

Supporting Phonics Instruction: Laying a Foundation for Reading

The importance of phonics to reading and writing success



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Best practices in reading instruction are always evolving, as researchers are constantly learning how to better support early literacy, particularly for young readers and struggling readers. Recent years have brought more changes to how phonics instruction is emphasized in reading curriculum. Many educators who taught during the Reading First era and later within the Common Core are uncertain about how to best support strong phonics instruction, and thus how to lay the foundation for reading success in their districts.

This web seminar featured a renowned researcher and professor emeritus of literacy studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, who discussed the importance of phonics instruction to reading and writing, and outlined some practical strategies for promoting more effective literacy instruction.

Jim Cunningham: Why are they called foundations? Because for the building to be strong, they must be strong. What building are we talking about? In the case of reading foundations, the building is reading. If we want to have strong readers we have to help those readers build strong foundations. That's why they're called foundations in the first place.

There are six reading foundations, one of which is phonics/decoding. It's not the phonics that students know that matters, it's the phonics they use. What's the use of phonics? It's to be able to decode unfamiliar printed words. If students cannot decode, then it does not matter how much phonics they supposedly know. They don't have the foundation.

We can probably say that phonics is one of the most important reading foundations, if not the most important one. But we also need to say that it's historically been the most controversial one. And for the first time this century phonics is again controversial.

Why? Because critics of phonics instruction have been emboldened anew by the failure of Reading First. In Reading First there was a central role played by phonics, but phonics critics learned the wrong lesson from the program's demise.

What's the right lesson? To answer that question I have to go back to the question, "Why are they called foundations?" The second answer to that question is, "Because they're not the building." The problem was not that Reading First taught foundations, the problem was that foundations were pretty much all it taught, at least in K2. Reading First seemed to be based on confusion about the difference between the foundation and a building. The building of writing was usually ignored all together, and the building of reading was often postponed until third grade. The lack of success for Reading First was not because it taught phonemic awareness and phonics, but because it neglected to teach reading and writing at the same time. That's the

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right lesson to learn.

The standards we have now correct that error. Foundations are just as important in the new standards as they were under Reading First, but what changed is that in K2 teachers are also expected to teach reading and writing.

What matters in teaching phonics? The first thing is best practices. We certainly have been paying lip service to best practices for a long time, but there are some real obstacles to actually delivering best practices in phonics instruction.

The first obstacle is the obvious one: It is that teachers may not always know current best practices. The phonics instructional materials that many schools use are sometimes left over from the Reading First era when an hour a day could be devoted just to phonics instruction. The goal was for students to read simple texts with lots of decodable words, instead of the more rigorous texts we expect students to read today.

But the biggest obstacle to best practices in phonics is the myth that we will raise test scores more if our instruction looks like the test versus using best practices to teach the ability being tested. We have research to show that if you use encoding tasks or phonetic spelling tasks as part of your phonics instruction, then students will learn the phonics better and will be able to use it in decoding better.

Best practices

What are some best practices for teaching phonics? We should give students regular opportunities to apply the phonics knowledge they are learning in meaningful texts. If it's a text you enjoy reading, then you will get more enjoyment for having decoded words in that text. There's a reward, there's a payoff. However, if you're reading not-meaningful texts, then the only reward is the teacher saying you did it right.

A second best practice is having students spell unknown words as best they can using their phonics knowledge, because it provides opportunities to ap-

ply phonics knowledge in a more concrete way. The people who put the standards together know what the research says about this—that's why they put phonetic spelling in Language Standard 2 at K and 1.

A third best practice is that students benefit from being taught how to use patterns. We have to teach letter-by-letter phonics. We have to teach phonemic segmentation. But once students are asked to decode words of more than four letters, they need to also be able to use patterns such as blends, digraphs, phonograms and suffixes to read and write words.

Another thing that matters is something hardly anyone is talking about: time management. We have to budget the time available so that across a week, every major component of the language arts curriculum receives a reasonable allocation of time.

If somebody tells me they don't have time to teach writing or they don't have time to teach comprehension, I want to know how they budgeted their time. We have to be smart. We have to choose ways of teaching that can be equally effective but actually take less time, so that we have time for it all. Blended learning is very important here, because it provides us with an opportunity to provide more instruction in the same time period.

I also recommend that you use an online adaptive diagnostic assessment. If time is limited, we don't have time for kids to be receiving phonics instruction that they're not ready to learn, or phonics instruction that they already know. A diagnostic assessment can guide us, target instruction, and help us use our time more efficiently.

We must work to modify how we teach every component of language arts in the elementary grades until all components can be taught well in the time allotted.

To download a copy of Dr. Cunningham's latest whitepaper, "What Really Matters in Teaching Phonics Today: Laying a Foundation for Reading," please visit www.curriculumassociates.com/phonicsDA.

To watch this web seminar in its entirety, please visit: www.districtadministration.com/ws040517

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