

From: Alaska State Literacy Association
To: Senate Education/Finance Committee, Co-Chair Bishop, Co-Chair Stedman
Subject: SB111
Date: Monday, February 28, 2022

The Alaska State Literacy Association (ASLA) is a professional organization of teachers, administrators, librarians, and advocates for high quality literacy instruction. ASLA strongly supports quality universal pre-Kindergarten programs which are accessible to all families. Data is clear that providing these experiences in early childhood impacts later school success.

ASLA supports key and strategic investment in professional development that is evidenced-based for all areas of literacy. We urge caution with a hasty adoption of models from other states professing "science of reading" initiatives as a simple solution to low reading scores. Our members have closely followed and testified on this bill the last few years, and offer the following questions and considerations on the Reading Intervention portion of SB 111:

- Literacy learning is complex and attends to more than just foundational skills. There are differing views regarding the definition of the "science of reading," some of them very narrow with an exclusive focus on phonemes. We concur with the language used in SB 111, "Evidence based Reading" interpreted by scholars as more comprehensive.
- Integrating phonics instruction with comprehension teaching using real text shows the greatest impact on children's reading. It is important to note that both the National Standards and the [Alaska State Language Arts standards](#) are composed of objectives in reading, writing, speaking and listening.
- Making curriculum decisions based on comparison to states with high retention rates to Alaska which has low retention rates is problematic. Mississippi artificially increased 4th grade NAEP scores when their retention rates doubled.
- Look at the data from Alaska's top performing schools. *Why are they at the top?* According to the Skagway school district website, they offer PreK, have a trained Reading Recovery teacher, use thematic planning and prioritize the teaching of writing.
- Districts across Alaska have unfilled staff positions. Is it realistic to expect there will be qualified applicants for interventionist and reading specialist jobs listed in the bill? Will small village schools be able to hire and train for these key positions?
- Does DEED have the staffing to determine if and how all programs meet the established criteria? How will the accountability reporting requirements be met, especially for small schools with under 10 staff?
- To maximize the potential of all Alaska's students, reading and writing should receive equal emphasis in literacy instruction. This is not attended to in SB 111.
- What is *culturally responsive* as referred to in the bill? Reading instruction should value and build on students' linguistic, cultural, and individual characteristics. Will frameworks be designed which are deeply connected to the lives of our Indigenous students? On February 26, 2022, keynote speakers in the virtual Alaska Culturally Responsive Literacy Education Conference, Kathryn H. Au and Taffy E. Raphael, spoke on the importance of culturally responsive instruction in conjunction with students, teachers, and leaders engaging collectively in higher order thinking. Au and Raphael shared how both promote equity in education and open the doors to achieving high levels of literacy for ALL students.

Thank you for your service and attention to improving education in Alaska. The Alaska State Literacy Association and our umbrella organization the [International Literacy Association](#) (ILA) strives to make a difference for every student. ASLA is submitting journal articles and peer reviewed pieces which we hope informs the committees' understanding of some of the points raised. Please contact our organization if we can assist or respond to questions.

Jessica Willis, President Alaska State Literacy Association (ASLA), Anchorage
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Deb Rix, Cook Inlet Literacy Council President, Eklutna
Beverly Colapietro, Valdez Reading Council President, Valdez

Journal articles and peer reviewed pieces (with 2 PDF documents from ILA attached) to this statement:

<https://theconversation.com/phonics-teaching-in-england-needs-to-change-our-new-research-points-to-a-better-approach-172655>

<https://www.infoagepub.com/products/How-to-End-the-Reading-War-and-Serve-the-Literacy-Needs-of-All-Students>



BEYOND THE LABEL

**Looking at the science of
reading instruction**

By **Rachael Gabriel**

*a*ll natural. Organic. Healthy. Farm fresh. What do these labels have in common with *evidence based*, *scientifically based reading research*, and *science of reading*? They signal a particular set of assumptions about what is good or bad (e.g., natural vs. unnatural, healthy vs. unhealthy, scientific vs. unscientific) and aim to communicate the value of whatever is inside. For this reason, labels often vary in meaning from user to user and place to place. They are interpreted, defined, redefined, and reinterpreted as their use becomes more widespread.

Behind the label

The science of reading (SOR) is as much a political statement as it is a label advertising a certain set of values. Like the name of a political party or philosophy, what it signals means something slightly different across contexts, and its definition, like scientific knowledge, is always evolving. It's the name of a podcast, a journal, a video series, a book, a set of ideas, a philosophy, and a movement to reinforce and extend particular approaches within reading instruction. Yet the implications of SOR across all entities that bear its name are not exactly the same. Though sometimes synonymous with explicit, systematic phonics instruction or structured literacy, the SOR term is also used more broadly to signal an emphasis on the relationship between reading instruction and certain kinds of evidence: specifically, but not only, evidence from cognitive neuroscience.

The SOR label has been evoked or even mandated more in some communities, regions, and states than others because of a confluence of conditions that position it as a remedy to a shared problem. Political scientist John Kingdon explains that policies are made when three streams converge in a certain policy window. That is, several conditions have to be just right for an idea to become the policy of an individual (e.g., teacher), group (e.g., school), or institution (e.g., district or state). According to Kingdon, a problem stream (an understanding that there is a problem to be solved) and a policy

stream (an understanding that policy can be used to solve this problem) align with a politics stream (other political topics and issues that are currently active) during a specific window of time. In this case, there is a predictable pattern to the way SOR currently is framed as a solution to the problem of low reading scores.

In the late 1990s, the *problem* of low reading scores met the *solution* of scientifically based reading research during a *policy window* when national *politics* included deepening engagement with evidence-based medicine, introduced in the early 1990s as “scientific medicine.” When these streams converged, policymakers and the public had a way to understand the problem and its solution, and contextual resources for imagining how to put the solution into action. There already was increased interest in and appetite for science use as a solution to complex problems.

More recently, increased awareness about the nature and prevalence of dyslexia has shone a spotlight on the persistent problem of achievement in reading and the number of students identified with reading difficulties. In some states and local areas, the politics stream resonates with the use of science as a solution because the status quo is understood as unscientific, relying too much either on intuition and art, or on chaos and poor leadership.

Beyond “what works”

Being able to label things as either *scientific* or *unscientific* makes it seem as if it should be easy for everyone to stop doing what doesn't work and do only what does. It makes it seem as though solutions, if not simple, are within reach. Ironically, the question that drives the scientific endeavor is often not “what works,” but “what works when, for whom, and under what circumstances.” As such, meaningful solutions can and should vary if they are truly connected to science. Still, the impulse to search for a clear-cut answer on what works or doesn't work comes from very real fear and frustration about children's experiences when their literacy development is not well supported in schools.

Some families and caregivers are just now learning that the instruction provided in their local schools is not

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designed for their children to thrive. Others have known this is true for their children for generations and view it as one of many examples of public institutions designed to oppress rather than empower. Therefore, the relationship of instruction to science is not always the primary way problems in reading are framed or understood in each community. Though some states write SOR into their legislation, others may take it no less seriously but have different priorities and solutions in their policy stream.

Likewise, within a single district, school, and even classroom, there are multiple streams creating the local policies that guide work and interactions in various settings. A state may claim to be an SOR state, or a university might promote an SOR program, but what individuals say and do in these contexts may vary. This contributes to variability across districts and schools in whether and how SOR is taken up and applied. This is also one reason instruction can and does look different between classrooms in the same school even when the approach of that school, district, or entire state has theoretically been prescribed by policy or even mandated by law.

What counts as SOR?

So what does it mean to be an SOR state, to attend a training about SOR, or to buy a program based on SOR? It means

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alignment to a set of assumptions and values. It assumes that evidence derived from the scientific method can and should direct the actions of people in schools. It signals that ideas and actions that are rooted in scientific research are valued and adopted.

Of the five pillars of reading identified by the National Reading Panel (phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension), SOR is often associated with phonics and phonemic awareness. But SOR can and should extend to a scientific approach to spelling, morphology, and writing, among other things. Each of these areas can and should be aligned to principles drawn from scientific evidence, and each could continue to be informed by scientific investigations. Where evidence from scientific inquiry exists, it can and should be considered when planning for instruction. However, this may turn out to include a much broader range of endeavors than is sometimes associated with SOR.

As asserted by the physicist and philosopher Thomas Kuhn, science is not a singular thing but a disciplinary matrix of key assumptions, influences, and values. Therefore, any SOR would include multiple disciplines—communities with different ways of thinking, communicating, and creating knowledge—in its matrix. The need for science to inform literacy instruction does not begin and end with discrete skills learned during early literacy development; instead, it touches upon multiple components of literacy at a range of grade levels. It follows that the SOR cannot be limited to the findings of cognitive neuroscience alone.

Therefore, when you hear about SOR, you can do what scientists do, which is to ask questions, collect evidence, and analyze: How is science being used to increase access to literacy instruction that works for particular students in particular contexts? What is the problem that science is being used to solve in our education system? How has science been used to generate solutions? And how does this fit with the structures and norms of this social and cultural moment? This means going beyond trusting the label to analyze the ingredients and sources, thereby checking the assumptions, influences, and values enabling or impeding SOR. ■



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COMMENTARY

What Matters

Kathryn H. Au**Taffy E. Raphael***schoolRISE, Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA***ABSTRACT**

We propose centering discussions of the science of reading around five values to increase the likelihood of bringing all students to high levels of literacy. These values are (1) collective responsibility, (2) equity through higher order thinking, (3) a rigorous system, (4) accountability with transparency, and (5) stability and sustainability.

Let's stop arguing about matters that do not matter and instead collaborate to help schools improve students' literacy proficiency. In support of schools, we propose reframing current discussions of the science of reading around five values, recognizing that scientific study reflects the culture from which it arises, and entails values, often unspoken. These values grow from our decades-long involvement with improving literacy proficiency for thousands of students in grades pre-K–12 across the United States, particularly in schools in Native Hawaiian communities and inner-city Chicago, Illinois. We think attention to these values increases the likelihood that current discussions will result in improvements to schools' ability to bring all students, especially those of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, to high levels of literacy.

Value 1: Collective Responsibility

What matters is that literacy researchers, as a community of scholars, share responsibility for bringing students to high levels of literacy. Literacy research is a broad field encompassing studies framed by a range of theories and questions, explored through a range of methodologies. Such breadth was emphasized at the famed Center for the Study of Reading at the University of Illinois. As doctoral students, we witnessed groundbreaking research extending from basic processes (McConkie on eye movements; e.g., McConkie, Kerr, Reddix, & Zola, 1988), to text comprehension (Anderson on schema theory; e.g., Anderson & Pearson, 1984), to instruction (Pearson on comprehension strategies; e.g., Raphael & Pearson, 1985).

What does not matter is arguing about what is or is not science, a debate long since abandoned by philosophers of science. Instead, let's recognize that a wide range of work can contribute to our understanding of literacy as a window into the mind and a proficiency valuable in a democratic society. Given the incommensurability of paradigms (Cunningham & Fitzgerald, 1996), let's evaluate studies according to appropriate quality

criteria, particularly when seeking to inform policy (Taylor, Anderson, Au, & Raphael, 2000).

Value 2: Equity Through Higher Order Thinking

What matters is consistent emphasis on comprehension and critical thinking across grade levels. Fostering school opportunities for students to learn essayist literacy, a specific form of higher order thinking, will increase equality in educational outcomes. Essayist literacy is the register of discourse valued in Western academic circles. It is organized with an introduction followed by a related body of text leading to a concluding point. This register frequently provides the basis for judging performances in high-stakes situations such as college essays and job interviews. Both research and experience have shown that a focus on essayist literacy, from creating a logical argument to reasoning about texts, is rare, particularly in schools serving students of diverse backgrounds. In our work with 264 schools to promote students' higher order thinking through an approach called the Seven Levels to Success, we found that a focus on essayist literacy could be maintained and used to improve higher order thinking across grades (Au & Raphael, 2019).

The literacy research field has long accepted comprehension as the purpose for reading, while recognizing rapid, accurate decoding as one means to this end. The challenge in primary grades is to provide systematic instruction in spelling-sound correspondences while keeping the larger picture of reading, deriving meaning from text, foremost in students' minds. Inequities in reading proficiency in higher grades, as well as a lack of motivation to read, can easily result when students gain the mistaken impression that reading is simply accurate word calling.

Value 3: Rigorous System for Curriculum and Instruction

What matters is that each school has a rigorous system for teaching essayist literacy across grades, vetted and constructed by teachers. This teaching should build on the discourse strengths that students bring from their homes and communities. Our research has suggested that schools are better able to provide effective literacy instruction when they have a staircase or coherent curriculum across grades that gives priority to higher order thinking, whether text comprehension, argumentation, or reasoning and proof (Au & Raphael, 2011). We found that a staircase curriculum matters most for students who depend on school to progress as literate thinkers.

What does not matter are efforts to promote a particular preset phonics program, as no one program has been demonstrated to be effective for all schools and all students. The orientation toward preset programs results in a revolving door, with one failed program going out and another coming in every few years. Leaders and teachers repeat the mistake of relying on another preset program, rather than applying a diagnostic lens to build on their school's instructional strengths and correct its weaknesses.

Value 4: Accountability With Transparency Over the Long Term

What matters is that we hold ourselves accountable for students' literate thinking, especially reading comprehension and motivation, over the long term. Let's follow the reading performance of students who participate in various primary-grade interventions as they progress to the upper elementary grades, middle school, high school, and beyond.

What does not matter is short-term success on specific measures of spelling-sound correspondences that may be misleading about long-term consequences for students' comprehension and motivation. Beginning in the 1960s, we have seen widely publicized studies of a given approach to phonics instruction influencing policy. However, we have not seen evidence of any approach to beginning reading validated in the upper elementary grades and beyond. Previous iterations of the great debate did not result in improvements to students' literacy learning and distracted researchers from matters of greater consequence. At present, researchers run the risk of being caught in the same time-wasting gyre.

Should schools teach spelling-sound correspondences to students who do not infer them on their own? Yes. Is there one best approach for teaching spelling-sound correspondences? No. Does knowing every word automatically lead students to comprehend a text? No. Comprehension must be taught because it does not naturally follow as a consequence of knowing every word (Anderson, Mason, & Shirey, 1984).

Value 5: Stability and Sustainability

The four preceding values are causal in guiding researchers to support schools through systems that promote diverse learners' literacy achievement and motivation. This fifth value reflects the culmination of these efforts, as the resulting system provides the stability and sustainability needed for ongoing teacher development and student success. The system continually undergoes refinement as

teachers encounter new ideas and think of ways to improve curriculum, assessment, and instruction. Everyone in the school works within a rigorous system with public points of accountability, a system that depends on collective responsibility to promote higher order thinking. The system and its values become a way of thinking, of engaging intellectually and practically with one another, of enacting the curriculum in support of students, families, and communities. Such an approach, rooted in equity through higher order thinking, is what will bring all students to high levels of literacy, and that is what matters.

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