

A faint, light blue illustration of several books and a notebook, arranged in a stack and slightly overlapping, serving as a background for the title.

Reaching Every Reader

THE PATH FORWARD

May 2022



ADVOCATES FOR CHILDREN
OF NEW YORK

Protecting every child's right to learn since 1971

ABOUT ADVOCATES FOR CHILDREN OF NEW YORK

Since 1971, Advocates for Children of New York (AFC) has worked to ensure a high-quality education for New York students who face barriers to academic success, focusing on students from low-income backgrounds who are at greatest risk for failure or discrimination in school because of their poverty, disability, race, ethnicity, immigrant or English Language Learner status, sexual orientation, gender identity, homelessness, or involvement in the foster care or juvenile justice systems. AFC uses four integrated strategies: free advice and legal representation for families of students; free trainings and workshops for parents, communities, and educators and other professionals to equip them to advocate on behalf of students; policy advocacy to effect change in the education system and improve education outcomes; and impact litigation to protect the right to quality education and compel needed reform.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report is a follow up to the December 2021 New York City literacy summit, *Reaching Every Reader*, an event co-hosted by Advocates for Children of New York; the New York City Department of Education (DOE); and the ARISE Coalition, a Citywide coalition coordinated by AFC that advocates for improved day-to-day experiences and long-term outcomes for students with disabilities. While all three organizations were responsible for the planning and execution of the summit itself, this paper was written by AFC alone and does not necessarily reflect the views of our summit partners.

The summit program, a video recording of the event, and additional AFC resources are available at www.advocatesforchildren.org/literacy.

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Julie A. Washington, PhD (*Panelist*)

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Tracy Weeden, EdD (*Panelist*)

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They who hold the advanced levels of literacy and writing hold the power of decision-making and are guaranteed the right to determine their life's trajectory.

LACEY ROBINSON *Chief Executive Officer, UnboundEd*

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On December 9, 2021, Advocates for Children of New York (AFC), the New York City Department of Education (DOE), and the ARISE Coalition jointly hosted a day-long summit to begin building a shared vision for improving literacy instruction in New York City. Teaching children how to read is one of the most fundamental responsibilities of our public schools, and this virtual event brought together diverse stakeholders and experts from around the country to explore current challenges and opportunities for change.

Reading—the ability to gain meaning from print—is the gateway to future learning, both in and out of the classroom; it is essential for full participation in civic life, democratic society, and the 21st century economy. Yet performance on the grades 3–8 New York State English Language Arts (ELA) exam indicates that an unconscionable proportion of DOE students are not being taught how to read: **less than half (47%) of all 3rd–8th graders, and only 36% of Black and Hispanic students, scored proficient in reading in 2019.**¹ Early national data indicate that even more children are struggling with reading in the wake of the pandemic; for example, one recent analysis found that only 48% of first graders were on track with early literacy skills mid-way through the 2021-22 school year, compared to 58% of first graders two years earlier, while racial disparities were even more extreme than prior to the pandemic.²

All children begin their educational careers eager to learn. A substantial body of research indicates that nearly all children, with and without disabilities, are capable of learning to read. And there is a strong scientific consensus as to what effective reading instruction looks like. We know that children learn literacy skills best when they are explicitly and systematically taught how to break the code that connects the sounds of spoken language and the letters of print; when the curriculum reflects their lived experiences and affirms their cultural and linguistic identities; and when their teachers have the training and support they need to be effective. Therefore, **when students do not attain a level of reading proficiency sufficient to pass the state test, they have not failed. The school system has failed them.**

The opportunity to learn to read has always been intertwined with the broader struggle for racial justice in the United States. As one of the summit panelists, Dr. Tracy Weeden, noted, “We need to understand that we are inheriting anti-literacy laws, and the outcomes of those anti-literacy laws, that were established in the 1830s.” These laws, which were on the books in most Southern states, made it illegal to teach African Americans, both free and enslaved, how to read and write, because—as Harper’s Weekly editorialized in 1867—“The alphabet is an abolitionist.”³ In the mid-twentieth century, educator and civil rights activist Septima Clark similarly argued that “literacy means liberation,” a belief that grounded her idea for citizenship education schools, which throughout the 1950s and 60s taught Black Southerners to read and write so that they could register to vote in the face of Jim Crow laws.⁴ Today, **the failure to provide evidence-based reading instruction in all New York City schools disproportionately harms children of color. Yet far too often, blame for low literacy rates is placed not on the system itself, but on individual students and their families;** getting help for a student



with dyslexia or other reading difficulties is almost never a simple or smooth process, but for many Black and Latinx parents, these challenges are compounded by a system that too often has lower expectations for children of color and that requires significant resources to navigate.⁵

Every child has the right to learn to read. Reading is a social justice issue ... it disproportionately impacts children in poverty and children coming from Black, Brown, as well as indigenous backgrounds. I think it's really important that we make that mind shift. It's not just 'oh, kids learn to read in school.' No, it's their *right* to learn to read in school.

NADINE GAAB, PhD

Associate Professor, Harvard Graduate School of Education

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The need is urgent, and **the literacy summit came at a moment when the time is ripe for change:** New York City recently transitioned to a new Administration led by a Mayor who has spoken frequently of his own struggles with undiagnosed dyslexia in school. Both Mayor Adams and Chancellor Banks have emphasized the critical importance of getting literacy instruction right and the need for City schools to change course.⁶ Moreover, there are currently substantial financial resources available for this work thanks to the influx of federal funding from the American Rescue Plan. In fact, the DOE has \$250 million for “academic recovery and student supports” for the 2022-23 school year, providing an unprecedented opportunity to fundamentally change the City’s approach to reading instruction and intervention.

Research lights the path forward, and success requires a long-term, citywide commitment to making evidence-based and culturally and linguistically responsive reading instruction a top priority. To truly move the dial on literacy, we need a comprehensive and cohesive plan—one that goes beyond band-aid solutions and avoids the pitfalls of past attempts at reform. **This paper summarizes key takeaways from last December’s summit and provides initial recommendations for how City Hall and the Department of Education can take action.**

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ❑ All children can learn to read, and explicit, systematic instruction in foundational skills is essential for success.
- ❑ Core instruction must be *both* evidence-based *and* culturally and linguistically responsive.
- ❑ There must be greater consistency in how reading is taught across the City.
- ❑ Teachers need ongoing support and training if they are going to change their practice.
- ❑ New York City needs a robust literacy safety net: a continuum of support, running from preschool through high school graduation, that identifies students who need extra help in reading and matches them with appropriate, evidence-based intervention.
- ❑ Systems change requires structures that will foster collaboration and ensure sustainability.

All children can learn to read, and explicit, systematic instruction in foundational skills is essential for success.

If we don't get that [foundational skills instruction] right in those early grade bands, we've set our students up for all kinds of challenges and failures that didn't need to happen.

JAN HASBROUCK, PhD

Researcher, educational consultant, and author

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One clear theme that emerged from the literacy summit was the need for instruction to be firmly aligned with the science of reading. By “science of reading,” we are referring to the large, interdisciplinary body of scientific research on how the human brain learns to read and the instructional practices that are most effective for helping all children become proficient readers.⁷ As synthesized in landmark federal reports in the late 1990s and early 2000s,⁸ further elaborated and refined by subsequent studies, brought to greater public attention via parent advocacy and [in-depth reporting](#), and discussed by panelists at December’s summit, the science of reading tells us that:

- » **In contrast to spoken language, reading does not come naturally.** The human brain is not automatically wired to read; reading is a learned skill that requires each of us to build new connections between areas of our brains that developed for other purposes.⁹
- » **All brains become reading brains in the same way, but children differ with respect to the amount of instruction needed.** All children (with the possible exception of those who have very severe cognitive impairments) are capable of learning to read. Some students will manage to develop strong literacy skills even in the absence of evidence-based instruction; some will quickly lift off as readers when they are explicitly taught foundational skills; and some—for example, those with language-based learning disabilities like dyslexia—will need extensive support, practice, and repetition in order to reach mastery, even when core instruction is strong.
- » **Skilled reading is the product of word recognition (decoding) and language comprehension.**¹⁰ To get the words off the page, children must develop phonemic awareness—the ability to distinguish

When children can't read ... they're also going to struggle with language development, because it's reciprocal. A lot of language development comes from the books that you read. The vocabulary that you learn, the concepts that you learn, the sentence structure that you master comes from books. **This is all reciprocal. It's not one thing or the other, one thing versus the other — they all have to come together in order to read.**

JULIE A. WASHINGTON, PhD

Professor, University of California – Irvine

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and manipulate the smallest units of sound, or phonemes, that make up spoken words—and learn how letters represent those speech sounds in print. But decoding alone does not constitute reading; children *also* need to understand what the words mean. This requires background knowledge about the world, a rich vocabulary, an understanding of sentence structure and grammar, and verbal reasoning skills.

- » **Explicit and systematic phonics instruction is the best way to teach beginning readers how to decode.**¹¹ All students, and *especially* those with learning disabilities, benefit from direct instruction in letter-sound relationships. An effective phonics program has a clear scope and sequence and provides students with frequent feedback and opportunities for practice. Students for whom word recognition does not become automatic and effortless in the early elementary grades will face increasing difficulties as they progress through school, as difficulties with decoding often snowball into difficulties with comprehension.¹²
- » **While structured phonics is essential, students *also* need robust social studies, science, and arts education to systematically build the content knowledge and academic vocabulary that will help them understand what they read.**¹³ Getting the words off the page quickly and accurately is only the first step in making meaning from text. Children need to be able to make connections between what they read and what they already know; to that end, a narrowing of the curriculum to focus only on basic skills will be counterproductive.
- » **Literacy instruction should not end after third grade.** In addition to the fact that all middle and high school students are still building comprehension and disciplinary literacy skills, many older students—and not just those receiving special education services—need support mastering foundational code-based skills. Yet as several panelists highlighted, schools typically do not teach reading after the early elementary grades or include word analysis work (mapping sounds onto letters) when introducing new content-area vocabulary.



The first thing we need to do for [struggling] older readers is stop pretending like those [foundational] skills are young skills, because so many kids don't have them by the time they get to fourth or fifth grade. Our national data show that. We treat these reading skills — like decoding skills, word recognition skills — like they're just a P-3 issue ... [but] the reality is that there are a lot of older kids who have not mastered the code ... **We need to rethink the way we think about older readers as something anomalous, because our data tells us they are *not* anomalous.**

JULIE A. WASHINGTON, PhD *Professor, University of California – Irvine*

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Core instruction must be both evidence-based and culturally and linguistically responsive.

It's not an either/or conversation — we have to be culturally relevant, or we teach the science of reading research. **It's both/and.**

TRACY WEEDEN, EdD

President and CEO, Neuhaus Education Center

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Evidence-based literacy instruction and child-centered, culturally responsive practice have at times been portrayed as entirely separate issues, complementary at best and contradictory at worst. A key takeaway from the summit was that not only *can* we do both; we *must* do both. As many educators—particularly educators of color—have argued for decades, direct instruction and culturally relevant and sustaining education are interconnected: failing to provide students from historically marginalized communities with high-quality instruction in the alphabetic code serves to maintain the status quo, while **explicitly and systematically teaching children the foundational skills that underlie skilled reading—phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension—gives them the tools they need to become self-directed learners, think critically about their world, and take steps to change it.**¹⁴ Moreover, students learn literacy skills *better* when instruction draws on the funds of knowledge they already possess and affirms who they are and where they come from.¹⁵

Culturally relevant curriculum, in which multiple forms of diversity (e.g., race, nationality, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability) are understood as indispensable sources of knowledge, makes learning engaging and meaningful.¹⁶ Yet, as the NYC Coalition for Educational Justice highlighted in a 2019 report, commonly used English Language Arts (ELA) curricula are “riddled with deficit messages” about people of color, immigrants, people with disabilities, and LGBTQ people, while “white authors and characters are massively over-represented” in the books New York City students read in 3-K, pre-K, elementary, and middle school.¹⁷ As Katherine Kurjakovic from the United Federation of Teachers noted at the summit, the DOE took a much-needed step forward this year by using federal COVID-19 relief funding to provide every school with “an infusion of books that reflect the variety of histories, languages, and experiences that make up the City.”¹⁸

Does [instruction] situate our students in a level of rigor that says back to them, ‘I believe in your intellectual capability’? ... **Does it affirm, acknowledge, and honor what they bring with them into the classroom — their historical context, their local context, their cultural context?** Does it affirm who they are interpersonally? Or does the classroom, materials, content actually negate, push down, diminish who they are and where they come from?

LACEY ROBINSON *Chief Executive Officer, UnboundEd*

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While multicultural, multilingual classroom libraries are not on their own sufficient to ensure all children become proficient readers, they are vital for success. **Students have increased motivation to read when they can see themselves, their experiences, and their communities reflected on the page and when reading material is relevant to their own lives.** However, culturally responsive literacy instruction is not just about ensuring students have access to diverse books that they can read on their own time. Reading material assigned and taught as part of the general curriculum must be intellectually rigorous and affirming of students' identities, and as both keynote speaker Lacey Robinson and panelist Dr. Claudia Rinaldi stressed, students need opportunities to engage in authentic tasks that connect to their lives outside of school. Educators need tools and training to be able to do this effectively; new books will simply sit on a shelf if schools do not have clear guidance on how to use them in the classroom.

While the specific texts used in class are a critical piece of the puzzle, **culturally and linguistically responsive practices go beyond just what students read to how they are taught to read it—and explicit instruction in foundational skills will be far less effective if it is not culturally and linguistically responsive.** For example, as Dr. Julie Washington discussed, early literacy instruction must be attentive to language variation: both the 42% of New York City public school students who speak a language other than English at home,¹⁹ as well as the tremendous variability *within* English as it is spoken in communities. Learning to read requires children to map the sounds of spoken language onto the letters that represent those sounds in print; the more everyday speech (e.g., the pronunciation of vowel sounds, the use of certain verb tenses, variation in the inclusion of prepositions) differs from the conventions of written text, the more complex and cognitively demanding this task becomes.²⁰



When we talk about dialect, it's not being a dialect speaker that's the issue. Everybody speaks a dialect ... One of the things we know is that teachers need to be aware of what the features are of the dialects and varieties [of language] that their children speak, so that they know where the points of departure are. Especially when we're talking about phonology and morphology, where are the points in a child's language system that are going to depart from the phonology and the morphology in the language of print? ... If we pay attention to and integrate children's language systems into our teaching ... students have a much better chance of becoming good readers.

JULIE A. WASHINGTON, PhD *Professor, University of California – Irvine*

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Foundational skills instruction that is culturally and linguistically responsive does not treat language variation as 'wrong' or 'bad English,' nor does it ignore the fact that such variation exists and impacts classroom learning. **Culturally responsive instruction sees children's existing linguistic skills as an asset rather than a deficit and uses those skills as a springboard,** helping students understand the commonalities and differences between their oral language system and the language of print. For example, Dr. Claudia Rinaldi discussed the need to allow students to talk in the classroom—not just sit and listen to the teacher—and use their home language to mediate academic language. On a practical level, this also means teachers must be sensitive to the structure and features of the varieties of language spoken by the children in their classroom so that they can distinguish between actual errors in decoding and the patterns of vernacular dialects.²¹



There must be greater consistency in how reading is taught across the City.



LINNEA EHRI, PhD

*Distinguished Professor,
CUNY Graduate Center*

My recommendation would be for a committee of knowledgeable, experienced educators to evaluate primary grade reading instruction curricula in order to **select one high quality program for universal adoption by all New York City elementary schools**. The program should provide comprehensive, culturally and linguistically responsive reading instruction ... It should provide teachers with professional development to learn how to teach the program, how to assess children's progress in acquiring the skills taught, and how to tailor the program to individual students. **And since we're moving into a new administration in New York City, this might be an opportunity to make important changes like this to improve literacy instruction.**

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Dr. Susan Neuman and Dr. Linnea Ehri, reading researchers based in New York City, both stressed the need for greater consistency in how reading is taught across the five boroughs. At present, New York City schools are free to use any ELA curriculum they like, regardless of whether it aligns with the research on reading acquisition or has proven effective in teaching children how to decode and comprehend text. Many teachers, through no fault of their own, have never received adequate training in the science of reading and evidence-based practice, and thus rely on the materials provided by their school, while educators who *are* well-versed in reading science cannot put their knowledge and skills to full use if they are required to use an ineffective program when they enter the classroom. **And many City schools continue to use old curricula that contain ideas and teaching methods that contradict the science; some employ a hodgepodge of different programs and materials, throwing everything at the wall to see what sticks and creating enormous incoherence in the process.** Even within a single school, reading instruction may look very different from one classroom to the next and from grade to grade.

As Dr. Neuman noted, this lack of consistency is *particularly* problematic for students who are highly mobile. Those who are especially likely to transfer schools mid-year—such as students who are homeless or in foster care—face more than enough obstacles as it is; they do not need the added challenge of adjusting to a radically different curriculum and approach to teaching reading. The fact that a slew of different curricula are in use across the City also makes it far more difficult for central DOE to provide support to schools around implementation, while the lack of system-wide coordination limits the sharing of resources and best practices.

While not the only possible path forward, Dr. Ehri recommended that a committee of knowledgeable educators review commercially available reading curricula and select one high-quality, evidence-based program for use in all New York City elementary schools. Another potential approach would be for such a committee to develop a menu of evidence-based and culturally responsive curricular options from which schools could choose.



Teachers need ongoing support and training if they are going to change their practice.

Literacy is an equity issue, and I would argue that **it's not just equity for our students, but it's an equity issue for our educators as well.** As an educator, I feel that I have a right to know what is best practice ... and to have the skills and tools, and not only to have those, but to be allowed and to be able to use them at the school level. We know that is not the case in all schools.

KATHERINE KURJAKOVIC

ELL Specialist, United Federation of Teachers

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Transforming literacy instruction in our schools cannot happen overnight. Teachers will need time, extensive training, and support to change their practice to align with the science of reading. California teacher and literacy coach Margaret Goldberg described her experience making this shift as tremendously challenging, though rewarding, and noted that we are essentially asking many veteran teachers to re-envision their jobs (“I had to go from making stuff up, to following a program, and realizing that that didn’t mean that I was less of a teacher. It didn’t mean that I was de-professionalized. It meant I was actually given the tools a professional deserved.”). A key takeaway from multiple panelists was that many educators are in “initiative overload” and have significant demands on their time, and so **the first step is for districts to strategically abandon what is not working and make literacy a priority for everyone in the school building.** As Dr. Devin Kearns put it, “all teachers should consider themselves literacy teachers.”

A second key step is providing on-the-ground coaching and support for educators. Teaching students how to read is a demanding and complex task that requires a deep understanding of the structure of language, but as New York City principal Maggie Siena noted, “teacher training is tremendously insufficient.” Many teacher preparation programs do not equip educators with the knowledge they need to effectively teach reading, nor do they ensure that pre-service teachers gain sufficient experience in assessing students’ literacy skills and adapting instruction to meet a wide range of

First, **commit to a collaborative, coordinated effort.** Determine the hub that’s actually going to lead this work for transforming literacy instruction — so whether it’s at the Department [of Education] or whether it’s an external entity — and fund it. Secondly, **establish boots-on-the-ground; support your teachers and administrators** through PD [professional development] and coaching and all of those things that they need in order to transform their culture and to change teaching in their schools.

KYMYONA BURK, EdD

*Senior Policy Fellow, ExcelinEd
Former State Literacy Director, Mississippi Dept. of Education*

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needs.²² When teachers see their students struggling to become proficient readers, they often have to figure it out on their own.

Simply offering teachers new materials or sending them to a handful of one-off workshops is insufficient and unlikely to have the desired impact. **Highly scripted reading curricula—even when evidence-based—cannot replace teacher expertise, as any program is only as good as its implementation.**²³ **Any change in curriculum should serve as an on-ramp to ongoing professional learning about reading research; teachers will need job-embedded support to learn why new practices are necessary and how to use new approaches and materials effectively with their own students.** As Dr. Kymyona Burk, the former state literacy director for the Mississippi Department of Education, put it at the summit, districts need to “invest in people—those who are standing in front of children every day” and provide “boots-on-the-ground” to help teachers make the shift. In fact, studies have found teacher coaching to be a more effective strategy for improving instruction and raising student achievement than traditional professional development programming.²⁴ Some of this work has already begun in New York City: through the DOE’s Universal Literacy initiative, approximately 400 reading coaches have received extensive training in evidence-based instruction and are working in elementary schools to help K–2 teachers improve their practice.²⁵ **The coaches are well-positioned to provide the on-the-ground support necessary to drive systemic change.**²⁶

New York City needs a robust literacy safety net: a continuum of support, running from preschool through high school graduation, that identifies students who need extra help in reading and matches them with appropriate, evidence-based intervention.



An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. When we’re thinking about this work, are we creating a literacy safety net, with early identification of the fifteen to twenty percent of children who are dyslexic? Retaining those children ... do[es] not teach them to read. They need therapy. And when we plan the work, **that literacy safety net does not stop at third or fourth grade ... it’s just the start of a developmentally appropriate continuum of support, all the way through to graduation.**

TRACY WEEDEN, EdD *President and CEO, Neuhaus Education Center*

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High-quality, evidence-based core instruction lays a critical foundation for success. However, we know from cognitive science research that learning to read will always be easier for some students than for others. At the summit, Dr. Nadine Gaab pushed the education sector to shift from a *reactive* to a *preventive* model: **rather than waiting to see which students struggle with reading before offering extra support, as has typically been the case, schools should take proactive steps to prevent students from having difficulty in the first place.** One way to do this is via universal screening. Much like routine preventive health care measures (e.g., screening for high blood pressure), early literacy

screeners can catch potential problems early on, when intervention can be most effective and efficient. In addition to identifying individual students who need additional support or may benefit from a more thorough special education evaluation, screeners and progress monitoring assessments should be used to guide core instruction—if two-thirds of a school’s first graders are struggling with a particular skill, for example, that reflects a problem with how the skill is being taught, and general classroom instruction should be modified accordingly.

As Dr. Gaab and other speakers emphasized, it is critical that schools use bias-free, linguistically appropriate screening instruments that have been normed and validated as reliable for the population of students with whom they are being used (“If you’re using a screener that was validated in middle-class White kids in the UK, that might not be relevant for the kids you have in your classroom today”); that are measuring the construct for which they are intended (e.g., a comprehension assessment should not be used to screen for decoding difficulties); and that directly measure children’s abilities, rather than relying solely on teacher or parent observation.²⁷ In addition, **screeners should not serve to label or stigmatize students or limit their access to interesting, high-quality books.** The purpose of screening is to assess students’ needs so that we can meet those needs, prevent difficulties before they occur, and ensure no one falls through the cracks.

Children should not be trapped in those [leveled] books. They should not be the only types of books that they see. And those levels should not be used as a scarlet letter on that child; they should not be walking around saying that they are a ‘level H.’ That is not the child’s identity.

KATIE PACE MILES, PhD

Assistant Professor, Brooklyn College, CUNY

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Simply administering a screener—even an excellent one—will not, on its own, improve literacy outcomes for our students. **Screening is just the first step; what matters is how the results are used. Schools need to know how to interpret the data they collect, and students who need individualized support must receive the help they need in a timely manner.** An effective, cohesive system of support will have several key features:²⁸

- » **Students are matched with evidence-based interventions that are explicit, systematic, and appropriately targeted to their needs.** Intervention programs are not all created equal; as with curricula, many schools continue to use ineffective programs that rely on outdated theories of reading development. Interventions should address a student’s specific needs; a student still struggling with word recognition, for example, will get limited benefit from an intervention focused solely on language comprehension.
- » **Intervention is aligned with and supplements core instruction.** The classroom teacher and the educator providing the intervention should be collaborating, not working at cross-purposes. If the support provided in an intervention is not aligned with the rest of the instructional program, it will cause further confusion for the student, even if everyone involved has good intentions. In addition, intervention should never supplant core instruction; it is an add-on, not a replacement.



DEVIN KEARNS, PhD
Associate Professor,
University of Connecticut

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Students [who need intensive intervention] in middle school often have comprehension difficulty, but it's often the result of long-term word recognition difficulty ... It's often the case that people don't emphasize word recognition skills enough. They want to jump just to language comprehension. The result is students continue to be weak in both areas.

The key is you need to provide core instruction also — so [intervention] is never a replacement, it's always a supplement. Students need access to grade level content, grade level ideas ... If we provide the right support within general education, students will learn the content. What *isn't* true is that that's enough. We can provide accommodations, we can do differentiation ... but if we don't do something *also* to support their foundational reading needs, then we're not going to get to a level where they can not only understand the content with the support of the teacher, but they can read the text on their own.

- » **Intervention is intensive, provided one-on-one or in small groups, with multiple sessions per week.** Intervention that is offered infrequently or inconsistently is unlikely to be effective.
- » **Intervention is provided by individuals who have been well-trained** in evidence-based approaches and who have the support they need to implement programs with fidelity. These individuals must also be skilled at building welcoming, supportive learning environments, particularly for students whose needs have gone unaddressed for multiple years.
- » **Intervention is developmentally appropriate.** A point that came up repeatedly at the summit was that many older students continue to struggle with decoding and need intensive intervention that is age appropriate. For example, students need to practice their emerging word recognition skills by reading decodable text—text that emphasizes the sound-letter relationships they have been explicitly taught—but adolescents are likely to disengage if presented with books designed for kindergartners. As Dr. Katie Pace Miles and Dr. Julie Washington both stressed, older students need decodable text that is relevant to their interests and that looks like something someone their age *should* be reading. It is also critical that older students who are still working on foundational literacy skills continue to have access to grade-level instruction so that they can build content knowledge, stay on track with the curriculum, and feel engaged in school.
- » **There is ongoing progress monitoring** to determine if students are making sufficient growth in response to intervention. As Dr. Kymyona Burk put it, “Collect the data. All kinds of data. Measure everything.” Students’ needs will evolve over time, and systematically collecting and analyzing progress monitoring data helps schools ascertain what is working and when adjustment is necessary. Dr. Devin Kearns and New York City principal Maggie Siena both discussed Data-Based Individualization (DBI), an approach to implementing intensive intervention that involves frequent data collection and adaptation in response to individual students’ needs; Maggie Siena noted that in implementing DBI, her school “saw a tremendous amount of growth among those kids who were having the most difficulty learning how to read.”²⁹
- » **Support is offered during the regular school day.** Interventions that are provided after school, on weekends, or over the summer are only effective to the extent that students are able to attend regularly.

Systems change requires structures that will foster collaboration and ensure sustainability.



JENNY BOGONI

Executive Director,
Read by 4th Campaign

WATCH >>

[You need] the infrastructure to implement things over time. So as you're having student teachers come into your school system, are they getting matched with teachers that are going to model the teaching that you want done in the future? ... And really thinking about how your student teaching matching system works is part of this pipeline, as well as doing the advocacy work with the [institutions of] higher ed that are sending you the majority of your teachers. Are they sending you teachers already prepared, so you don't have to throw money at retraining them? There's a whole ecosystem here that will set up a sustainability for the work you're talking about doing.

Make sure you have the systems in place that will support the change that you are trying to make, and [do] not just assume that the change — because it's so high quality and right — will take hold without those supportive systems.

A final theme that emerged from the literacy summit was the need to break down longstanding divides—between the DOE and teacher training programs; between general and special education; between early childhood and secondary schools—and commit to a collaborative, coordinated effort. As Dr. Tracy Weeden noted, “the silo effect is killing us, and we need to break those siloes down.” **New York City is home to numerous individuals and organizations who have substantial expertise in reading research and instruction and who are already working in this space, but they are often doing so in isolation rather than as part of a cohesive system.** Even within the DOE itself, for example, there are a multitude of different literacy initiatives run out of different offices.

Success is only possible if everyone is on the same page and working in tandem. This means bringing the full array of stakeholders to the table: teachers, school leaders, speech-language therapists, and school psychologists; researchers and teacher educators from the City's colleges and universities; organizations offering professional development programming; after-school and tutoring providers; libraries and community-based organizations; parents, students, and advocates. Jenny Bogoni, Executive Director of the [Read by 4th Campaign](#) in Philadelphia—a concrete example of a broad-based, citywide coalition united around the common goal of protecting every child's right to read—urged New York City to “articulate a shared vision for the city's children that is owned beyond just the school walls.” This means paying attention to the full ecosystem that supports literacy learning, including the role of families, community members, and teacher preparation programs. At the school level, the decisions made by leadership must align with and support the work happening on the ground; **literacy safety nets require infrastructure and school-wide commitment to be impactful.**³⁰ For example, panelists discussed the complex “choreography” involved in scheduling time during the school day for reading interventions and for teacher collaboration.





You can't have reading without word recognition and decoding; you can't have it without vocabulary; you can't have it without considering multilingual, bilingual, and multi-dialectal speakers; you can't have it without excellent teaching. What we're doing now is expecting the schools to come together and integrate everything we're talking about. Why can't we integrate it and talk about it in a coherent way that schools can just extract from? ... **We each have our own little sphere that we're talking about, and yet there's not one of these things that can happen without the others to create a good reader.**

JULIE A. WASHINGTON, PhD *Professor, University of California – Irvine*

WATCH >>

Multiple summit panelists called for greater collaboration between the DOE and institutions of higher education in order to strengthen the teacher pipeline going forward and—in the words of Dr. Katie Pace Miles, a researcher at Brooklyn College—“ensure that all school of ed students know how to teach a striving reader how to read as soon as they walk through a DOE door.” Currently, **there is far too often a disconnect between what happens in the City’s teacher preparation programs and what is expected of new teachers when they enter the school system**; NYU’s Dr. Susan Neuman argued that part of problem lies in the fact that “we all haven’t been talking together enough.” Through such collaborations, the City could also leverage pre-service educators as interventionists in order to provide more DOE students with the individualized support they need. For example, Dr. Miles discussed her work with the Reading Rescue-Reading Ready initiative, a CUNY-DOE partnership in which pre-service teachers are trained in evidence-based early literacy interventions³¹ and matched with elementary school students who need one-on-one or small group support; she described a summer 2021 program that brought together CUNY students and DOE Universal Literacy coaches for this purpose as “electric.”

* * *

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGE

- Bring together stakeholders to move the work forward, coordinate efforts, and sustain support.
- Require all schools to use evidence-based curricula that are culturally and linguistically responsive and aligned with the science of reading.
- Continue and build upon the work of the Universal Literacy initiative to provide on-the-ground coaching and ongoing support to educators.
- Build out the infrastructure for a cohesive literacy ‘safety net’ that identifies students who need extra help in reading and provides them with individualized, evidence-based intervention.

Are the strategies that you're proposing meant to be a band-aid, or are they meant to be a resolution of decades of misaligned policies, practices, and procedures that, prior to our pandemic, weren't really reeling out the results that we assumed that they would?

LACEY ROBINSON *Chief Executive Officer, UnboundEd*

WATCH >>



The challenges facing the New York City public schools are far from new: fifty years ago, then-Chancellor Harvey Scribner called for a new focus on the “very serious” problem of reading instruction,³² even as the *New York Times* lamented his administration’s lack of “a comprehensive, concerted plan...that would embody an all-out assault on the city’s most serious educational ill.”³³ Chancellor Banks has articulated a vision for City schools that points to literacy as “the biggest equity issue we confront.”³⁴ History tells us the work ahead will not be easy and good intentions are not enough. However, the current Chancellor has tailwinds at his back that his predecessors lacked: there is now a massive body of research, unavailable in the 1970s and 80s, on what works in reading instruction; the City has an influx of one-time funding from the federal government and will continue to benefit from the State’s full funding of Foundation Aid in the years ahead; the literacy summit and other efforts have elevated the urgent need for fundamental changes in the City’s approach to reading instruction and demonstrated the widespread support for prioritizing the issue. As was the case five decades ago, **the City needs a comprehensive, long-term plan, and the summit provided concrete action steps that should guide the path forward:**

Bring together stakeholders to move the work forward, coordinate efforts, and sustain support.

Establish a structure, such as an advisory council, to articulate a shared vision, align around goals and a theory of change, and establish benchmarks for measuring success.

The Chancellor recently announced that the Department of Education would be forming an “Advisory Council on Literacy,” which has the potential to fill this role, provided all the necessary players are at the table: teachers, school leaders, speech-language therapists, and school psychologists; researchers and teacher educators from the City’s colleges and universities; organizations offering professional development programming; after-school and tutoring providers; libraries and community-based organizations; parents, students, and advocates. This group should include members who bring expertise in the science of reading; culturally responsive and sustaining education; English Language Learners (ELLs) and the impact of linguistic variation on reading development; special education and the needs of students with a range of disabilities; and the nuts and bolts of policy implementation.

Establish partnerships between the DOE and the City’s teacher preparation programs to build a strong pipeline of future teachers.

There needs to be intentional collaboration between higher education and the public schools to ensure that all teachers enter the classroom ready to teach children how to read on day one and that the training teachers receive in their pre-service program aligns with the needs and practices of City schools so that the DOE does not need to perpetually re-train its educators.

Require all schools to use evidence-based curricula that are culturally and linguistically responsive and aligned with the science of reading.

Conduct a comprehensive inventory of the curricula, interventions, and other supplemental reading programs currently being used in New York City schools.

The City must ensure that all schools are using evidence-based, culturally responsive curricula for core instruction and that students who need extra support in reading have access to evidence-based interventions. To this end, the DOE needs to know what is happening on the ground in every school in order to appropriately target resources and support. Without clear baseline data, it will be far more difficult to gauge progress or hold superintendents and building leaders accountable down the road. In conducting such an inventory, the DOE must assess whether curricula and programs currently in use reflect the diversity of New York City's student population and provide guidance to teachers to support culturally responsive practice; adequately cover all five pillars laid out in the report of the National Reading Panel (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension); do not explicitly or implicitly encourage approaches and teaching strategies unaligned with the scientific evidence; and have demonstrated effectiveness in teaching students, including students with disabilities and English Language Learners, how to read.

Determine which schools need to replace their current programs, set clear timelines for doing so, and fund the purchase of the materials and training necessary for successful implementation.

Last summer, then-Mayor Bill de Blasio announced that the DOE would be using federal COVID-19 relief funding to develop a comprehensive culturally responsive curriculum, called Mosaic, for English Language Arts and math. Though the Mosaic Curriculum was initially slated to roll out in all schools in fall 2023, the effort has now been scaled back to only middle school grades, and it is unclear if or when Mosaic might be rolled out in elementary or high schools.³⁵ It is critical that any early literacy curriculum the DOE develops be firmly grounded in the science of reading. Until the Mosaic Curriculum is universal, the DOE should—in consultation with a panel of experts and educators—vet published ELA curricula, develop a menu of options from which schools can choose, and establish a centralized appeal process for schools who wish to use programs not on the approved list; this process must ensure that any approved alternatives are culturally responsive and provide the explicit, systematic instruction in foundational skills that we know is critical for success.

Continue and build upon the work of the Universal Literacy initiative to provide on-the-ground coaching and ongoing support to educators.

Sending school staff to a handful of workshops is an inadequate strategy for driving meaningful systemic change. Changes in curriculum must serve as an on-ramp to ongoing professional learning, such that all educators have the knowledge and support they need to implement new programs effectively and institute culturally and linguistically responsive practices in their own classrooms. The Universal Literacy coaches, who have already received extensive training in the science of reading, are well-positioned to provide the on-the-ground support necessary to help schools transform their day-to-day work.



The hardest part of changing instruction is realizing that it must be changed. Because, as teachers, we tend to look on the bright side; we tend to look at the growth our kids are making, and we tend to console ourselves or justify our practice by seeing the progress that is there. It's because we don't realize that better is possible. **We've failed for so long to ensure that every kid becomes a reader that teachers are used to having kids in their classes who can't lift the words up off the page. But this is a totally fixable problem, and we need to convince teachers that it can be fixed by giving them the supports and the tools that they need in order to deliver higher quality instruction.**

MARGARET GOLDBERG

Literacy Coach & Co-Founder, The Right to Read Project

WATCH >>

Build out the infrastructure for a cohesive literacy 'safety net' that identifies students who need extra help in reading and provides them with individualized, evidence-based intervention.

Institute universal screening using validated, bias-free, linguistically appropriate instruments that directly assess children's skills.

The City must shift to a preventive model that identifies students who need extra support in reading before they begin to fall behind. The DOE should improve upon the universal screening conducted this year using COVID-19 relief funding and provide additional training to ensure schools know how to use screening instruments and interpret the data collected to provide needed support to students.

Provide individualized, evidence-based intervention to all students, regardless of grade level, who need extra support to become skilled readers.

Interventions must be intensive, age-appropriate, targeted to students' specific needs, and responsive to progress monitoring data. They should align with core instruction and be provided by individuals who are well-trained and have the support they need to implement programs with fidelity. To this end, the City could hire and train a new corps of tutors, leverage current staff who have been trained in evidence-based approaches, and/or scale up promising initiatives like the CUNY Reading Rescue-Reading Ready tutoring corps and the use of Data-Based Individualization (DBI). The DOE must also provide school leaders with support and technical assistance as needed to establish the building-level infrastructure necessary to sustain a robust school-wide continuum of support.



NOTES

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