

On the latest obsession with phonics

Perspective by [Valerie Strauss](#)

May 23, 2023 at 11:28 a.m. EDT. **Washington Post**

The “reading wars” have been around for longer than you might think. In the 1800s, Horace Mann, the “father of public education” who was the first state education secretary in the country (in Massachusetts), advocated that children learn to read whole words and learn to read for meaning before they are taught the explicit sounds of each letter. Noah Webster, the textbook pioneer whose “blue-back speller” taught children how to spell and read for generations, supported phonics. So it started.

In the last century and now again, we have gone in and out of debates about the best way to teach reading — as if there was a single best way for all children — with the arguments focusing on phonics, whole language and balanced literacy. We’re in another cycle: Just this week, New York City, the largest school district in the country, announced it would require all elementary schools to employ phonics programs in reading instruction.

New York City requires reading instruction to be phonics-based

This post — written by David Reinking, Peter Smagorinsky, and David B. Yaden — looks at the debate on phonics in a different way than is most often voiced these days. It notes, among other things, that the National Reading Panel report of 2000, which is often cited in arguments for putting phonics front and center in school reading curriculum, says many things about the importance of systematic phonics instruction but it also says this: “Phonics should not become the dominant component in a reading program, neither in the amount of time devoted to it nor in the significance attached.”

Reinking is a professor of education emeritus at Clemson University, a former editor of *Reading Research Quarterly* and the *Journal of Literacy Research*, a former president of the Literacy Research Association and an elected member of the Reading Hall of Fame. Smagorinsky is a research professor emeritus at the University of Georgia, a visiting scholar at the University of Guadalajara, a former editor of the journal *Research in the Teaching of English*, and an elected member of the National Academy of Education. Yaden is a literacy professor in the College of Education at the University of Arizona, a former editor of the *Journal of Literacy Research*, and a past president of the Literacy Research Association.

By David Reinking, Peter Smagorinsky and David Yaden

Two of the nation's most trustworthy news sources, the New York Times and The Washington Post, recently ran opinion pieces asserting that there is a national reading crisis and a single solution: more phonics instruction. The Times followed with a news article about how a "science of reading" movement is sweeping the United States in support of more phonics instruction.

These claims have clearly impressed many politicians, journalists, educational leaders and parents. Phonics has become political fodder with copycat legislation in state after state mandating more of it. There is now a firmly rooted popular narrative of a national crisis in reading achievement supposedly linked to inadequate phonics instruction and unequivocally supported by a science of reading. Those who question it and ask for more evidence are portrayed as unenlightened or even as science deniers, including many experienced, dedicated and successful teachers who contend daily with the complex, multifaceted challenges of teaching children how to read.

As researchers and teacher educators, we, like many of our colleagues, shake our heads in resigned frustration. We believe phonics plays an important role in teaching children to read. But, we see no justifiable support for its overwhelming dominance within the current narrative, nor reason to regard phonics as a panacea for improving reading achievement.

Specifically, we do not see convincing evidence for a reading crisis, and certainly none that points to phonics as the single cause or a solution. We are skeptical of any narrowly defined science that authoritatively dictates exactly how reading should be taught in every case. Most of all, we are concerned that ill-advised legislation will unnecessarily constrain teachers' options for effective reading instruction.

As for a crisis (always useful for promoting favored causes), the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has been tracking reading achievement in the United States since 1972. Until the coronavirus pandemic began in 2020, the scores were mostly flat for decades, even trending slightly upward before covid-19 shut down schools. The decline since the pandemic is a clear example of how societal factors influence reading achievement. Given the nation's increasing linguistic and cultural diversity and widening economic disparities, that upward trend might even suggest encouraging progress.

Less absurd, but no less arbitrary, is using NAEP scores to argue that two-thirds of students are not proficient in reading. Diane Ravitch, a former member of the NAEP governing board, has equated scores at the proficient level with a solid A. Peggy Carr, commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics, which administers NAEP, has said that basic level is generally seen as grade-level achievement. Adding students who achieve at a Basic level (interpreted as a B) or above, two-thirds of students have solid reading skills. In other words, the argument only holds if we expect every student to get an A. We can always do better, but there is neither no convincing evidence of a crisis nor magic that eliminates inevitable variation in achievement.

The straw man in the new round of the reading wars

But crisis or not, is there evidence that more phonics instruction is the elixir guaranteed to induce higher reading achievement? The answer isn't just no. There are decades of empirical evidence that it hasn't and won't.

In the mid-1960s, the federal government funded two landmark national studies of early reading instruction in the United States at 23 sites (districts or regions) carefully chosen to represent a cross section of the nation's students. One purpose was to determine which of several approaches to teaching reading was most effective, including a strict phonics approach.

The conclusion? All approaches worked well at some sites and less so in others. Phonics worked best when it was integrated with other approaches and is most effective with beginning readers. The researchers leading these multiple studies concluded "that future research should focus on teacher and learning situation characteristics rather than method and materials."

In the 1980s, Dolores Durkin, an iconic reading researcher, found that phonics lessons dominated reading instruction and that the problem is not phonics-or-not, but ineffective instruction that, as she concluded, "turns phonics instruction into an end in itself but also deprives children of the opportunity to experience the value of phonics."

The subsequent National Reading Panel report of 2000, much cited today for its support of phonics instruction, actually reported that teaching phonics had only moderate effects, limited to first grade. The report also advocated for balanced reading instruction in which phonics was only one of many components. In Chapter 2, page 97, the report stated unequivocally, "Phonics should not become the dominant component in a reading program, neither in the amount of time devoted to it nor in the significance attached." And it says this: "Finally, it is

important to emphasize that systematic phonics instruction should be integrated with other reading instruction to create a balanced reading program. Phonics instruction is never a total reading program.”

In the early 2000s, there was the evaluation of the massive Reading First program implemented across six years in grades 1 through 3 in more than 5,000 schools across all 50 states and implemented with federal funding north of \$5 billion. Teachers were carefully trained to deliver “scientific” reading instruction that included a numbing 1.5 to 3 hours of phonics instruction each day. Yet, students receiving this extensive phonics instruction scored no better on tests of reading comprehension than did students in schools providing more conventional instruction.

These findings do not mean that phonics is unnecessary or unimportant. They simply suggest that there is no basis for the conclusions that the absence of phonics is the cause for a reading crisis and that the sole solution to reading difficulties is intensive phonics instruction for all readers. Nor is there a reason to believe that more phonics is the linchpin to raising reading achievement. Rather, the lack of evidence supporting an increase in phonics may indicate that there is already enough phonics being taught in schools. Despite nebulous claims that there is widespread neglect of phonics in classrooms, no recent data substantiate those claims. But, beyond phonics, what other factors might inhibit greater reading achievement — factors that could be addressed more appropriately through legislation? There are possibilities, grounded in data, that are at least as reliable and convincing as increasing phonics. Here are a few examples. There is hard evidence that in schools with a good library and librarians, reading scores are relatively high. Unfortunately, in a growing number of states, libraries are defunded, sometimes for ideological reasons. The number of school nurses has declined during the ongoing assault on school budgets, which we know increases absenteeism, which in turn, decreases achievement. Kids can’t learn phonics or any other academic skill if they are not in school.

What about poverty and hunger? We know that kids who do poorly on standardized reading tests tend to come from the nation’s least affluent homes. And, there is considerable evidence that educational reforms focused only on classrooms and not broader social factors like poverty often fail. What does help is the availability of free meals, which are associated with enhanced academic performance, including reading and math test scores.

So, to boost reading achievement, why not legislate more funding for libraries, school nurses and programs to feed hungry children? The evidence that such legislation would increase achievement is no less, and arguably more, than increasing phonics. The recent declines in NAEP scores during the pandemic, which raise concerns, sharpen the point. Possible explanations include lack of internet connections, distractions inherent to home learning, and untrained and overworked teachers, not phonics.

When pressed on these points, inveterate phonics advocates play a final trump card: the science of reading. They cash in on the scientific cachet of esoteric cognitive and neurological research, often collectively referred to as “brain science.”

There are several reasons to discount that response. Many brain researchers concede that their work is in its infancy using marginally reliable methods with small samples, leading to debatable interpretations that are difficult to translate into classroom practice. They are only beginning to investigate how social factors influence brain activity.

Further, as our colleague Timothy Shanahan has argued, there is a difference between a basic science of reading and a science of *how to teach* reading. The two are not entirely in sync. He cites several examples of empirical research validating effective reading instruction that is inconsistent with brain studies. Just as hummingbirds fly, even when aeronautical science concludes they can't, brain research doesn't negate the reality of instructional practice that works.

But, like the snark, the nonexistent creature in Alice in Wonderland, the narrative about phonics persists, because enough people say so, over and over. For at least 70 years, demanding more phonics has become a shibboleth among those who see, or want to see, reading as essentially a readily taught technical skill. We've been fiddling with phonics ever since, while more consequential societal factors burn brightly in the background.