

Public Comments for Virtual School Board Meetings #19

My public comments are related to: * Strategic Plan: ACPS 2025

Topic * Strategic Plan/literacy instruction

Name * Margaret McLaughlin

What is your relationship to ACPS? * Parent/Guardian of an ACPS Student

To include your comments as part of the Public Comments agenda item at weekly Special Called School Board Meetings, enter your comments here:

I continue to be disappointed by the commitment of ACPS to literacy programs that yet another state has “soundly rejected” and score “so poorly in the state’s first round of evaluation, it didn’t move on to the in-depth secondary evaluation, and failed again on appeal.”

<https://co.chalkbeat.org/2020/6/25/21303429/colorado-is-cracking-down-on-reading-curriculum-heres-how-denvers-made-the-cut?fbclid=IwAR2kmafkADD9StA6whbHz98art1H2KXO90YyEgRNaQrDyzCUWuCaJUUEqJA>

The explicit commitment to Units of Study and Fountas and Pinnell in the strategic plan condemns 5 more years or students and teachers to struggle mightily under the weight of a failed curricular concept. If we are truly unwilling to discontinue the use of curricula that leave so many ACPS students behind then I implore you to provide teachers and administrators (especially principals) with rigorous learning opportunities in the science of reading and the English language. This will equip them with the tools to succeed in their hugely complicated job of successfully turning non-reading brains into reading brains no matter the curriculum used.

<https://www.aft.org/ae/summer2020/moats>

We all know the lift will be heavier over the next number of years but the goal remains the same- teaching all students the skills they need to read and succeed. If the chosen curriculum fails to do that, get the skills and knowledge teachers need into their hands anyway possible.

Linked articles are printed below:

Colorado is cracking down on reading curriculum. Here's how Denver's made the cut.

By [Ann Schimke](#) Jun 25, 2020, 1:53pm MDT



First grade Denver teacher Katie Ridder works with students on a reading lesson using Orton-Gillingham, a phonics-heavy approach used in some Denver schools.

AAron Ontiveroz/The Denver Post

State evaluators have approved the main reading curriculum used in Colorado's largest school district after initially saying it didn't pass muster.

As part of Colorado's ongoing effort to get more students reading well, state evaluators recently vetted more than 20 reading curriculums used in kindergarten through third grade. In April, they approved eight of them.

But Benchmark Advance, the primary curriculum used in most Denver elementary schools, wasn't on the list because it didn't earn a passing score. Two months later, after the curriculum's publisher, Benchmark Education, made changes to the product and appealed the state's decision, its score rose enough to make the list for kindergarten through second grade.

With new rules requiring Colorado schools to use reading curriculum backed by science, [the state's list of approved curriculum](#) is a big deal. Districts using programs on the list won't have to make expensive, time-consuming changes in the midst of a coronavirus-fueled budget crisis. Districts that use curriculum that didn't make the cut — and lots of districts fall into this category — could face penalties if they don't switch.

Benchmark Education was the only publisher to revise its core curriculum during Colorado's review process and the only one to win such a substantial reversal.

A few other curriculums, including EL Education, Core Knowledge Language Arts, and Wonders, got approval after appeal for one or two additional grade levels — but were always on the 2020 approved list in some form. Each curriculum was reviewed originally and on appeal by a team of two to four evaluators, which included Colorado educators and state education department staff.

Eric Hirsch, executive director of EdReports, a national nonprofit that reviews curriculum, said it's not uncommon for curriculum publishers to make revisions during the review period. Colorado education officials said they didn't treat Benchmark differently from other publishers that appealed evaluators' decisions.

"They were not granted a permission different from anyone else," said Floyd Cobb, the state education department's executive director of teaching and learning, in an email. "If a vendor has the resources and

desire to make changes to their program while it's under review, that is at their discretion. We will review what they present.”

In their 788-page appeal document, Benchmark officials said the version of the curriculum they initially submitted for review was a 2021 pilot edition and that they made changes in response to evaluators' critiques in the final version.

The company made a number of revisions across several grade levels. For example, the units now give teachers more guidance on helping students learn and practice vocabulary. Benchmark also revised units so teachers provide immediate feedback when students practice a new phonics skill.

The company's Spanish-language counterpart — called Benchmark Adelante — was also initially rejected by state evaluators. An appeal of that decision is not yet complete.

Denver district officials described the approval of Benchmark Advance as a good step, and said they're waiting to see if Benchmark Adelante will be approved on appeal too.

“In our estimation, there is no discernible difference in the components or the quality of the resources” in Advance and Adelante, said Tamara Acevedo, Denver's deputy superintendent of academics.

The district first adopted Benchmark Advance and Benchmark Adelante five years ago. Neither were approved by the state education department during a 2017 review, but at the time it didn't matter much since the state had little power to control curriculum choices.

That changed with the passage of a 2019 state law updating a landmark 2012 law called the READ Act. Fed up with stagnant reading proficiency rates despite many millions spent on struggling readers, lawmakers gave state education officials new powers to control curriculum choice, oversee reading-related spending, and mandate teacher training on reading instruction.

The state has not detailed how it will use its new oversight power, especially given the additional financial stress districts are now facing. Denver, for example, has already planned to save money by delaying science curriculum purchases. No doubt, the approval of Benchmark Advance represents one less headache for district leaders in the coming year.

That's not to say some Denver schools won't have to make changes. Only about two-thirds use Benchmark Advance or Adelante. The rest use a variety of different curriculums, including several the state judged subpar.

Denver is among five Colorado districts, including Aurora, Cherry Creek, Mesa County Valley, and Mapleton, that use a popular curriculum the state soundly rejected. It's called Units of Study for Teaching Reading, or known popularly as “Lucy Calkins.” The program, which at times has students guess at words instead of sounding them out, scored so poorly in the state's first round of evaluation, it didn't move on to the in-depth secondary evaluation, and failed again on appeal. The same thing happened to a curriculum called Fountas and Pinnell Classroom, which is used in some Denver, Aurora, and Boulder Valley schools.

ReadyGEN, a curriculum used in at least seven of Colorado's 30 largest districts — from Douglas County to Greeley-Evans — passed the first round of evaluation, but wasn't approved in the second. On appeal, it again failed to win approval.

Cobb indicated in an interview with Chalkbeat earlier this spring that the state might allow more flexibility to districts using curriculums like ReadyGEN, which was previously on the state's approved list and aligns more closely to state criteria than does Lucy Calkins.

Here are the reading curriculums approved for use in Colorado schools (and the ones that aren't)

In April, Colorado's education department released a list of eight core English-language reading curriculums approved for use in K-3 classrooms. Many publishers whose curriculums didn't make the list appealed the state's decision. The list below shows the results of the original reviews and the results after appeals were completed. Overall, the appeal process resulted in one major change to the approved list: The addition of Benchmark Advance, the reading curriculum used in many Denver schools.

- Approved as core curriculum for grades K-3
- Approved as core curriculum for some grades
- Approved as supplemental and/or intervention program
- Not Approved

Approved Curriculum	Original Review	Appeal Results
Benchmark Advance Used by: Denver	<input checked="" style="background-color: #FF8C00;" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <i>Grades K-2</i>
Benchmark Workshop Used by: No districts surveyed	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<i>Not requested</i>
Collaborative Literacy Used by: No districts surveyed	<input type="checkbox"/> <i>Grades K-2</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <i>Grades K-2</i>
Core Knowledge Language Arts Used by: District 49, Eagle County, Greeley-Evans, Montrose, Pueblo 60, Rocky Mountain Prep charter network, University Prep	<input type="checkbox"/> <i>Grades K, 1, 3</i>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
EL Education K-5 Language Arts Used by: Aurora, Denver, Eagle County, Mapleton, Pueblo 60, Roaring Fork	<input type="checkbox"/> <i>Grade 2</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <i>Grades K-2</i>
Fundations Used by: Boulder Valley, Rocky Mountain Prep charter network	<input style="background-color: #FFD700;" type="checkbox"/>	<i>Not requested</i>
Heggerty Phonemic Awareness Used by: Littleton	<input style="background-color: #FFD700;" type="checkbox"/>	<i>Not requested</i>
Into Reading Used by: Widefield	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<i>Not requested</i>

Teaching Reading Is Rocket Science

What Expert Teachers of Reading Should Know and Be Able to Do

By Louisa C. Moats



The most fundamental responsibility of schools is teaching students to read. Because reading affects all other academic achievement and is associated with social, emotional, economic, and physical health, it has been the most researched aspect of human cognition. By the year 2000, after decades of multidisciplinary research, the scientific community had achieved broad consensus regarding these questions: How do children learn to read? What causes reading difficulties? What are the essential components of effective reading instruction and why is each important? How can we prevent or reduce reading difficulties? Two decades later, hundreds of additional studies have refined and consolidated what we know about bolstering reading achievement, especially for students at risk.

Scientists use increasingly sophisticated technology that can picture the brain's activation patterns or measure split-second reactions to speech or print. New statistical methods can document the complicated interactions of many factors as students develop reading skills. Fine-grained analyses illuminate the nature of individual differences and individual responses to instruction. These advanced investigative techniques have confirmed and extended the bedrock findings about reading and effective teaching of reading that were known 20 years ago. Evidence to guide our practices is stronger than it has ever been.

Unfortunately, much of this research is not yet included in teacher preparation programs, widely used curricula, or professional development, so it should come as no surprise that typical classroom practices often deviate substantially from what is recommended by our most credible sources. As a result, reading achievement is not as strong as it should be for most students, and the consequences are particularly dire for students from the least advantaged families and communities.

This we know: reading failure can be prevented in all but a small percentage of children with serious learning disorders. It is possible to teach most students how to read if we start early and follow the significant body of research showing which practices are most effective. Students living in poverty, students of color, and students who are eligible for remedial services can become competent readers—at any age.

Persistent “gaps” between more advantaged and less advantaged students can be narrowed and even closed. Fundamentally, these gaps are the result of differences in students’ opportunities to learn—not their learning abilities.

Although educators have long understood the importance of literacy, teaching children to read is very complex. Far too many children have trouble reading and writing. About 20 percent of elementary school students nationwide have serious problems learning to read; at least another 20 percent are at risk for not meeting grade-level expectations.¹ For children growing up in underresourced communities and attending underresourced schools, the incidence of reading failure is astronomical and completely unacceptable. Students who are African American, Hispanic, learning English, and/or from impoverished homes fall behind and stay behind in far greater proportion than students who are white and middle class. The rate of weak reading skills in these groups is 60–70 percent, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress.²

The tragedy here is that most reading failure is unnecessary. We now know that classroom teaching itself, when it includes a range of research-based components and practices, can prevent and mitigate reading difficulty. Although home factors do influence how well and how soon students read, informed classroom instruction that targets specific language, cognitive, and reading skills beginning in kindergarten enhances success for all but a very small percentage of students with learning disabilities or severe dyslexia. Researchers now estimate that 95 percent of all children can be taught to read by the end of first grade, with future achievement constrained* only by students’ reasoning and listening comprehension abilities.³

While parents, tutors, and the community can contribute to reading success, classroom instruction is the critical factor in preventing reading problems and must be the primary focus for change.⁴ To be clear: although the day-to-day work is teachers’ responsibility, students’ reading success is our shared responsibility. From preparation programs to standards and assessments to curricula and professional development, the policies and systems currently impacting how reading is taught need to improve—dramatically and rapidly. Teaching reading *is* rocket science. But it is also established science, with clear, specific, practical instructional strategies that all teachers should be taught and supported in using.

Research-Validated Ideas for Instruction



A well-validated concept that should underpin the design of instruction is called the Simple View of Reading.⁵ It states that reading comprehension is the product of word recognition and language comprehension. Without strong skills in either domain, an individual’s reading comprehension will be compromised.

A reader’s recognition of printed words must be accurate and automatic to support comprehension. The development of automatic word recognition depends on intact, proficient phoneme awareness, knowledge of sound-symbol (phoneme-grapheme) correspondences, recognition of print patterns such as recurring letter sequences and syllable spellings, and recognition of meaningful parts of words (morphemes).⁶ Young readers progress by gradually learning each of these ways that our print system represents language, and then applying what they know during ample practice with both oral and silent reading. If reading skill is developing successfully, word recognition gradually becomes so fast that it seems as if we are reading “by sight.” The path to that end, however, requires knowing how print represents sounds, syllables, and meaningful word parts; for most students,

developing that body of knowledge requires explicit instruction and practice over several grades.⁷ While some students seem to figure out how the print system works through incidental exposure, most do not.

Language comprehension, the other essential domain that underlies reading comprehension, depends on background knowledge, vocabulary, ability to decipher formal and complex sentence patterns, and recognition of the devices that hold a text together.⁸ Furthermore, language comprehension is facilitated by metacognitive skills such as monitoring whether reading is making sense and choosing to act if it does not. The language comprehension factor in overall reading achievement becomes more and more important from about fourth grade onward.⁹ From preschool through high school, students gain vital exposure to a variety of text forms, language patterns, background knowledge, and vocabulary both by listening to text read aloud and by reading itself.

The implications of the Simple View of Reading should be self-evident: reading and language arts instruction must include deliberate, systematic, and explicit teaching of word recognition and must develop students' subject-matter knowledge, vocabulary, sentence comprehension, and familiarity with the language in written texts. Each of these larger skill domains depends on the integrity of its subskills.

Learning to read is a complex achievement, and learning to teach reading requires extensive knowledge and skills across the components of word recognition, language comprehension, spelling, and writing. Consider what the classroom demands of the teacher. Children's interest in reading must be stimulated through regular exposure to interesting books and through discussions in which students respond to many kinds of texts. For best results, the teacher must instruct the majority of students directly, systematically, and explicitly to decipher words in print, all the while keeping in mind the ultimate purpose of reading, which is to learn, enjoy, and understand. To accommodate children's variability, the teacher must assess children and tailor lessons to individuals or groups. This includes interpreting errors, giving corrective feedback, selecting examples to illustrate concepts, explaining new ideas in several ways, and connecting word recognition instruction to meaningful reading and writing.

Some children learn language concepts and their application very easily in spite of incidental teaching, but others never learn unless they are taught in an organized, systematic, efficient way by a knowledgeable teacher using a well-designed instructional approach. Children of average ability might learn enough about reading to get by if their instruction is haphazard; with systematic research-based instruction, those students could achieve much more, such as the appreciation for language structure that supports learning words from context, perceiving subtle differences in meaning, or refining language use.

Toward a Curriculum on the Science of Reading



A core curriculum on effective literacy instruction for pre-service and in-service teacher education would, of course, be supplemented and honed over time, but its goal is to bring continuity, consistency, quality, and comprehensiveness to the many different programs, organizations, and systems through which aspiring and current teachers receive information about how to teach reading. Given the current science of reading, this core should be divided roughly into the following four areas:

1. Knowing the basics of reading psychology and development;
2. Understanding language structure for both word recognition and language comprehension;
3. Applying best practices in all components of reading instruction; and
4. Using validated, reliable, efficient assessments to inform classroom teaching.

This excerpt offers an introduction to the first two areas. For a detailed discussion of all four areas, please see the full report: www.aft.org/sites/default/files/Moats.pdf.

1. Reading Psychology and Development

Learning to read is not natural or easy for most children. Unlike spoken language, which is learned with almost any kind of contextual exposure, reading is an acquired skill. Although surrounding children with books will support reading development, and a “literature-rich environment” is highly desirable, it is not sufficient for learning to read. Neither will exposure to print ordinarily be sufficient for learning to spell, unless organized practice is provided. Thus, teachers must be reflective, knowledgeable, and intentional about the content they are teaching—that is, the symbol system (orthography) itself and its relationship to meaning.

Good readers do not skim and sample the text when they scan a line in a book. They process the letters of each word in detail, although they do so very rapidly and unconsciously. Those who comprehend well accomplish letter-wise text scanning with relative ease and fluency. When word identification is fast and accurate, a reader has ample mental energy to think over the meaning of the text. Knowledge of sound-symbol mapping is crucial in developing word recognition: the ability to sound out and recognize words accounts for about 80 percent of the variance in first-grade reading comprehension and continues to be a major (albeit diminishing) factor in text comprehension as students progress through the grades (and students’ background knowledge and vocabulary become ever-larger factors in comprehending academic texts).¹¹



The ability to sound out words is, in fact, a major underpinning that allows rapid recognition of words. (This recognition is so fast that some people mistakenly believe it is happening “by sight.”) Before children can easily sound out or decode words, they must have at least an implicit awareness of the speech sounds that are represented by symbolic units (letters and their combinations). Children who learn to read well are sensitive to linguistic structure, recognize redundant patterns, and connect letter patterns with sounds, syllables, and meaningful word parts quickly, accurately, and unconsciously. Effective teaching of reading entails these concepts, presenting them in a sequence from simple and consistent to complex and variable.

The word-recognition component of reading is most closely dependent on the phonological aspect of language processing.¹² Phonological language skills include awareness of bits of speech or linguistic elements within words: consonant and vowel phonemes, spoken syllables, grammatical endings, and meaningful word parts (morphemes). Awareness of these linguistic elements in spoken language is essential for making sense of print because our alphabetic writing system represents language at all these levels. When students cannot rapidly associate the sounds, syllables, and/or morphemes in spoken words with printed symbols, they will not be able to store words in their mental dictionaries. Conversely, a new word that is decoded accurately through phonological analysis can be pronounced and remembered, even if its meaning is not yet known.

Beginning reading instruction of necessity will focus on teaching students how to read and write words, following a systematic and logical sequence. When appropriate, the emphasis will shift to increasing reading volume. Combining research on reading, cognitive science related to the role of knowledge in thinking, and practice-based wisdom, it appears that opportunities for wide reading are best provided within a knowledge-building curriculum in which text readings are linked by a theme or topic.¹³ Ironically, while background knowledge can be gained from reading, it is also true that those who already know more about a topic make better inferences and retain meanings better than those who know little about it.

Therefore, reading practice should be linked to or embedded within the study of subjects including science, history, literature, and the arts. Interpretive strategies that facilitate comprehension—including summarizing, questioning, predicting outcomes, and monitoring one’s own understanding—are best used in the service of learning defined curricular content.¹⁴ Moreover, writing in response to reading is one of the best ways to enhance reading comprehension.¹⁵

2. Language Structure

Expert teaching of reading requires knowledge of language structure at all levels.¹⁶ Without such knowledge, teachers are not able to respond insightfully to student errors, choose examples for concepts, explain and contrast words and their parts, or judge what focus is needed in a lesson. The table below provides examples of key concepts of language structure and how they apply to instruction.

Selected Concepts and Skills by Domain	Ideas for Application to Instruction
<p>1. Phonetics and Phonology Understand that speech sounds are not letters, and letters do not make sounds—they represent them.</p> <p>Know that consonant and vowel phonemes can be grouped into classes with similar properties (e.g., stops, nasals, etc.).</p>	<p>Instead of asking “What sound does each letter make?,” use accurate language and focus on a specific sound, asking, “What letter(s) represent /e/ in first?”</p> <p>Help children focus on sounds by saying things like, “/m/, /n/, and /ŋ/ are the three ‘nosy’ sounds in English; hold your nose to feel how these sounds go through the nose.”</p>
<p>2. Phoneme Awareness Produce speech sounds accurately during reading, vocabulary, and spelling instruction.</p> <p>Identify, match, and select appropriate examples of words containing specific phonemes.</p>	<p>Say /r/ orply, not tuh.</p> <p>In teaching awareness of the phoneme /ʃ/, use words including shoe, chef, and sugar. Listen for the sound; don’t confuse the task with spelling or phonics.</p>
<p>3. Morphology Identify morphemes (the smallest meaningful units of language) and distinguish them from syllables.</p> <p>Recognize that spellings of morphemes are often stable even when pronunciation varies in words with a common root; as a result, spelling can be a clue to meaning.</p>	<p>The word interchangeable has five syllables and three morphemes: /ntər, change, able.</p> <p>Express, expression; legal, legislate; inspire, inspiration; nature, natural.</p>
<p>4. Orthography Understand that letters and letter combinations (graphemes) represent sounds but are not the same as sounds.</p> <p>Use a comprehensive scope and sequence that includes instruction in digraphs, blends, silent letter combinations, vowel teams, diphthongs, and the six common syllable types.</p>	<p>The phoneme /f/ is represented by f, ff (stuff), gh (tough), and ph (phone).</p> <p>Explicit instruction in the written code should extend at least through grade 3 when syllables and morphemes in longer words are tackled.</p>
<p>5. Semantics Teach word meanings in relation to other word meanings.</p> <p>Adopt a routine for teaching unfamiliar word meanings to students.</p>	<p>Include antonyms, synonyms, associations, analogies, and categorical relationships on vocabulary tasks.</p> <p>Provide a student-friendly definition, many examples, and opportunities for students to say and use new words.</p>
<p>6. Syntax and Text Structure Appreciate that texts have structures that can be represented with graphic organizers (e.g., narrative and informational texts organized as compare/contrast, argumentation, description, cause/effect, etc.).</p> <p>Identify cohesive devices such as pronoun references, connecting words, word substitutions, parallel sentence structure, and paragraph organization.</p>	<p>Identify and illustrate for students the purpose of a given text and its logical structure.</p> <p>Help students identify how a text hangs together and how to follow the connections among ideas as meaning is constructed.</p>

Experts agree that children who initially are at risk for failure are saved, in most cases, by instruction that directly teaches the specific foundational language skills on which proficient reading depends.¹⁷ Effective teachers of reading raise awareness and proficiency through every layer of language organization, including sounds, syllables, meaningful parts (morphemes), phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and various genres of text. Their teaching strategies are explicit, systematic, and engaging.¹⁸ They also balance language skill instruction with its application to purposeful daily writing and reading, no matter what the skill level of the learner. Middle- and upper-grade children who are weak readers can be brought up to grade level with

appropriate instruction (although the time, effort, and emotional strain for children and teachers involved is considerably greater than that required to teach younger children, so offering research-based instruction in the early grades must remain a top priority).

A rich and meaningful curriculum, in which students are exposed to a variety of texts as they learn concepts in science, literature, social studies, history, the arts, and culture, should provide the context for developing reading and writing skills. Comprehension strategies should not be taught in isolation but used as necessary to enhance understanding of text assigned for content learning. Useful comprehension strategies to embed in content reading include prediction of outcomes, summarizing, clarification, questioning, and visualization; these can be modeled explicitly by the teacher and practiced overtly if students are not comprehending well or if they approach reading comprehension passively. Vocabulary is best taught with a variety of complementary methods, both direct and incidental, designed to explore the relationships among words and the relationships among word structure, origin, and meaning. Of course, children also benefit from access to full libraries and incentives to read independently.

The fact that teachers need better preparation, professional development, and resources to carry out deliberate instruction in reading, spelling, and writing should prompt action rather than criticism. It should highlight the chronic gap between what teachers need and what they have been given. Just about all children can be taught to read and deserve no less from their teachers. Teachers, in turn, deserve no less than the knowledge, skills, and supported practice that will enable their teaching to succeed. There is no more important challenge for education to undertake.

Louisa C. Moats ([link is external](#)) has been a teacher, psychologist, researcher, graduate school faculty member, and author of many influential scientific journal articles, books, and policy papers on the topics of reading, spelling, language, and teacher preparation. After 15 years as a licensed psychologist specializing in evaluation and consultation with individuals who experienced reading, writing, and language difficulties, she served as a site director of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development's Early Interventions Project and research advisor and consultant with Sopris Learning.

*It is important to note that students' reasoning and comprehension abilities can also be enhanced through informed instruction. As students' subject-matter knowledge and vocabulary grow, so will their capacity to think critically. ([return to article](#))

Endnotes

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