outcomes. These reforms, however, will not necessarily improve reading instruction and boost literacy skills. Reformers also need to ensure that we teach children to read with the most effective evidence-based approaches available.

But it is not easy. In Connecticut, for instance, legislators from the state's urban centers tried to pass legislation modeled after Florida's Reading

for Learning that demanded evidence-based instruction, improving assessments and applying the data to boost reading proficiency, and ending social promotion at fourth grade. But concerns about costs and impact on localities tabled the bill in 2012 with minor components adopted as a pilot project in the state's major education reform package. It will now be up to state and national advocates to demonstrate how reading instruction legislation can help close the achievement gap, and to move such legislation from a pilot to law that will benefit all kids—particularly our struggling readers.