



Opinion

Opinion: Reading curriculums must change with times

By M-J Mercanti-Anthony|October 2, 2019

Are we teaching reading the wrong way? That is the daunting and uncomfortable question educators across the county are wrestling with in the light of renewed attention to the science of what supports young readers.

There is a lot of evidence that something is amiss. Despite decades of intervention, reading national reading rates are flat. Closer to home, reading scores fell in Greenwich and Stamford last year.

This lack of reading progress — particularly for the most vulnerable — has led to the rise of a [national movement of frustrated parents of dyslexic students](#). In the past three years, these parents have stormed state capitals across the country demanding change to how students in need of reading interventions are treated.

At the heart of this dilemma is public education's 20-year love affair with “balanced literacy.”

This approach was meant to settle the “reading wars” of the 1990s, where rabid proponents of a phonics-based approach to reading instruction squared off against equally rabid proponents of “whole language.” These advocates urged the de-emphasis of phonics in favor of teaching students site words and other symbol-recognition methods of learning words.

Balanced literacy sought the best of both. Sure, teach kids some phonics when needed, but make sure kids are surrounded by rich texts they can read and enjoy. Support students in learning unfamiliar words not simply by sounding it out, but by looking at context clues and syntax.

Balanced Literacy sounds great, but there is growing evidence that it does not work for a lot of kids. This charge has been brought most forcefully by Emily Hanford in three school-foundation shattering [podcast documentaries](#) over the past year.

She points out that the most popular balanced literacy programs — including the reading workshop programs used by Greenwich and Stamford — give lip service to phonics at best. The focus of context and syntax clues in these programs actually confuses students with poor phonics skills and hurts their ability to decode unfamiliar words.

Meanwhile, the science in support of phonics instruction could not be clearer. In an effort to end the reading wars, Congress commissioned a national report on reading, which way back in 2000 unequivocally supported the importance of phonics instruction. Australia and the United Kingdom subsequently commissioned their own national studies in 2005 and 2006, reaching the same conclusion. In fact, the UK government was so convinced that it made systemic phonics instruction in early elementary grades the law. Five years after these changes went into effect, national reading scores were up 23 percent.

It is settled science that while reading workshops can be incredibly nurturing environments for young readers, it is not enough. Once a week practice, the occasional alphabet card review, or “as needed” phonics supports do not qualify. The [science calls for daily, explicit, systemic instruction](#) in both the sounds letters make and how these sounds can be blended together to make words

Because balanced literacy seemed like such a sensible compromise, many districts in the state have been slow to bring their curriculum in line with the real science. The good news is Stamford's curriculum documents point to daily phonics lessons in addition to the reading workshop.

The picture in Greenwich is less clear. Some schools appear to have a phonics component, while others point to a spelling program as their phonics intervention. District-wide there is no systematic phonics program of record.

This is not news to the scores of frustrated special education parents currently demanding reform. They most acutely sense that there is something missing in their child's instruction.

If students do not learn basic reading instruction by the end of first grade, they are likely to remain behind academically for the rest of their lives. Statistically, students who do not learn basic reading instruction by the end of first grade [are likely to remain behind academically for the rest of their lives.](#)

We need to fix this now. Curriculum conversations across the state — and here in Greenwich — need to take stock of the science of reading and make the necessary changes. Moreover, districts must provide phonics-based interventions to all upper elementary, middle, and high school students who may have missed it and still need it. Dyslexic students in particular benefit from age-appropriate phonics programs which remediate gaps in decoding skills.

At one time, schools latched on to balanced literacy because it seemed like the right thing for kids. Now that we know more about what is right for kids, districts need to act fast.

M-J Mercanti-Anthony, Ed.D, is a school administrator for the New York City Department of Education and adjunct professor at Drexel University. He lives in Riverside.