

The Importance of High-Quality Reading Instruction

Reading is the fundamental skill upon which all formal education depends. Research now shows that a child who doesn't learn the reading basics early is unlikely to learn them at all. Any child who doesn't learn to read early and well will not easily master other skills and knowledge, and is unlikely to ever flourish in school or in life.

Low reading achievement, more than any other factor, is the root cause of chronically low-performing schools, which harm students and contribute to the loss of public confidence in our school system. When many children don't learn to read, the public schools cannot and will not be regarded as successful—and efforts to dismantle them will proceed.

Thanks to new scientific research—plus a long awaited scientific and political consensus around this research—the knowledge exists to teach all but a handful of severely disabled children to read well. It is estimated that 85 to 90 percent of students who are poor readers—including many now classified as learning disabled—could increase their reading skills to average level with intensive, early instruction delivered by skilled teachers. Research also shows that the use of decodable text—books and materials containing a high proportion of new words that adhere to phonetic principles students have already been taught—can help young students at the pre-primer and primer levels to master decoding skills and increase speed and fluency. For the vast majority of students much of this can be accomplished before the end of first grade, enabling them to tackle the vast array of interesting and challenging children's literature that can help expand vocabulary and increase background knowledge and comprehension.

It is for these reasons that the AFT believes that all students must be guaranteed a carefully crafted approach to the teaching of reading that reflects the latest research on successful reading intervention. This must include early, systematic and explicit instruction in phonics; an emphasis on listening skills, language development, conceptual and vocabulary development, storytelling and writing; exploration of rich and challenging children's literature; and literacy-related activities that can enhance children's love of books and learning.