



Evidence-Based Reading Instruction and Educational Equity

Summary

2023 Children's Mental Health Report



Child Mind
Institute

Summary

Evidence-Based Reading Instruction and Educational Equity

Reading is a fundamental skill underlying academic achievement, professional success, and full participation in society. But right now, staggering numbers of children in the United States are not learning to read fluently.

- Only 33 percent of fourth-grade students in the U.S. are proficient readers. And only 63 percent demonstrate even basic reading skills.
- Reading struggles at a young age often affect later academic achievement. One report finds that about 16 percent of students who aren't reading proficiently by the end of third grade don't graduate from high school on time. This rate is four times greater than students who read proficiently by the end of third grade.
- Children who struggle with reading, including those with dyslexia, are at higher risk for mental health challenges, including low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and behavior problems.
- In 2017, 23 percent of adults in the United States have low English literacy skills — about 48 million adults.

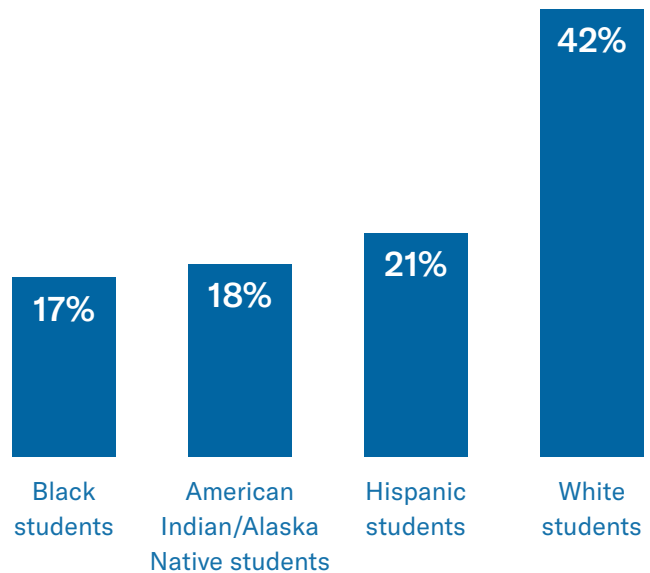
Reading and inequality

- Learning disorders like dyslexia occur at similar rates across ethnicities and socioeconomic groups. But the many costs of low literacy fall more heavily on low-income communities and communities of color.
- Only 17 percent of Black students, 18 percent of American Indian/Alaska Native students, and 21 percent of Hispanic students demonstrated proficiency in reading, compared to 42 percent of white students.
- Only 19 percent of children from low-income families (as defined by eligibility for free or reduced-price school lunches) demonstrated proficiency in reading.
- Research also indicates that African American and Hispanic children who show signs of dyslexia are less likely than white children to be identified as dyslexic through school screening programs, even after controlling for income level, which means that they are less likely to get the early intervention that they need.



Only 33 percent of fourth grade students in the U.S. are proficient readers. Among students from communities of color, rates of reading proficiency are even lower.

Percentage of fourth grade students who are proficient readers



Learning to read

Unlike speaking, reading is not a skill that the brain is hardwired to develop. There is no single reading center in the brain — instead, it involves several different areas of the brain working together to develop the neuronal circuitry required for skilled, fluent reading.

- Some children can learn to read with relatively little effort, no matter what kind of instruction they receive. But most children — including kids with dyslexia — need explicit, systematic reading instruction to build the necessary pathways in their brains and become strong readers.
- Children’s brains are plastic and flexible, and neuroimaging studies have demonstrated that with effective, targeted instruction, the brain areas and systems that kids with dyslexia use to read can change over time. As one team of leading researchers puts it: “The brain systems for reading are malleable and their disruption in children with dyslexia may be remediated by provision of an evidence-based, effective reading intervention.”

- Systematic phonics instruction is an invaluable tool for helping all kids become skilled readers, including those who are vulnerable for reasons other than dyslexia. “Systematic” means that instruction moves step-by-step through a carefully planned progression of phonics skills, from the most common and consistent letter-sound patterns to harder and less consistent letter-sound patterns.



Moving toward the science of reading

- In 2013, Mississippi became a leader in literacy policy with the passage of its Literacy-Based Promotion Act (LBPA). The LBPA's mandates include training teachers in science-based reading instruction (including systematic phonics instruction), early identification of struggling readers, and individualized reading plans for students with identified reading deficiencies. Since the policy's enactment, Mississippi has seen remarkably consistent gains in the reading scores of fourth graders.
- A number of other states have attempted to emulate Mississippi's approach, passing laws that mandate a wide variety of trainings, curricula, and interventions. Data from an ongoing tracking project at Education Week indicates that as of July 2023, "32 states and the District of Columbia have passed laws or implemented new policies related to evidence-based reading instruction since 2013."
- Even New York City, the largest school system in the country, recently mandated curriculum changes to better align instruction with the science of reading. And in July 2023, California became the 41st state to require screening for dyslexia and other reading delays in early grades.

Conclusion

We can advocate for the science of reading at all levels of our education systems.

While progress toward broader implementation of the science of reading is clearly underway, we are far from the universal access to quality instruction that our nation's students deserve. It's crucial to push for reading programs that emphasize systematic phonics instruction while also integrating it with the other pillars of effective reading instruction.

- Advocacy at the state and local levels can push leaders to implement legislation mandating alignment with the science of reading, and to expand funding for related professional development and improved classroom materials.
- States can also change regulations around teacher training and dyslexia screening to ensure that all teachers know the most effective ways to teach reading and all kids who struggle with reading get the early intervention they need.
- Higher education institutions can prioritize preparing teachers to use systematic phonics instruction in the classroom.
- Educators can advocate for the use of systematic phonics instruction in their own schools and classrooms.
- Pediatricians can encourage early screening of language development and developing reading skills to increase the odds that kids in need of early intervention get the right help.
- Parents can familiarize themselves with the components of phonics instruction and, if their child's school is not using a phonics-based curriculum, push for change through the school administration.

Learn More

Visit childmind.org/2023report to download the full 2023 Child Mind Institute Children's Mental Health Report, learn more about the best ways to teach children to read, and find practical resources that parents and educators can use to support struggling readers.