Most people would agree that teaching children how to read is among the most important of our schools’ many important missions. When children don’t learn to read well, they generally can’t do well in most other subjects, including math and science, and this effect worsens as they go through school. What is more, without reading, my kids and I would not be as happy as we are today. By adding learning that books can give us.

The good news, as the recent Harry Potter phenomenom hints is that our readers—especially our early readers—are reading. And looking kids come out of the movie discussing whether it was two or three books.

Contrary to popular belief, international comparisons put the reading of U.S. students on a par with the reading performance of students in many other industrialized nations. And even in our lowest-performing schools, reading achievement is fine. Yet, a lot of new research shows we can do better, and we have to keep working. Particularly with the best performing readers.

Certainly, poor students account for a large share of struggling readers—and to close the current education gap we have to ensure that our most vulnerable students learn to read early and well. Yet wealth is no guarantee of success: reading difficulties extend across all income levels; and with this problem instruction and support, the vast majority of students can learn to read well by the third grade.

Utilizing our teachers

This means, first and foremost, making sure our teachers are equipped with the knowledge and skill they need to be good reading teachers. There has been an emerging research consensus about how to teach reading effectively. In 1999, the AFT devoted an issue of its quarterly, Education Digest, to the then subject. Since then, the AFT has created professional development programs on beginning morning instruction based on this research. It has also published a model reading instruction for teacher education and training ("Reading: An Essential Science"). Information about research-based practices and how to put them into practice, teachers, and worked with other education and media organizations to translate this research into practical classroom strategies to improve student performances.

One piece of the recently enacted "No Child Left Behind Act," which builds on legislation signed into law in 1998, gives a boost to improving the teaching of reading. Now called Reading First, the law extends the reach of federal reading initiatives and provides funding for new programs.

Early Reading First, for example, funds developers of language and early literacy skills programs. It also funds a new program, ensuring that they begin school ready to read. It is still unclear how much money from this new law will go to improve the preparedness of prospective teachers, to ensure that existing teachers have access to assessment-based professional development.

Reading and early reading teachers demonstrated age-appropriate methods for the systematic teaching of phonemic awareness and phonics, how to incorporate reading comprehension strategies into regular classroom discussions, and how storytelling and other literary materials can be used to build vocabulary and background knowledge. Master teachers provided classroom teachers with in-school coaching and advice.

The "missing piece"

This kind of support made a real difference for teachers. As one experienced first-grade teacher in New Orleans commented, this program provided "the missing piece" that helped reach those students she never could.

Last summer, first-grade teacher Linda Lewis emphasized the need for early reading support. At a White House conference on early childhood education, she also noted the historic gap between education research and classroom practice. The first lady, who taught second grade before becoming a U.S. librarian, admitted that "All I did in teaching reading, of course, but in practice, I didn’t really know how to teach a class of students to read." As a former first-grade teacher, I knew just how she felt.

Just as doctors and other health professionals need to learn about developments in the medical field so that the treatment of patients will be based on the best evidence we can offer, so do teachers and other educators need to have access to new methods that work in teaching reading.

With this kind of support, teachers can help make sure our children enter magical worlds like Harry Potter’s, and how to imagine worlds and possibilities they wouldn’t otherwise contemplate.