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# AMERICAN Educator

A JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL EQUITY, RESEARCH, AND IDEAS

## Raising Joyful, Confident Readers

A special issue  
on teaching reading  
for **families** and  
**educators**

**¡Artículos  
en español!**

Ver páginas 11, 39,  
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# Real Solutions for Loneliness, Learning Loss, and Literacy

RANDI WEINGARTEN, AFT President

BACK TO SCHOOL is a time of hope and excitement for students, families, and educators. But this year, teachers across the country are wondering whether topics they teach and books they offer students will get caught up, baselessly, in the tempest of the culture wars. They might hear presidential hopefuls slander them as “groomers” who teach “filth.” These demagogues do nothing to help students in public schools—quite the contrary.

They are engaged in a coordinated attack on public schools (as I explain in my article on page 64) to starve public education and divert public school funding to private and religious schools through vouchers. Ninety percent of parents send their children to public schools, and the vast majority want public schools strengthened, not privatized.

What I’ve seen in classrooms all over the country as educators help their students recover and thrive, and what research has proven, together form a set of strategies and solutions that will help students and strengthen public education.

These strategies address students’ loneliness, learning loss, and literacy, and they are at the center of the AFT’s new \$5 million Real Solutions for Kids and Communities campaign. Our goals are to

- unlock the power and possibility that come from being a confident reader;
- ensure that all children have opportunities to learn by doing—engaging in experiential learning, including career and technical education;
- catalyze a vast expansion of community schools that meaningfully partner with families;
- care for young people’s mental health and well-being, including by demanding that social media companies protect, not prey on, children; and
- fight for the teaching and support staff, and the resources, students need to thrive.

It starts with reading, the foundation for all academic learning. The AFT’s Reading Opens the World program has given away 1.5 million books to children and families over the last year—and we’re giving away 1 million more. Now we’re helping teachers develop their expertise in reading instruction through Reading Universe, a new online resource developed by working with real teachers in real classrooms. (For details on Reading Universe, see page 24.) And we’re reaching out to families with this issue of *American Educator*. We’re even printing 100,000 extra copies to give away at community events!

Another solution is experiential learning—learning by doing: like third-graders in Washington, DC, who role-play that they are officials addressing real issues affecting their city, and chemistry students in Cincinnati who get out of an escape room (their classroom) by solving puzzles that embed the content they just learned. Career and technical education is experiential learning at its best, and it prepares students not only for traditional trades programs, but also for careers in healthcare, information technology, and skilled manufacturing.

Experiential learning prepares students for the opportunities of tomorrow, and community schools help solve the challenges students and families confront today. Community schools wrap academics, healthcare, mental health services, food assistance, and much more around public schools—supports that students and families need to learn and live. Through meaningful partnerships with families and deep community engagement, they become centers of their communities. AFT members have helped create more than 700 community schools across the country, and we are part of a movement calling for 25,000 community schools by 2025. (To determine if your community is ready to launch and sustain community schools, see page 77.)



## What I’ve seen in classrooms, and what research has proven, together form a set of solutions that will help students recover and thrive.

To further support young people’s well-being, we are working with parent and student groups to counter the harmful impacts of social media. In our new report, *Likes vs. Learning: The Real Cost of Social Media for Schools* (available at [go.aft.org/5wo](http://go.aft.org/5wo)), we call on social media platforms to make fundamental changes to prioritize safety for children—such as turning on the strongest safety features by default and implementing safeguards that deter students from overuse and protect students’ privacy.

Of course, we need appropriate funding for our public schools and the three R’s—educator recruitment, retention, and respect—so all students have the educators they need.

These solutions are worthy on their own; together, they are transformational. At the AFT, we are doing everything we can to scale and sustain them. And they should be a national priority, because we all want our young people to recover and thrive. □

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# Seven Questions You Always Wanted to Ask a Reading Teacher



Helping your child learn to read is important—and can feel overwhelming. Even if you are able to talk to your child’s teacher often, you probably still have questions about literacy. Wanting to help answer those questions, we partnered with the National Parent Teacher Association to get a list of questions from parents for reading teachers. Then, we brought together a group of current teachers and teachers-turned-researchers to answer them. You are your child’s first and most important teacher; we hope this guide helps you feel confident as you help your child develop a love of reading.

—EDITORS

## 1

### What are the building blocks of literacy?

The original building block of literacy is early oral language, representing children’s developing capacity to understand and produce the words and sentence structures of the language(s) they speak. Oral language skills, including an ever-expanding vocabulary, are critically important for literacy.

They are one of the necessary foundations underneath successful reading comprehension. The stronger children’s oral language skills, the more readily they will be able to comprehend what they read.

Another necessary foundation for reading comprehension is skilled word reading, including automatic recognition of familiar words and the ability to “decode” or sound out unfamiliar words. How is skilled word reading developed? One building block that leads to skilled decoding is alphabet knowledge—matching the printed forms and sounds of each letter. Another building block that supports skilled decoding is the ability to identify and manipulate the sounds within words. Together, these two foundational skills allow children to “crack the code” and begin decoding: first simple one-syllable words, then more advanced words with multiple syllables and more complex spelling patterns. The more words children successfully decode, the more words they automatically recognize the next time they see them, and the more fluent their reading becomes.

All along the way, children are drawing upon their language skills to help them decode and comprehend what they are reading. As text becomes more complex, these oral language skills become

increasingly relevant. This is why it is so important to support children's language skills before, while, and after they learn to read.

## 2

### When can you really tell that literacy is hard for your child?

Learning to read takes many years, so it can be hard to tell if your child is on track or needs extra support. Among young children, early signs that learning to read may

be challenging for a child include difficulties with oral language, with manipulating sounds within words, and with learning the alphabet. These and other things to look for in three- to five-year-old children are described by Beth M. Phillips on page 32.

For more details on the phases that children move through as they learn to read, see Linnea C. Ehri's article on page 17. If your child does not seem to be progressing steadily through these phases, see the article by Sharon Vaughn and Jack M. Fletcher on helping children who are struggling readers, on page 34.

It is also important to recognize that some children who do not have trouble learning to decode may still face challenges with reading comprehension. See Sonia Q. Cabell's article on page 21, where she discusses what early instruction should look like to support comprehension. Also see Natalie Wexler's article on page 19 about supporting comprehension and knowledge acquisition through conversations about what you are reading with your child.

## 3

### How important is fluency? And when should children stop working on fluency?

Fluency becomes important as soon as children begin to read texts and stays important even for proficient readers. Fluency is the

ability to read accurately, quickly, and with appropriate expression. Fluency supports comprehension. When children become fluent readers, they read with ease and their reading sounds a lot like their talking. Fluency frees the reader to think about the meaning of the text. If a child reads slowly and haltingly, having to focus on sounding out words, then it is very hard to understand the information and ideas shared in the sentences. Fluency also represents comprehension. When you read out loud, you vary your tone of voice and pause at the right times; this indicates that you are understanding the text, and it helps listeners understand too.

By the end of elementary school, children should be able to read relatively simple chapter books and informational texts fluently—but they may need to practice reading more complex texts easily and accurately. This remains true even for advanced readers. When advanced readers encounter new texts with many rare words, especially multisyllabic words, their typically fluent reading may slow down. Complex sentence structures can also be a challenge to fluent reading. Practicing a text several times can assist with presenting it fluently to others.

If your child can correctly sound out words but does so with difficulty, they need more practice reading. As Diane August recommends in Spanish on page 44 (and in English at [aft.org/ae/fall2023/bilingual](http://aft.org/ae/fall2023/bilingual)), "ask your child's teacher for texts that your child can practice reading aloud to you every night."

## 4

### How does technology help literacy skills?

Technology can support children who are learning to read in a variety of ways. Elementary school teachers often use programs that range from helping a child sound out a specific word to reading a whole book to a child. Programs like these offer practice and individualized help while the teacher is busy with other children. Many computer programs and apps are also available to support children with specific needs. They can include accessibility features that remove barriers that children may otherwise face in accessing print.

However, technology does not replace the need for children to be taught and encouraged by caring adults—you, other family members and caregivers, and teachers. Not all technology is created equally. For example, sometimes technology can have features that are distracting, such as buttons during a read-aloud that don't support the meaning of the story. Also, when it comes to children's learning, there is no substitute for warm and responsive back-and-forth conversations and interactions.

## 5

### How is literacy connected to writing?

There is a reciprocal relationship between reading and writing. In fact, literacy researchers and teachers talk about *decoding* (sounding words out) and *encoding* (spelling words). Both rely on the same foundational knowledge: knowing the sounds that make up words and the letters that represent those sounds. At the same time, practice in writing helps children build their reading skills. This is especially true





for younger children. As they are learning how letters represent sounds and how to sound words out, it's helpful to also practice spelling words.

When children read extensively, they also become better writers. Reading a variety of genres (e.g., science fiction, memoirs, and poetry) helps children learn text structures and language that they can transfer to their own writing in other formats (e.g., a short story or a persuasive essay). In addition, reading provides young people with background knowledge that they can use when they write.

To help your three- to six-year-old start writing, check out the tips offered by Nell K. Duke on page 14. And to help your elementary school child become a better writer, turn to the article by Judith C. Hochman, Toni-Ann Vroom, and Dina Zoleo on page 28.



**There is a saying that after third grade, children are no longer learning to read but are reading to learn. Why is that, and is it too late to develop reading skills?**

A child doesn't need to wait until third grade to read to learn about the world around them. In fact, it is never too early to start developing the skills that set the stage for reading to learn! It's true that educators must focus on teaching children foundational reading skills in the beginning of elementary school so they become confident readers (and writers) during elementary school. Linnea C. Ehri explains the phases of foundational skill development on page 17. But foundational skills alone won't prepare your child to read to learn—that also requires oral language and knowledge development. Even before children can fluently decode words, they can learn through listening to books read aloud by teachers, parents, and other caregivers. The language of books is more formal than the language we use in daily conversations and often includes vocabulary we don't usually use while

speaking. Also, the conversations that take place before, during, and after reading aloud are important to children's learning. Learn how to help your child understand texts in the articles by Sonia Q. Cabell on page 21 and Natalie Wexler on page 19.

Thankfully, it is never too late to develop reading skills! Even with good early instruction, some children in later grades face significant difficulties learning to read. With explicit instruction, practice, and support, they can make great strides. If your child is struggling to read, stay determined and hopeful—and see the article by Sharon Vaughn and Jack M. Fletcher on page 34.



**Why does dyslexia seem to be diagnosed more than it used to be, and why doesn't that immediately mean children need services?**

There is increased awareness about dyslexia that may be leading to more children being diagnosed. Providing initial screenings of all children allows schools to identify those who may need additional evaluation to determine whether they should receive a dyslexia diagnosis. Early diagnosis is especially critical for helping children with reading challenges and disabilities, including dyslexia. Timely diagnosis enables children to receive focused, evidence-based instruction that meets their needs. Diagnosis also ensures that children receive appropriate accommodations within the school setting.

As Sharon Vaughn and Jack M. Fletcher discuss, there is a wide range of skills among children who have dyslexia. Therefore, not all will require the same level or type of supportive services. High-quality instruction and intervention for all children, including those with dyslexia, meet children where they currently are and help them to advance their reading skills. To learn how you can partner with your child's teacher in this process, turn to the article by Vaughn and Fletcher on page 34. □



# Reading Rockets

Launching Young Readers

Are you looking for more guidance on helping your child at home? Do you want to better understand the instructional practices your child's teacher is using? These video series from Reading Rockets can help!

## Reading SOS: Expert Answers to Family Questions About Reading

This series has dozens of three- to six-minute videos answering families' questions about everything from helping young children learn new words to supporting children with dyslexia. There's also a section of slightly longer videos for helping deaf children learn to read. When you visit [go.aft.org/qhx](http://go.aft.org/qhx), you'll find videos answering nearly 40 questions, including:

- Should I be concerned if my child reads slowly?
- Why can't my child reread a word in a sentence that he just sounded out?
- Should I correct my child when she reads aloud to me?

- If I sense that my concerns about my child's reading are being ignored due to bias, what can I do?
- My child is learning English. How can we tell if she needs help with speech issues?

## Looking at Reading Interventions

With seven in-depth videos of about 15 minutes each, this series shows one-on-one instruction with children in kindergarten through third grade. You'll learn strategies you can use at home to help your child master foundational reading skills. And, you'll become better prepared to talk to your child's teacher about extra supports at school. Take a look at [go.aft.org/vd1](http://go.aft.org/vd1).

### Question: How do I help my child learn new words while we read aloud?

Reading aloud is a great way for children to learn new words. Literacy expert Sandra Wilborn suggests that parents pause during the read aloud to elaborate on a new word by giving a simple definition, connecting the word to something your child knows, and using it in a sentence. Reinforce the learning by using that new word at home in the weeks ahead.



### Episode 1: Letter Names with Reese, Kindergartener

### Episode 2: Blending Sounds in Syllables with Autumn, Kindergartener



Ms. Parrell works with Autumn to master specific pre-reading skills, with a focus on strengthening her phonological awareness and giving Autumn extra practice with onset and rime.

[Watch online >](#)

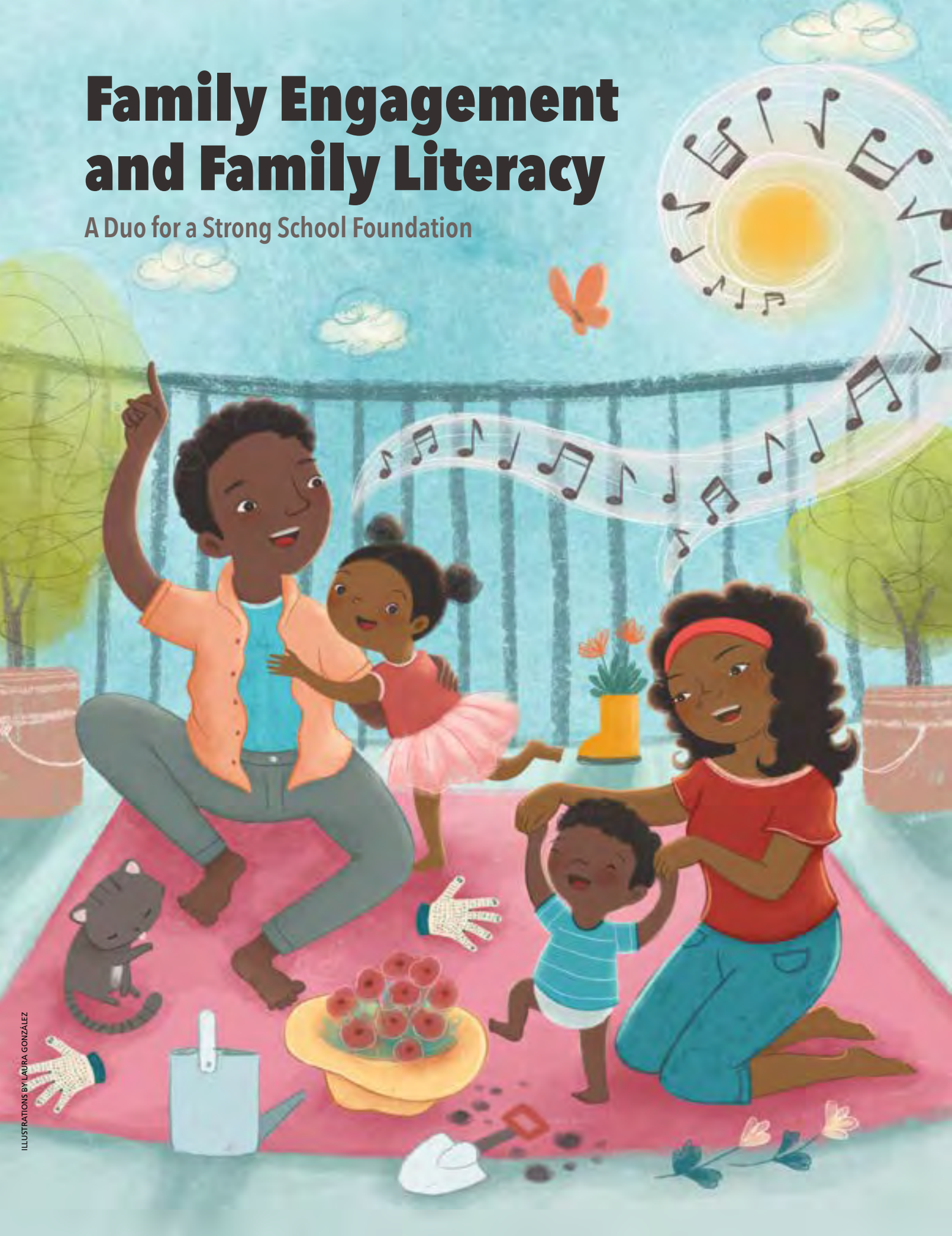
Professional development guides:

- [Episode 2: Viewer's Guide \(PDF\)](#)
- [Episode 2: Facilitator's Guide \(PDF\)](#)



# Family Engagement and Family Literacy

A Duo for a Strong School Foundation





Family literacy is about supporting your child’s literacy development by providing a print-rich environment, reading aloud, and using print to spark conversations. This does not have to cost any money. Print is all around us! In the kitchen alone, there are words on can labels, box tops, cereal packages, and so much more. Families can use these items (that are usually thrown away) to develop their children’s understanding of words and numbers. With your child, you can read a recipe from the back of a box, talk about the farms where foods are grown, or talk about the life cycle of plants in your yard or a nearby park. And, with your help, your child can cut out labels and draw pictures to place in a journal, capturing a daily story about what you are cooking together.

As families talk with their children throughout these everyday experiences, they are building strong language skills that will help their children in school. To make sure your child becomes a confident reader, there are six key skills for you to help them develop from birth through elementary school and beyond:

- **Oral language:** listen to and speak with family members and friends;
- **Vocabulary:** learn and use words to convey meaning at a rich level (for example, after learning *big*, your child is ready for *gigantic* and *enormous*);
- **Phonological awareness:** hear sounds within the language (for example, the word *sounds* begins and ends with the /s/ sound);
- **Sound-letter relationships (alphabetic principle):** connect the sounds in words to the letters that represent them (for example, the /s/ sound is represented with the letter *s*, as in *sound*, and the letter *c*, as in *circle*);
- **Fluency:** read accurately and quickly with ease (starting with basic texts in early elementary grades and progressing to complex texts in high school and beyond); and

By Rebecca A. Palacios

**F**amily engagement and family literacy are two of the most important keys, or components, for building a strong foundation for children’s academic success. In the years from birth through prekindergarten—before your child even sets foot in an academic school setting—you are their first and most important teacher.

Family engagement is about spending quality time with your child every day: talking, playing, and asking questions. As you interact, you build bonds and promote your child’s language development. Many of our earliest memories are of spending time with loved ones and doing things together. This engagement can be whatever you enjoy: reading together, taking walks, gardening, caring for pets, playing games, cooking together, or singing together. While these activities might seem more natural with three- and four-year-olds, little ones from birth through age two also need you to read, sing, and talk to them—just as much as they need your smiles, kisses, and hugs. Through these warm interactions, you’ll also be teaching your child how to talk. Listening to you is how babies and young children learn patterns of language and vocabulary.



Rebecca A. Palacios taught in early childhood classrooms for more than 30 years in Corpus Christi, Texas. She is a teacher mentor, the former vice chair of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, and the author of *Being Your Child’s Most Important Teacher: A Guide for Families with Young Children*.



- **Comprehension:** understand what is being read and heard (from picture books to classroom discussions to college textbooks).

Below are some examples of fun ways you can support your child in developing these six crucial skills.

This important time between birth and age four is critical for developing your child’s foundation for success in school. In fact, about 90 percent of their brain’s growth happens before kindergarten.

The four Es that are important for families to remember as you play, teach, and talk with your child are

- **Experiences:** do things with your child;
- **Expressions:** talk to your child;
- **Explanations:** answer questions and encourage curiosity; and
- **Extras:** take your child to free or low-cost opportunities like a park, a farmers’ market, the beach, a forest, or the mountains.

These four Es cover many of the bases for helping your child become a strong reader and succeed in school. They include, of course, family engagement and family literacy. More importantly, you’ll spend a lot of quality time together! □

Oral Language	Phonological Awareness	Sound-Letter Relationships (Alphabetic Principle)	Vocabulary	Fluency	Comprehension
Talk to your child about your day and ask them about their day.	Have your child listen for words that have the same initial sounds as you talk about your day, like <i>me/my, rain/run,</i> and <i>car/care.</i>	Look for words that begin with the same letter, like <i>Mary/Monica</i> and <i>cook/clean,</i> or end with sounds that make the words rhyme, like <i>hat/mat</i> and <i>day/stay.</i>	Make a list of words that are new that day. Add to the list every day on a calendar or in a journal.	Read aloud every day, showing your child how to read smoothly. You can take turns: you read a few words or a sentence and then your child repeats you.	Ask questions about your child’s day: <i>What did you do at school that was different? Did you like a particular activity at school today?</i>
Explain what you are doing as you are cooking.	Have your child play a game clapping out the syllables of words that you are using in the kitchen that end in <i>-ing,</i> such as <i>cooking, washing, stirring, grilling, mashing,</i> and <i>chopping.</i>	Write down the <i>-ing</i> words used as you cooked. Have your child clap the syllables again, then talk about and show how they all end with <i>-ing</i> and sound the same.	Ask your child to say as many <i>-ing</i> words as they can think of. Write them down (and you can use this list on another day to clap the syllables).	Read aloud parts of the labels used as you are cooking. They have math (like portion size), geography (where the food comes from), and literacy (so much to read) in them.	Ask questions about the cooking process and the ingredients, such as <i>What happened first, second, third, next, last? What was needed to make this food? Where did the food come from?</i>
Discuss the environment, such as the weather and the seasons of the year.	Have your child sing rhyming songs about the weather and listen for the rhyming words, like <i>sunny</i> and <i>funny.</i>	Write down weather words, like <i>sun, wind, fog, rain,</i> and <i>snow,</i> then sound them out.	Write down new weather vocabulary words in a journal or on a calendar.	Read aloud a book on clouds, weather, or the seasons of the year several times so your child can hear you read with fluency.	Discuss what you read in the book on clouds, weather, or the seasons and ask questions about what you read. When the weather is like what it is in the book, take your child outside to experience it.

# El compromiso y la alfabetización familiar

Un dúo para una base escolar sólida





Por Rebecca A. Palacios

**E**l compromiso y la alfabetización familiar son dos de las claves o componentes más importantes para construir una base sólida para el éxito académico de los niños. En los años que van desde el nacimiento hasta el preescolar, incluso antes de que su hijo ponga un pie en un entorno escolar académico, usted es el primer y el más importante maestro de su hijo.

El compromiso familiar consiste en pasar tiempo de calidad con su hijo todos los días: hablando, jugando y haciendo preguntas. A medida que interactúa, crea vínculos y promueve el desarrollo del lenguaje de su hijo. Muchos de nuestros primeros recuerdos son de pasar tiempo con seres queridos y hacer cosas juntos. Este compromiso puede consistir en cualquier cosa que disfruten: leer juntos, pasear, trabajar en el jardín, cuidar mascotas, participar en juegos, cocinar juntos o cantar juntos. Si bien estas actividades pueden parecer más naturales con niños de tres y cuatro años, los pequeños desde el nacimiento hasta los dos años también necesitan que usted les lea, cante y les hable, tanto como necesitan de sus sonrisas, besos y abrazos. A través de estas cálidas interacciones, también le estará enseñando a su hijo a hablar. Escuchándolo a usted es la forma como los bebés y los niños pequeños aprenden patrones del lenguaje y del vocabulario.

*Rebecca A. Palacios enseñó en aulas de primera infancia durante más de 30 años en Corpus Christi, Texas. Es mentora de maestros, ex vicepresidenta de la Junta Nacional de Estándares de Enseñanza Profesional y autora de Usted es el maestro más importante de su hijo: Una guía para familias con niños pequeños.*

La alfabetización familiar consiste en apoyar el desarrollo de la alfabetización de su hijo proporcionándole un entorno rico en material impreso, leyendo en voz alta y utilizándolo para suscitar conversaciones. Esto no tiene por qué costar dinero. ¡La impresión nos rodea! Solo en la cocina, hay palabras en etiquetas de latas, tapas de cajas, paquetes de cereales y muchas cosas más. Las familias pueden utilizar estos artículos (que generalmente se tiran) para desarrollar en sus hijos la comprensión de las palabras y los números. Con su hijo, puede leer una receta de la parte posterior de una caja, hablar sobre las granjas donde se cultivan los alimentos o sobre el ciclo de vida de las plantas en su jardín o en un parque cercano. Y, con su ayuda, su hijo puede recortar etiquetas y hacer dibujos para colocarlos en un diario, capturando así una historia diaria sobre lo que están cocinando juntos.

A medida que las familias hablan con sus hijos a lo largo de estas experiencias cotidianas, desarrollan sólidas habilidades lingüísticas que ayudarán a sus hijos en la escuela. Para asegurarse de que su hijo se convierta en un lector seguro de sí mismo, hay seis habilidades clave para ayudarlo a desarrollarse desde el nacimiento hasta la escuela primaria y estudios posteriores.

- **Lenguaje oral:** escuchar y hablar con familiares y amigos;
- **Vocabulario:** aprender y utilizar palabras que transmitan un significado a un nivel rico (por ejemplo, después de aprender *grande*, su hijo está listo para *gigantesco* y *enorme*);
- **Conciencia fonológica:** escuchar sonidos dentro del idioma (por ejemplo, la palabra *sonidos* comienza y termina con el sonido /s/);
- **Relaciones sonido-letra (principio alfabético):** relacionar los sonidos de las palabras con las letras que los representan (por ejemplo, el sonido /s/ se representa con la letra *s*, como en *sonido*, y la letra *c*, como en *círculo*);
- **Fluidez:** leer con precisión y rapidez con facilidad (comenzando con textos básicos en los primeros grados de primaria y progresando a textos complejos en la escuela secundaria y estudios posteriores); y





Este importante período entre el nacimiento y los 4 años es crítico para desarrollar la base de su hijo para el éxito en la escuela. De hecho, alrededor del 90 por ciento del crecimiento de su cerebro ocurre antes del jardín de infancia.

Las cuatro *Es* que son importantes que las familias recuerden mientras juegan, enseñan y hablan con su hijo son:

- **Experiencias:** haga cosas con su hijo;
- **Expresiones:** hable con su hijo;
- **Explicaciones:** responda a preguntas y fomente la curiosidad; y
- **Extras:** lleve a su hijo a oportunidades gratuitas o de bajo costo como un parque, un mercado de agricultores, la playa, un bosque o las montañas.

Estas cuatro *Es* cubren muchas de las bases para ayudar a su hijo a convertirse en un buen lector y tener éxito en la escuela. Incluyen, por supuesto, el compromiso y la alfabetización familiar. Y lo que es más importante, ¡pasarán mucho tiempo de calidad juntos! □

- **Comprensión:** comprender lo que se lee y escucha (desde libros ilustrados hasta debates en clase y libros de texto universitarios).

He aquí algunos ejemplos de formas divertidas en las que puede apoyar a su hijo(a) a desarrollar estas seis habilidades cruciales.

Lenguaje oral	Conciencia fonológica	Relaciones sonido-letra (principio alfabético)	Vocabulario	Fluidez	Comprensión
Cuéntele a su hijo cómo le fue a usted en su día y pregúntele a él sobre su día.	Haga que su hijo escuche palabras que tengan los mismos sonidos iniciales que usted habla sobre su día, como <i>me/mi, los/las</i> y <i>carro/cara</i> .	Busque palabras que comiencen con la misma letra, como <i>María/Monica</i> y <i>cocina/cocodrilo</i> , o que terminen con sonidos que hagan que las palabras rimen, como <i>casa/masa</i> y <i>día/tía</i> .	Haga una lista de palabras que son nuevas ese día. Agregue a la lista todos los días en un calendario o en un diario.	Lea en voz alta todos los días, mostrándole a su hijo cómo leer sin problemas. Pueden turnarse: lea unas pocas palabras o una oración y luego su hijo las repite.	Haga preguntas sobre el día de su hijo: <i>¿Qué hiciste en la escuela que fuera diferente?</i> <i>¿Te gustó una actividad en particular en la escuela hoy?</i>
Explique lo que está haciendo mientras cocina.	Haga que su hijo juegue a palmear las sílabas de las palabras que está usando en la cocina que terminan con <i>-an</i> como: <i>pan, mezclan, coman, doran</i> y <i>muelan</i> .	Anote las palabras <i>-an</i> utilizadas mientras cocinaba. Pídale a su hijo que de una palmada a cada de las sílabas que escuche nuevamente, luego háblele y muéstrelle cómo todas terminan con <i>-an</i> y suenan igual.	Pídale a su hijo que diga tantas palabras <i>-an</i> como pueda pensar. Escríbalas (y puede usar esta lista otro día para palmear las sílabas).	Lea en voz alta partes de las etiquetas utilizadas mientras cocina. Contienen información matemática (como el tamaño de las porciones), información geográfica (de dónde proceden los alimentos) e información de alfabetización (hay mucho que leer) en ellas.	Haga preguntas sobre el proceso de cocción de los alimentos y los ingredientes, como: <i>¿Qué pasó primero, segundo, tercero, siguiente, último?</i> <i>¿Qué se necesitaba para hacer esta comida?</i> <i>¿De dónde procedía la comida?</i>
Hable sobre el medio ambiente, como el clima y las estaciones del año.	Haga que su hijo cante canciones que rimen sobre el clima y escuche las palabras que riman, como <i>nube</i> y <i>tuve</i> .	Escriba palabras meteorológicas, como <i>sol, viento, niebla, lluvia</i> y <i>nieve</i> , y luego pronúncielas.	Escriba nuevas palabras de vocabulario meteorológico en un diario o en un calendario.	Lea en voz alta un libro sobre las nubes, el clima o las estaciones del año varias veces para que su hijo pueda escucharlo leer con fluidez.	Hable sobre lo que leyó en el libro sobre las nubes, el clima o las estaciones y haga preguntas sobre lo que leyó. Cuando el clima sea como el del libro, lleve a su hijo afuera para experimentarlo.

# H Is for Home

Supporting Foundational Literacy Skills



By Nell K. Duke

**Y**our preschooler is “helping” you make dinner. You need some sour cream. Your child needs to figure out which container has the sour cream—not the cottage cheese. Here’s a teachable moment: “Ssssour cream starts with the ssss sound, and we spell that sound with the letter *s*. Let’s look for the container with a word that has the letter *s* at the beginning!”

Teachable moments—opportunities to help children learn foundational reading skills—happen every day in our homes and communities. You can use these moments to complement the systematic instruction your child should be receiving at school (preschool and early elementary school). Here are some ways to take advantage of teachable moments.

## Point Out Print

Children aren’t born knowing that letters have a special importance in our society. As toddlers or preschoolers, they may be just as interested in a door’s hinges as the sign on it. You can help your child understand that print is important by pointing it out and talking about its purpose. For example, when you see a stop sign, you can tell your child, “The letters on that sign spell ‘stop.’ They tell us to stop. They help us not crash into other cars.”



*Nell K. Duke is the executive director of the Center for Early Literacy Success at Stand for Children and a professor of education at the University of Michigan.*

When you are reading a book or other text to your child, run your fingers along the words as you read. In addition to helping your child learn that the letters are telling you what to read/say, you are helping your child to understand the direction in which we read. For example, in English we read from left to right and top to bottom. As children grow, point out more advanced aspects of print, such as the exclamation point on a “Happy Birthday!” card or the search results that help you find what you’re looking for online.

## Emphasize Sounds

Learning the names of letters is valuable, but learning the sound or sounds spelled by each letter is also important for your child’s development. For sounds to teach early on, see the box on page 16 for the English alphabet (if your home language uses a different writing system, teach that instead or as well!). When you are writing, say a sound aloud, invite your child to say it with you, and then show your child how to spell that sound. For example, if you are leaving a note to say that dinner is at six, emphasize the /d/ sound\* as you say “d d dinner” and then explain that we spell that /d/ sound with the letter *d*. Show your child how you write the letter. Take care when you pronounce the sounds. Rather than saying “duh,” try to clip the vowel sound after the *d* sound as much as possible. And be sure to pronounce words and sounds the way you do in your dialect or way of speaking—children learn best when they can connect letters to the way you and they speak every day.

## Name It

Research studies have found that children’s names are especially important for their early literacy development. Names

\*Throughout this magazine, slash marks indicate the letter sound rather than the name of the letter.

often help children understand that print can represent the things we say. Children tend to learn the letters in their names before other letters. And a child's name is often among the first words they write. Expose your child to their name often and give them lots of opportunities to write their name themselves. Early on, you can invite your child to watch you write their name as you demonstrate how to form each letter. (If possible, use whatever way of forming each letter is taught in the schools in your community.)

Later, children can trace what you have written. As they work to write their names themselves, don't worry if their name doesn't look perfect; that will come with time.

Look for lots of authentic reasons for your child to write their name: to label clothing, to sign a card, to make a place card, and so on. And don't worry if the way your child's

name is spelled doesn't match the letter-sound relationships in the box on page 16. This gives you an opportunity to help your child understand that there are often many ways to represent a sound. For example, in *Ella* and *Niesha*, the letter *a* spells the "uh" sound.

### Write Away

Engaging young children in writing is great for their literacy development. Need help with a shopping list? A reminder note? A text message to a relative? Invite your child to help you write it! Early on, children often pretend to write, using scribbles or other marks that look more and more like letters over time. Next, children may use a combination of letters and other shapes. The letters children choose to write may have no relationship to what they wish to communicate. But eventually, given experiences such as those described in the previous paragraphs, your child will begin to represent the sounds they

are hearing. Many children rely heavily on letter names early on—for example, writing "MT" for *empty*. But they will move to letter sounds, perhaps spelling it "emtee." Do not worry if your child doesn't spell words conventionally. That will come later in elementary school. In fact, researchers find that children have better outcomes later on if they have experience spelling words as they sound. Support your child to spell correctly the letter patterns that they have been taught, but not patterns that they have not yet been taught. For example, they might spell *school* as "skool" if they have been taught the sounds that the letters *s*, *k*, *oo*, and *l* spell, but haven't yet been taught the relatively unusual case in English in which *ch* spells the sound associated with the letter *k*.

### Put It in Perspective

Developing your child's foundational literacy skills is important, but so is developing their social and language skills, knowledge of the world, and enthusiasm for learning to read and write. Make teachable moments in literacy just one of the many priorities you have for your child, and always make the learning positive.

Also, be a critical consumer of programs and products that claim to teach children to read and write—most of them are not well aligned with research and may do more harm than good. Look to sources you can trust; a few of my favorites are PBS Kids ([pbskids.org](http://pbskids.org)), the Florida Center for Reading Research ([fcrr.org/families](http://fcrr.org/families)), and the National Center for Families Learning ([familieslearning.org](http://familieslearning.org)). If your child is having difficulty meeting age expectations around literacy, seek resources such as those discussed in the article by Sharon Vaughn and Jack M. Fletcher on page 34.

Most importantly, ground all your interactions around literacy in your loving relationship with your amazing child. □



# Getting Started

## Common Sounds That Letters Represent

Early in children’s development, it’s important to help them learn common sounds that letters represent. For most letters, just one sound is taught for each letter; but for some of the letters, a second sound is also recommended:

Letter	Link to the sound (or sounds) at the beginning of:
Aa	Apple (also, apron)
Bb	Ball
Cc	Cat (also, ceiling)
Dd	Dog
Ee	Edge (also, eagle)
Ff	Fox
Gg	Guitar (also, giraffe)
Hh	Hat
Ii	Itchy (also, ice cream)
Jj	Jellybean
Kk	Kite
Ll	Leaf
Mm	Moon
Nn	Nest
Oo	Octopus (also, ocean)
Pp	Pumpkin
Qq	Queen
Rr	Rainbow
Ss	Socks
Tt	Turtle
Uu	Umbrella (also, unicorn)
Vv	Van
Ww	Watermelon
Xx	Box*
Yy	Yellow
Zz	Zipper

\*Words with x at the beginning are rare and don’t reflect the sounds (“ks”) that are most commonly associated with the letter.



# Phases of Development in Learning to Read and Spell Words



By Linnea C. Ehri

There are several ways that people might read words. They can sound out and blend letters to **decode** words. They can read new words by **analogy**; for example, if they already know *play* and *jump*, they can read *plump*. They can use prior meanings in a sentence or text to **predict** words (and to confirm that words read in other ways fit the meaning of the text).

Words that readers have read before and have stored in memory can be read **automatically by sight**. Readers can look at word spellings and recognize the pronunciations and meanings immediately without having to stop and decode, analogize, or predict words. This enables them to read text easily. The meanings of words just pop into their minds without any effort and enable them to focus on the meaning of the text.

In elementary school, an important goal of reading instruction is to enable children to read most words automatically by sight so that they can focus on learning from and enjoying what they are reading. But becoming a strong reader takes several years. As a parent or caregiver, you need to know if your child is making good progress in learning to read. Along with many colleagues, I've been studying how children learn to read for more

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*Linnea C. Ehri, a member of the Reading Hall of Fame and the National Reading Panel, has been researching how children learn to read and write since 1970.*

than 50 years. My research suggests that children move through four phases on their way to becoming joyful, confident readers.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Pre-Alphabetic Phase

During the pre-alphabetic phase, which is typical of three- and four-year-olds who have not yet begun reading instruction, children have little knowledge of how letters represent sounds, so they use visual or context cues to read (or guess) words. For example, they may use the golden arches rather than the letter M to read “McDonald’s.” They may know letters in their own names, but these are memorized rather than connected to the sounds in their names.

Children’s spoken vocabularies grow during this phase, especially when adults read books to them. The more words they know, the easier it will be to build their reading-by-sight vocabularies later on. So, try reading to your child every day. It will become a fun time to snuggle up together—and you’ll be helping your child grow into a strong reader.

## 2. Partial Alphabetic Phase

To move into the partial alphabetic phase, children need to learn letter shapes, names, and sounds. They also need to be taught how to detect the smallest sounds (which are called *phonemes*) in spoken words. For example, *help* has four phonemes (each letter makes a sound), and *chick* has three phonemes (because *c* and *h* are combined to make one sound and likewise *c* and *k*). Typically, children in the partial alphabetic phase are in kindergarten or first grade; they know letter names and some letter sounds, but they have not received systematic instruction in how letters represent sounds. Older struggling readers may also be stuck in this phase and therefore need more instruction and practice.

Distinguishing phonemes is hard because there are no breaks between them in spoken words. Instruction in how letters represent sounds—like *ch* making the first sound in *chick*—helps children distinguish phonemes in speech. Another instructional strategy that helps is analyzing the positions and movements of parts of the mouth to pronounce words. For example, to distinguish the three phonemes in *mat*, children can learn that first the lips are closed to say the sound /m/, then opened to say /ă/, and then the tongue is lifted to the roof of the mouth to say /t/. Developing this awareness of phonemes enables readers to form connections between the sounds in words they pronounce and the letters used to spell those words—and that helps them store words in memory and get closer to reading automatically by sight.

To read and write words in the partial alphabetic phase, children apply their partial knowledge of the spelling system to connect some letters in words to sounds. For example, a child trying to spell *mail* might write “ML.” Children in this phase can



also use letter names to write salient sounds in words, such as “LFT” for *elephant*. However, they don’t know enough about how letters represent sounds to decode unknown words or to spell words correctly.

To help your child during this phase, you can play word games like changing the first letter of a word to make new words—*mat*, *sat*, *hat*, *cat*, *bat*—and encourage your child to write the sounds they hear in words (knowing that misspellings are OK for now).

### 3. Full Alphabetic Phase

To move into the full alphabetic phase, children need to acquire the major letter-sound (grapheme-phoneme) relations of the writing system. They need to acquire decoding skill to sound out letters and blend the sounds to form words. The type of reading instruction that helps children master these skills is called *phonics*. In systematic phonics instruction, teachers follow a “scope and sequence” chart to teach the major letter-sound relations; they also teach segmenting sounds, decoding words, and spelling skills. Phonics instruction can reduce the time that students spend in the partial alphabetic phase and move them quickly into the full phase, typically by the end of kindergarten or in first grade. The skills children acquire help them store words in their memory for reading by sight and spelling words correctly.

To help your child develop these skills, encourage them to read aloud to you and to try to decode unknown words. This will help your child bond the spellings of words to their pronunciations in their memory. You can also help your child read new words in text (like a complete sentence or a short book that contains many words they can already read). This is especially important to learn words whose meanings depend on context, such as with function words (*was*, *from*, *with*), irregular past-tense verbs (*held*, *took*, *kept*), and words that sound the same but have different spellings and meanings (*ate/eight*, *to/two/too*, *rode/road*). If these words are read in isolation, your child might learn the wrong meanings or no meanings.

### 4. Consolidated Alphabetic Phase

With intentional, systematic phonics instruction in kindergarten and first grade, and much practice reading words in text and spelling words, children move closer to the consolidated alphabetic phase in second grade. As readers in the full phase store more and more words in memory, they learn about spelling patterns. In the consolidated phase, combinations of letter sounds that recur across different words become consolidated into multi-letter spelling units, such as syllables (*li-ber-ty* in

*liberty*), prefixes (*un* in *unless*), and suffixes (*tion* in *education*). Children can use these units to form connections between spellings of multisyllabic words and their pronunciations—and that helps them read and spell with ease and confidence.

For example, to learn the word *interesting*, children might isolate each written syllable (*in-ter-est-ing*) while pronouncing it and then blend the parts to read the whole word.<sup>2</sup> Repeated practice with different multisyllabic words can improve children’s memory for the words. You can make this practice fun by spotting multisyllabic words—like *library*, *grocery*, *playground*, *basketball*, *restaurant*, and *museum*—in everyday life and helping your child read them by isolating the separate syllables and decoding these parts, then saying the whole word.

### Conclusion

These four phases help us understand the emergence of word reading and spelling skills and identify what type of instruction is needed. Here’s a quick summary of the key skills to reinforce at home:

- In the pre-alphabetic phase, help your child learn letters and build their spoken vocabulary.
- To move into the partial phase, help your child hear the small sounds in words and learn how letters represent sounds in words.
- To move into the full phase, develop your child’s knowledge of the major letter-sound relations and their use to decode new words to build a reading-by-sight vocabulary and to spell words.
- To move into the consolidated phase, support your child’s growing knowledge of multi-letter units in the spelling system (like *-ing*, *-tion*, *-ed*) to read and write words.

In school, children benefit most from systematic phonics instruction to acquire these skills. One great way to support your child’s growth at home is to create lots of opportunities for them to practice reading—and to talk about what you’ve read together to boost their comprehension. And if your child is not progressing through the four phases, be sure to go to their school to ask for additional supports. □

For the endnotes, see [aft.org/ae/fall2023/ehri](https://aft.org/ae/fall2023/ehri).



# Everyday Conversations

How They Help Your Child Become a Strong Reader



By Natalie Wexler

When my son Sam was about three, we had something like the following conversation in the kitchen, near the back door of our house.

Sam: Why did you lock the door?

Me: So people can't get in.

Sam: Why?

Me: Well, they might take something.

Sam: Why?

Me: I don't know, they might not have some things they need.

Sam: Why?

Me: Maybe they don't have much money.

Sam: Why?

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Me: Well, maybe they don't have jobs.

Sam: Why?

At the time, I wasn't thrilled about all these questions: How do you explain crime, poverty, and unemployment to a three-year-old? But I now realize that this back and forth was an important part of my son's education. I won't say that it led to his current job as a public defender, but I'm confident that conversations like this—we had many—were crucial to the language skills and vocabulary that helped him understand what he was expected to read and learn in school.

For children to become strong readers, they need to learn a huge number of words—at least 100,000 by the time they get to eighth grade.<sup>1</sup> It's impossible to teach that much vocabulary directly; children gain most of their vocabulary indirectly, as their knowledge of the world expands.<sup>2</sup> Much of this learning happens through conversations and read-alouds. So parents and caregivers play a crucial role in giving their children access to the vocabulary, complex sentence structure, and knowledge they need to be successful, beginning at birth.<sup>3</sup>

## Conversational Turns

One way of helping your child become a confident reader is simply to engage in back-and-forth conversations like the one I had with my son. Studies have found that children's development is closely

linked to the number of “conversational turns” they experience.<sup>4</sup> Conversational turns happen when an adult speaks and a child responds, or vice versa—like a game of Ping-Pong. The “conversation” doesn’t even have to use words. Even if your baby just coos or your toddler makes up words—and you respond—it counts.<sup>5</sup>

Everyday activities provide lots of opportunities to engage in conversational turns. In the supermarket, for example, you can have dialogues about different kinds of apples or where milk comes from. At home, when your child is playing with blocks or dolls, you can comment on what they’re doing.

But studies have shown that certain kinds of interactions are more powerful than others.<sup>6</sup> In powerful conversations, you provide

- words for actions and objects that interest your child (“Yes, that’s a bird singing up there in the tree”);
- familiar routines and repeated language, making the words predictable and easier to learn (like playing peekaboo before bedtime); and
- lots of opportunities for taking turns, participating equally, and generally enjoying yourselves.

It’s also a good idea to follow your child’s interests, letting them take the lead.

## Read-Alouds

Conversations with children—important as they are—aren’t enough to equip them to become good readers. It’s also crucial to read aloud to kids. That won’t teach a child how to read, or “decode,” written words; most children will need systematic instruction from well-trained teachers to be able to do that.\* But reading aloud to children can build the kind of knowledge and vocabulary they need to *understand* the written texts they’ll be expected to read in school—and in life.

Why isn’t conversation enough? Written language is more complex than spoken language.<sup>7</sup> Writers use words that don’t generally appear in conversation—like *despite* or *moreover*—and they use a lot more words. And writers don’t explain every word or phrase they use (because their writing wouldn’t be much fun to read if they did). Instead, they assume readers know what most of the words mean.

The structure of sentences in written language is also more complex than those we use in conversation. Written sentences tend to be longer, sometimes using unclear pronouns, passive verbs, and lots of subordinate clauses. If you’re not familiar with that kind of sentence structure, it can be hard to make sense of a text even if you can read and understand the individual words.<sup>8</sup>

Children can learn a lot from books even before they’re able to talk—especially if they have a caring adult to guide them. If you’re showing your child a picture book, you can point to the pictures and say the names of the objects they depict. And after your child learns to read, it’s important to continue reading aloud: in addition to being a nice way to spend time together, it’s a way to introduce your child to vocabulary and concepts in books they can’t yet read independently. Researchers have found that children’s listening comprehension exceeds their reading comprehension through about age 13, on average.<sup>9</sup>

\*For tips on helping your child learn foundational reading skills, see the article by Nell K. Duke on page 14.

## Conversational Read-Alouds

Even better than just reading aloud is to *combine* it with conversational turns. Asking and answering questions about a book you’re reading together is a great way to help your child understand and remember the new concepts and vocabulary in the text. You might ask what your child thinks is going to happen next in a story, or why a character behaved in a certain way.

Better yet is to read a series of books on the same general topic—maybe sea mammals, airplanes, or the solar system. It’s definitely worthwhile to read fiction and poetry, but books that convey information about the world have the most potential to build the kind of knowledge that fuels reading comprehension. And children usually need to hear the same concepts and vocabulary repeatedly in different contexts to truly understand and remember them.

These don’t have to be dry, informational books—although kids can actually get very interested in those. Both children and adults tend to find it easier to understand and retain information from stories,<sup>10</sup> but those stories don’t have to be made up. Children can learn a lot about science from a biography of a scientist, for example. And history is basically a series of stories; kids can find history fascinating if it’s presented in an engaging way. If you’re not sure what books would be right for your child, ask a librarian for suggestions.

If your child shows a particular interest in a topic, it’s also a great idea to nurture that interest by going beyond books. If your child is fascinated by sharks, maybe you can find an aquarium to visit. If your child’s passion is for something more easily available, like insects or rocks, a walk in a park could be a rich educational experience. Just remember the importance of those conversational turns: ask and answer questions about what you’re seeing, ideally connecting them to books you’ve read together.

There may be times when you don’t feel like answering your child’s questions—as I did when I was just trying to lock our back door. And of course it’s not always possible to stop whatever you’re doing and read a book or engage in a conversational turn. But it’s important to remember that having back-and-forth exchanges with young children, exposing them to the complexity of written language, and feeding their natural curiosity will put them on the path to becoming successful readers and learners. □

For the endnotes, see [aft.org/ae/fall2023/wexler](https://aft.org/ae/fall2023/wexler).



# Helping Young Children Read for Understanding

What to Look for in the Early Grades



By Sonia Q. Cabell

**A**lthough the focus in the early grades is often on teaching young children how to read, the ultimate goal of reading is to understand the text—whether to learn new information or simply enjoy a story. Building the groundwork needed for this understanding starts right from the beginning of life—and it’s essential from the beginning of school. What kind of instruction should you be looking for in your child’s classroom?

During the primary grades (kindergarten through second grade), teaching children to sound out words is a necessary focus of instruction.<sup>1</sup> Teachers should intentionally and carefully help children understand the relationships between written letters and spoken sounds. As children practice sounding out words in the texts they are reading, their ability to read words grows. Their understanding grows too because being able to quickly recognize words makes it easier to focus on the meaning of the texts. (See the article by Nell K. Duke on page 14 for information on how to support foundational reading skills.)

But teaching children how to sound out words is not enough to help them become skilled readers. It is important that early instruction also focuses on *language comprehension*, especially understanding written language when it is read aloud.<sup>2</sup>

*Sonia Q. Cabell is an associate professor of reading education with the School of Teacher Education and the Florida Center for Reading Research at Florida State University.*

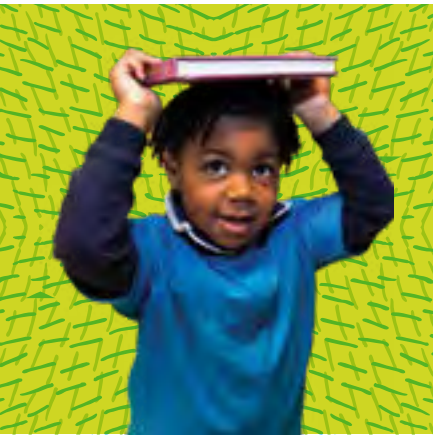
## What Does Language Comprehension Include?

**Vocabulary:** *the words that children can either understand or use.* As children become readers, they will be expected to understand words that typically are not used in everyday household conversations—but are used in books.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, exposing children to the language of books early on is important.

**Language structures:** *the ways that words come together to form sentences and sentences come together to form paragraphs.* Just as the words used in everyday conversations are different from the words in written language, the structure of language is different when speaking than when writing. Written sentences tend to be much longer and more complex.

**Verbal reasoning:** *the ability to make sense of what you are reading.* An important part of this is making inferences, or “reading between the lines.” Consider the following sentences from the book *Knuffle Bunny Too*,<sup>4</sup> when Trixie realized in the middle of the night that her toy was switched with a classmate’s toy: “Trixie marched into her mommy and daddy’s room and said: ‘That is *not* my bunny.’ Trixie’s daddy ... asked, ‘Can we deal with this in the morning?’ Trixie’s daddy went to the phone.” To make sense of these sentences, the reader or listener must infer that although Trixie’s daddy wanted to sleep, he felt pressure from his daughter to immediately take care of the situation by calling her classmate’s parents.

**Background knowledge:** *the information that the reader or listener needs to understand the text.* In the *Knuffle Bunny* example, chil-



children would need some knowledge of what it feels like to be in Trixie's situation to fully understand the urgency she felt to get her toy back. Because there is so much knowledge that children need and because it takes time to build, it is important that science and social studies instruction are emphasized in the earliest grades. In later grades, when children are expected to read science and social studies textbooks (and as adults, when they want to read newspapers), they will rely on this

knowledge to be able to understand and learn from these more challenging texts.

### Why Does Language Comprehension Matter?

Sometimes parents are surprised to learn that their child has difficulty understanding what they read in the upper elementary grades because teachers hadn't mentioned a reading problem in the primary grades. This might happen because the kinds of texts that children are expected to read change dramatically over time. In kindergarten and first grade, children are reading simple texts that are often fictional stories. By fourth grade, children spend a lot of time independently reading complex informational texts, such as a biography in social studies or a science textbook.

Take, for example, this excerpt from the book *Rocks and Minerals*:

Meteorites are pieces of rock or metal that hit the Earth. Some have broken off asteroids, large chunks of rock that orbit the Sun between Mars and Jupiter. Most are fragments of comets.<sup>5</sup>

To understand this passage, children must already have some familiarity with most of the vocabulary, especially words that are not defined, like *fragments* and *comets*. They must be able to understand the structure of the sentences—for example, understanding that the definition of *asteroids* comes after the comma. They must also have some background knowledge about the solar system and how it works. The next sentence in the book talks about how a massive meteorite may have caused the dinosaurs to become extinct. To understand how that is possible, an inference is necessary—children must understand something about how a big meteorite could damage the Earth or its atmosphere.

In a simple passage about meteorites, there is a lot to understand! The good news is that, in partnership with your child's teacher, you can help develop your child's language comprehension.

### How Should K-2 Instruction Address Language Comprehension?

**Back-and-forth conversation:** From birth, children are developing language through conversations. This doesn't stop when they enter school. Teachers should foster a classroom in which your child has an opportunity to participate in frequent conversations on stimulating topics. As teachers engage children in back-and-

forth conversations, they extend children's ideas to help them learn new words and knowledge.<sup>6</sup>

**Interactive read-alouds:** Interactive read-alouds are a great way to foster language comprehension,<sup>7</sup> especially when children are listening to books that are a few grade levels above what they can read by themselves. With conversations before, during, and after these read-alouds, children can really learn from what they hear. The types of texts that teachers choose also matters. For example, when teachers choose several texts on the same topic (e.g., the water cycle), children's knowledge and vocabulary can grow.<sup>8</sup>

**Vocabulary instruction:** It is important for teachers to carefully select vocabulary words from the read-alouds. They should provide instruction on these words in which they share child-friendly definitions, help children connect new words to words they already know, and encourage children to use the words.<sup>9</sup> (Ask your child's teacher to share vocabulary words regularly so you can practice them at home too.) Teachers should also foster learning environments where children are curious about words and the world.



**Content knowledge instruction:** Children should spend time learning about science and social studies topics in deep and meaningful ways. Read-alouds are important, but children should also spend time writing about and discussing these topics, along with engaging in hands-on inquiry (e.g., science investigations).<sup>10</sup>

**Comprehension strategy instruction:** Teachers can teach important strategies that help children learn to read for understanding.<sup>11</sup> For example, a teacher can help students monitor their comprehension during a read-aloud, stopping to think aloud about whether what was just read made sense. They can also model summarizing what they just learned from a particular page or paragraph.

**B**e on the lookout for how your child's language comprehension is supported right from the start of schooling. Your child's teacher should engage the class in meaningful conversations, provide experiences with listening and responding to a variety of texts, teach vocabulary words, and systematically build science and social studies knowledge. These opportunities to learn during the early years lay important groundwork for later reading success. □

For the endnotes, see [aft.org/ae/fall2023/cabell](http://aft.org/ae/fall2023/cabell).

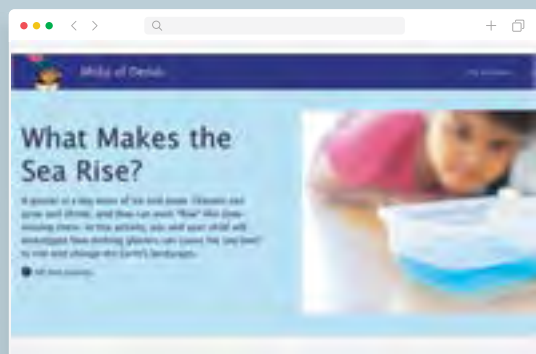
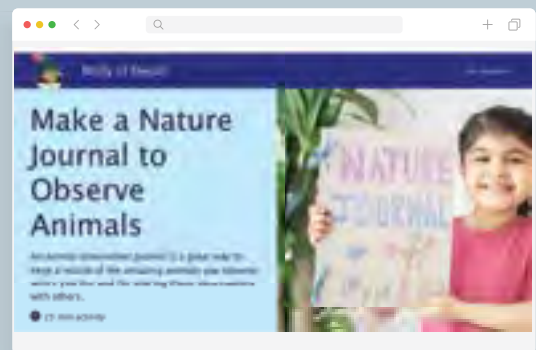
# Molly of Denali

A PBS KIDS Show That Helps Families  
Extend Learning at Home



*Molly of Denali*, an animated series grounded in Alaska Native culture and history, highlights how children and their families learn from informational texts. And it includes lots of great tips for how to search for information online. While children can watch on their own, it's beneficial for parents or other caregivers to watch too so they can talk about each episode. Here are some easy steps to get you started:

1. Check out the show with your child: [go.aft.org/ybf](https://go.aft.org/ybf).
2. Bring the show to life with these fun activities: [go.aft.org/d48](https://go.aft.org/d48). Not sure where to start? Consider making a nature journal from a cereal box ([go.aft.org/3zv](https://go.aft.org/3zv)) or using ice cubes to learn about rising sea levels ([go.aft.org/e2w](https://go.aft.org/e2w)).
3. Raise an info-kid by highlighting informational texts in your everyday life. For tips, see this short blog post: [go.aft.org/gsv](https://go.aft.org/gsv).
4. Listen to the *Molly of Denali* podcast: [go.aft.org/vpo](https://go.aft.org/vpo).



# Reading Universe

## How Two Decades of Innovation in Mississippi Is Now Empowering Families and Educators Everywhere



Below: Erika Bryant celebrates new reading skills with a child she is tutoring. Pages 25–26: Children in Erika’s classroom love to read!

Teaching a child to read is a science and an art. Fueled by love and joy, songs and word games, everyday conversations, and books, books, books, it’s a multiyear process in which families and educators make great partners.

For some children, learning to read is a challenge—and both family support and teacher expertise are all the more important. Two decades ago, innovators in Mississippi wanted to ensure that all teachers had that expertise. They developed trainings, improved instructional materials, sent coaches into classrooms, and engaged teacher preparation programs.\* Now, as fourth-grade reading achievement has soared in Mississippi, they are making what they’ve learned available for free to all through Reading Universe: [readinguniverse.org](http://readinguniverse.org) (which the AFT is proud to sponsor).

Here, Erika Bryant, a first-grade teacher in Jackson, Mississippi, and Kelly Butler, a senior advisor for Reading Universe, share highlights of Mississippi’s transformation—and offer tips on how families can advocate for better reading instruction and supports in their communities.

—EDITORS

\*To learn more about Mississippi’s transformation, see *The Reading Revolution*: [go.aft.org/24a](http://go.aft.org/24a).

**ERIKA BRYANT:** I am going into my 26th year of teaching, with the last 24 years in the Jackson Public Schools. I started off with an undergraduate degree in communicative disorders, but decided I liked being in the classroom better. So, I earned a Master of Arts degree in teaching. I’ve taught kindergarten and grades one, four, and five—here in Jackson, I’ve taught at Lake Elementary and Pecan Park Elementary, both of which I attended as a child—and have truly enjoyed it. Being a good teacher is a calling for me.

**KELLY BUTLER:** That’s wonderful! My teaching career began after I graduated with a degree in special education from the University of Alabama. I’ve taught at public schools in Greenwich, Connecticut, one of the most privileged areas in the country, and in Holmes County, Mississippi, which is one of the least privileged. I know that every kid deserves a great education—and it’s possible if you put the right resources and the right people in the right place.

For the last 20 years, I’ve been with the Barksdale Reading Institute (BRI) in Mississippi, and as BRI sunsetted in June 2023, I’ve recently transitioned to being a senior advisor for Reading Universe, a project initiated by BRI back in 2003. We’re taking everything we learned from working with teachers across Mississippi and making sure educators and families everywhere have what they need to ensure their children become confident readers.

**ERIKA:** When I came to Jackson, I was fortunate to teach in a school with a Barksdale coach, which was so vital for me. Seeing my coach work with the children, I developed as a teacher quickly. And Barksdale gave us amazing materials—our classrooms were full of books.

**KELLY:** I'm so glad you were in a Barksdale school. At BRI, we spent years developing our literacy model by working with teachers across hundreds of schools. We created demonstration sites to refine our approach and trained administrators so they could support excellent instruction. So, when Mississippi passed the Literacy-Based Promotion Act in 2013, we had a strong model ready to go to scale throughout the whole state, with high-quality coaching, materials, and training. At the governor's request, we loaned two senior staff members to the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) to help roll out the changes and supports detailed in the legislation. BRI had introduced a professional development program, the Foundations of LETRS, in 2010 to the educator preparation faculty, and so LETRS<sup>†</sup> is what we recommended for state professional development when the law passed. We also helped draft position descriptions for the literacy coaches.

**ERIKA:** I took LETRS training a while ago. It helped me better understand the roles of phonological awareness (or hearing the sounds in words) and writing. And, it built on the knowledge I initially developed in college about communicative disorders. For my colleagues who didn't have that foundation—and who hadn't worked at a Barksdale school—LETRS taught the science behind reading instruction. It really is helpful, especially for teaching K-3.

**KELLY:** The state began offering LETRS in 2014, so you must have been among the first teachers to receive it. Within about the first 18 months, MDE had trained close to 15,000 K-3 teachers. This was thanks to the funding allocated with that 2013 law. From the beginning, BRI has worked to improve teacher preparation for early literacy instruction. Following the 2013 law, BRI petitioned the commissioner of higher education to review what the programs were doing, given that the state was now appropriating \$15 million a year to retrain teachers. This led to BRI's development of a professional growth model for early literacy faculty to train them in the science of reading.

**ERIKA:** We lose new teachers because they don't know the basics and don't feel supported. Everyone wants us to be personal with the children—to recognize their strengths and weaknesses and to support them—so someone needs to be personal with us. This is especially true for new teachers; administrators and more seasoned teachers should be in their classrooms helping. I enjoy mentoring my new colleagues, and I learn from them too. They have shown me how to use the latest instructional technology.

All teachers need to be supported, whether that's through better teacher preparation or coaching in the classroom—or both—so we can become the quality teachers that we are expected to be. Without that support, many of us are just wading through a whole lot of water, but we're not getting anywhere.

When I was teaching fourth and fifth grades, I saw how critical it is to lay the foundation for reading in kindergarten and first grade. In fourth grade, the curriculum does not allow the teacher time to reteach foundational skills.

**KELLY:** You're absolutely right—and we need to do more about reading challenges in upper elementary and middle grades. Prior to BRI's sunseting, we had begun to work with MDE to design a similar literacy model for the middle grades as we had done for K-3. Another legacy project of BRI is the creation of a new statewide reading clinic to focus initially on fourth through eighth grades. The clinic's new metric will be the eighth-grade reading scores on NAEP (the National Assessment of Educational Progress).

The Mississippi law requires retaining children who don't pass the third-grade reading test; it was instituted to ensure that students have sufficient foundational skills by the end of third grade because the curriculum shifts as students enter fourth grade, when they are expected to be able to learn from their reading. We worried that the retention component of the law would become the burden of nine-year-olds; however, with strong MDE leadership, the implementation focused on coaching and training for the adults—prevention, not retention. But even if a child is retained, the emphasis is on delivering purposeful interventions, targeted to address the gaps. A recent study showed that students who just barely failed the test, were retained in third grade, and received help are doing better in sixth grade than students who just barely passed.<sup>‡</sup>

As much as we were worried about this aspect of the 2013 law, in hindsight, the law was a wake-up call for teachers and school leaders. And no doubt, it was a necessary boost to bring the Barksdale model to scale throughout Mississippi. It was a game changer.



<sup>†</sup>For details on LETRS (Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling), see "Creating Confident Readers" in the Spring 2023 issue of *American Educator*: [aft.org/ae/spring2023/moats](http://aft.org/ae/spring2023/moats).

<sup>‡</sup>To read the study, visit [go.aft.org/kvp](http://go.aft.org/kvp).



Blanketing the state with training, support, and coaching gave us the traction we needed.

**ERIKA:** Standardized testing is stressful for all our kids, but it does give us a clear view of their growth. And it also shows the weaknesses of the lower grades. We put so much emphasis on our tested grades, starting in grade three, so there's less attention on K-2. In Mississippi, kindergarten is not required, so my first-graders range from children who have attended preschool and kindergarten to children who have never been inside a school. I don't think the third-grade test is misused. I think it's a qualifier that brings appropriate attention to the earlier grades. I don't agree with teaching to the test, but I teach the skills and know my kids will be able to perform on the test.

And while I think the testing helps, what really matters is family involvement. Being a first-grade teacher, one of the first things that I tell my kids' parents and caregivers is, "You're your child's first teacher." Literacy starts at home. I encourage families—and they know that I care about their children. I let them know that I miss their babies when they're not at school. And, by sending home tips in children's backpacks and hosting community nights, I share ways that families can extend what we're doing in the classroom. For example, I ask parents and caregivers to talk to their children, to ask them about school, to sing and play word games with their children, to read to their children, and to have their children read to them. That's especially important in the summer, when children tend to forget some skills. I encourage a lot of play during the summer and also some work practicing reading skills.

**KELLY:** I agree—parents are their children's first teachers. Once children start school, families and teachers need to be equal partners. That's what we're trying to support with Reading Uni-



verse. Although we're still developing the site, [readinguniverse.org](http://readinguniverse.org), we'll be adding resources to help foster partnerships between families and educators. For example, we're developing a series of questions that parents and teachers could ask each other to really get to know each child and best support their reading.

As parents and caregivers learn more about how children learn to read, they can also become advocates for better instructional materials and supports, including coaching for teachers and administrators. Reading Universe will give families everything they need to show their local school board members and their elected representatives what excellent reading instruction looks like—and to demand that their children's teachers get the resources and training they deserve and want. We're launching the website with resources for K-1, but ultimately, Reading Universe will cover preK-6.

I have enormous gratitude for teachers and appreciation for what they are asked to do day in and day out. Teachers are the bedrock of our culture. Every other profession must come through the hands of a teacher, so we owe it to this profession to provide as much support as we can.

**ERIKA:** Teachers do deserve support—and that's a great reason to belong to the AFT. I'm glad that the AFT is contributing to Reading Universe; that's yet another way my union is supporting teachers' expertise. I've been a professional development presenter through my union for the past 12 years, and I enjoy this extra work. My first love is teaching children, but my second love is encouraging those around me to remain in education because our children deserve teachers who love to teach. □



Kelly Butler (left) discusses literacy and leadership with a Mississippi principal during a professional development session.

# READING UNIVERSE

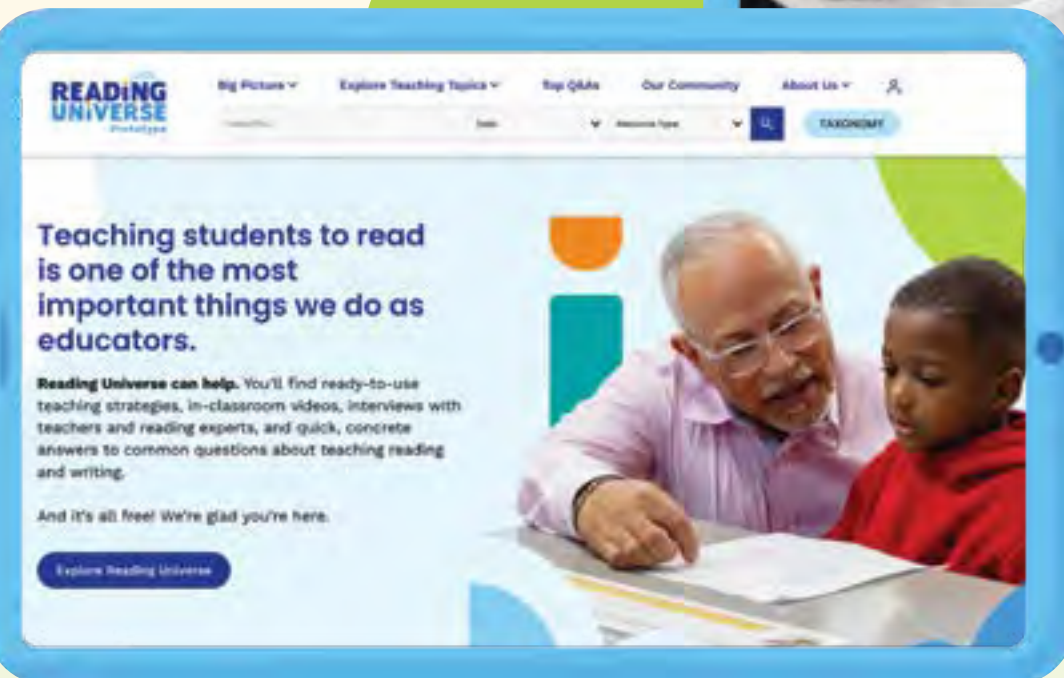
## All About Teaching Reading & Writing

Reading Universe is a new online, step-by-step pathway for educators to learn more about evidence-based reading instruction and then translate it into classroom practice that will complement any curriculum. It offers instructional videos shot in real classrooms, with real kids, in diverse settings around the country.

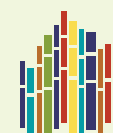
It provides both a comprehensive guide to teaching reading and quick, concrete answers that educators can use in classrooms immediately. Best of all, Reading Universe has been built from the start in close collaboration with a cadre of dedicated teachers who helped to shape the content, the approach, and the presentation of everything on the online platform.

While Reading Universe has launched with content for kindergarten and first-grade teachers, it will soon expand to cover preK-6 and offer guidance for families.

[ReadingUniverse.org](https://ReadingUniverse.org)



Reading Universe is a service of WETA/ Reading Rockets, the Barksdale Reading Institute, and First Book.



THE BARKSDALE  
READING INSTITUTE



Reading Universe is made possible by generous support from Jim and Donna Barksdale, the American Federation of Teachers, the Emily Hall Tremain Foundation, and two anonymous donors.

# Helping Your Child Become a Writer

Simple Strategies for the Whole Family



By Judith C. Hochman, Toni-Ann Vroom, and Dina Zoleo

**W**riting has many benefits. It can improve children’s speaking, boost their reading comprehension, build their knowledge, and elevate their thinking. But one reason it’s hard to learn is that without explicit writing instruction, children often write the way they speak.

From elementary through high school, many children answer questions with little elaboration. Others tend to ramble on, giving unnecessary information in a disorganized fashion. It’s not unusual to see the same tendencies in their writing. With the strategies shared in this article, your child will be on their way to becoming a clear thinker and coherent communicator—not just in school but for the rest of their life. We can see some of this progress with Michael.

Ms. Worth, mother of 10-year-old Michael, looked forward to hearing about his day at school. However, when asked, Michael always gave the same answer: “Good.”

After reading about the benefits of explicit writing instruction,<sup>1</sup> Ms. Worth decided to try an approach that seemed to

make sense to her: sentence stems. But she didn’t ask Michael to write; she just added them to their conversation. When Michael provided his usual response, “Good,” she asked him to turn the following sentence stems into complete sentences:

*School was good because \_\_\_\_\_.*

*School was good, but \_\_\_\_\_.*

*School was good, so \_\_\_\_\_.*

Ms. Worth learned that Michael had a good day *because* his class visited the aquarium. Michael’s day was good, *but* he had to write about the field trip. Finally, Michael shared “School was good today, *so* I hope tomorrow is, too.”

Michael was able to provide much more information to his mother when she gave him an approach that incorporated the conjunctions *because*, *but*, and *so* than if she had just asked her usual question, “How was your day?”

Although the *because/but/so* strategy was developed to help students with their writing, there are great benefits to using it orally, too—especially at home. It gives children a structure to extend and elaborate their verbal responses. And, when children offer their families even a few more details, great conversations are often sparked.

Since the sentence stems worked well, Ms. Worth also started using them to extend Michael’s written responses when she helped him with his homework. She found that this strategy had a great impact when applied to the content he was studying.

*Judith C. Hochman, former head of The Windward School in White Plains, New York, is the founder of The Writing Revolution and a coauthor (with Natalie Wexler) of The Writing Revolution: A Guide to Advancing Thinking Through Writing in All Subjects and Grades. Toni-Ann Vroom and Dina Zoleo are co-chief executive officers and founding members of The Writing Revolution.*

For example, when Michael was learning about the American Revolution in school, he read about the causes of the conflict. Rather than asking “Why did many colonists want to break away from Great Britain?” Ms. Worth tried checking his understanding by giving him the following sentence stems:

Many colonists wanted to break away from Great Britain....

Many colonists wanted to break away from Great Britain because *they believed Parliament's tax policies were unfair.*

Many colonists wanted to break away from Great Britain, but *the Loyalists wanted to remain part of the British empire.*

Many colonists wanted to break away from Great Britain, so *the Continental Congress adopted the Declaration of Independence.*

Prompting children with *because*, *but*, and *so* is a simple yet powerful strategy. It requires children to think more analytically, while also teaching them how to extend their written responses.



## Writing Complex Sentences

Like so many children, Michael often writes the way he speaks—and the quality of his writing may suffer as a result. Written language generally requires more precision than spoken language because the reader of a text cannot ask for clarification the way a listener can (i.e., when you’re reading a book, you can’t ask the author what a confusing sentence means). In addition, the sentence structure of written language is more complex than the language we generally use in conversation. Writers often use multiple clauses and subordinating conjunctions such as *although*, *since*, *before*, *after*, and *if*, especially at the beginning of a sentence. If children are unfamiliar with those structures, they are more likely to struggle with under-

standing what they read. But when they learn to use more complex sentences in their own writing, their reading comprehension often improves.<sup>2</sup> Their writing quality improves as well.

Wanting her son to continue developing as a writer, Ms. Worth helped him practice writing more complex sentences—and in reading his work, she could assess his comprehension of the text he had been assigned on the American Revolution. She gave him the beginning of a sentence, and he needed to supply the rest (Michael’s responses are shown in italics).

After the Sons of Liberty dumped tea in Boston Harbor, *Parliament punished the colonists with the Intolerable Acts.*

Although the British military was well-equipped, *the colonists’ knowledge of the land helped them win the war.*

## Expanding Sentences

When responding to questions, Michael, like many children, often omits information that he assumes a reader or listener already knows. In the *sentence expansion* strategy, children add information to a simple sentence, called a *kernel*, by answering the relevant question words: *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, *why*, and *how*.

Ms. Worth decided to add this strategy. Michael found it fun to use when given a kernel that allowed him to use his imagination, such as *He ran*. Practicing it at home improved his writing for school assignments—and his mom enjoyed hearing the answers he’d dream up.

Continuing the revolution theme in his social studies class, Michael was asked to complete a sentence expansion activity about Gandhi leading the Salt March. He knew that when he saw dotted lines under the kernel, he didn’t have to write complete sentences, just key words and phrases. Still, his written responses allowed his mother to check his understanding of the text about Gandhi.

He led the Salt March.

Who? *M. Gandhi*

When? *1930*

Where? *India*

Why? *protest Brit. salt tax inspire nationalism*

Expanded Sentence:

*In 1930, Mohandas Gandhi led the Salt March in India because he wanted to protest the British salt tax and inspire nationalism.*

As with the *because/but/so* activity, parents and caregivers can practice this sentence expansion strategy with their children using academic or everyday content, and in any grade level and

subject area. The example below about leaves changing color demonstrates that even first-graders can become adept at expanding sentences.

They change color.  
 What? leaves  
 When? autumn  
 Why? trees receive less sunlight  
 Expanded Sentence:  
In autumn, leaves change color because trees receive less sunlight.

### Planning Paragraphs

One of the most effective ways to make writing easier for children is to teach them how to develop a plan before writing a paragraph. Like the sentence stems and expanders, you can help your child at home by helping them practice using the single-paragraph outline.

The single-paragraph outline enables even young students to begin developing a coherent paragraph by planning a topic sentence, supporting details, and a concluding sentence. Since this is intended to be a plan—not a draft—just ask your child to write notes on the detail lines, not complete sentences. Here's an example from a first-grader after an exciting field trip.

T.S. Last week we went pumpkin picking.  
 1. ...met farmer  
 2. hayride  
 3. picked pumpkins  
 4. back to school  
 C.S. We had a great trip!

This strategy can even work with preschoolers and kindergartners. If your child isn't writing yet, have them dictate the most important words and phrases for you to write on the dotted lines. For older children like Michael, this single-paragraph outline still works well. In the following outline about deforestation for a school assignment, Michael used symbols to show relationships between ideas.



T.S. Deforestation, the clearing of trees, is an important environmental issue.  
 1. humans cut trees/room for agri + dev  
 2. ~28k sq. mi lost per year  
 3. tree slash ↓ CO<sub>2</sub> → further global warming  
 4. loss of habitat → extinction  
 C.S. Clearly, we cannot continue to cut down forests at this rate!

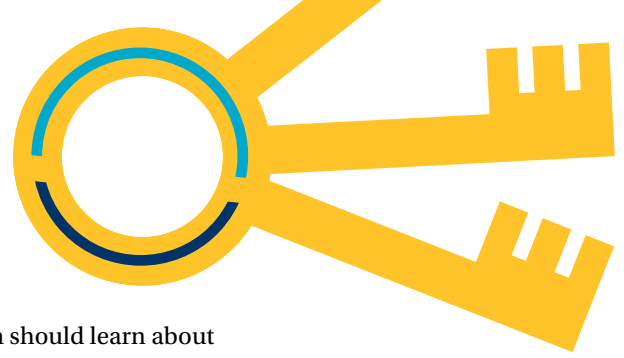
While the goal is for your child to be able to develop an outline independently, in the beginning they will need your help in learning how to develop topic and concluding sentences and how to select and sequence appropriate details.

**W**riting may be the most cognitively demanding academic skill we expect children to master. For many, crafting clear sentences is challenging, and producing paragraphs is even more difficult. Written assignments often require knowledge of the subject matter, awareness of one's audience, varied vocabulary, logically sequenced information, and a consistent focus on the topic. Fortunately, the strategies in this article, as well as others available for free at [thewritingrevolution.org/resources/book-resources](http://thewritingrevolution.org/resources/book-resources), can improve children's oral and written responses. And, by helping your child with these strategies, you'll learn a lot more about their experiences, thoughts, and feelings as your prompts encourage them to open up. □

For the endnotes, see [go.aft.org/ff5](http://go.aft.org/ff5).

# The Keys to Success

## Literacy Tip Sheets



These AFT tip sheets help parents and caregivers understand what their children should learn about reading, writing, speaking, and listening in kindergarten through eighth grade. And, they have lots of fun suggestions for supporting children's learning at home, such as:

### Grades K-2

- Read to your child daily (fiction and nonfiction).
- Ask your child to retell the story or events in the text.
- When reading nonfiction text with your child, point out any words that are in bold print, highlighted, or in a text box.
- Play word games where you and your child ask each other for synonyms or opposites of words found in the text or used in conversation.
- Have conversations with your child about the text using words and phrases from the text, such as character names, places, and events.

### Grades 3-5

- Encourage your child to ask questions about the text, and then explore the answers together by going back in the text to find them.
- Talk about interesting words and what they mean. Make it a point to use these words in conversation with your child.
- Help your child build background knowledge about a particular topic by reading several texts about that topic. The more your child knows about a topic, the easier it will be to understand texts about that topic.
- Encourage your child to read widely to hear a variety of word choices and structures.
- Model good listening habits by allowing your child to talk about a topic without interruption.

### Grades 6-8

- Read multiple genres (including fiction, informational, poetry, and argumentative text) over connected subjects with your child and ask questions that assist with deeper thinking by encouraging conversations about the text.
- Ask your child how the text connects to themselves, other texts, and the experiences of others around the world.
- Encourage your child to state their position and use research to formulate a strong argument.
- Expose your child to rich language and vocabulary through reading, cultural experiences, and exploration.
- Set aside some time for you and your child to actively take turns participating in discussions about shared interests, current and upcoming events, or desires and plans for the future.

**Literacy**  
Tips for Elementary School Parents  
**Grades K-2: Reading**

**Reading Literature and Informational Text Goal:** Through frequent opportunities to be exposed to and, with support, to read challenging texts, students will acquire rich vocabulary and build background knowledge. Students will read and demonstrate understanding of various types of text. Students will learn to support their responses to the text with evidence from the text.

**Students Can:**

- With the help of teachers and adults read and comprehend stories, poems and informational text. (Teachers and other adults may need to help students in kindergarten and grade 1)
- Ask and answer questions (who, what, where, when, why, and how) to show understanding of key or important ideas in a book.
- Retell stories and facts from nonfiction/informational texts, making sure to use key details from the text to show understanding of the main idea and rely on memory.
- Identify similarities and differences between two or more texts about the same topic.
- Identify and understand the most important points presented by two texts on the same topic. (Teachers and other adults may need to help the kindergarten students to do this.)

**How Parents or Caregivers Can Help:**

- Read to your child daily (fiction and nonfiction).
- Ask your child questions about the text.
- Encourage him/her to go back to the text to find the words that support his/her answer (first or second grade).
- Encourage your child to point to key details in the text to support his/her answer to questions and not rely on memory.
- Ask your child to retell the story or events in the text.
- Ask your child to identify the main idea in a story.
- When reading nonfiction text with your child, point out any words that are in bold print, highlighted or in a text box.
- Provide child-friendly definitions for new words from the text. For example, you might define "dazzling" as something that is so bright, it hurts your eyes to look at it.

**Literacy**  
Tips for Elementary School Parents  
**Grades 3-5: Reading**

**READING GOAL:** Students learn about their world through fiction and nonfiction. They build background knowledge that will help them succeed throughout their school years and beyond.

**Students Can:**

- Read many different kinds of literature such as stories, poetry, plays as well as a wide range of informational (nonfiction) texts related to history, social studies, science and other content areas.
- Focus more on gaining skills and developing stamina to read, learn from and respond to grade-level informational (nonfiction) texts.\*

\*Texts at the appropriate level of difficulty as consistent with the demands of the standards.

**How Parents or Caregivers Can Help:**

- Read and discuss texts on a variety of topics with your child.
- Find out what interests your child and read many texts about each of those topics.
- Select newspapers or magazine articles that may interest your child, and then read and talk about the articles together.
- Use technology to find child-friendly websites where children can find articles that interest them.

**Literacy Night Activities**  
**Grades 6-8**

**Book Tasting from Around the World**

**THEME:** Oh, the Places You Will Go!

**LEARNING GOAL:** Exposure to complex texts, develop independent and proficient reading skills

**LENGTH OF ACTIVITY:** 20-30 minutes

**MATERIALS:** Middle-grade novels centered around traveling and exploring different countries

**ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS:**

- Place several middle-grade books on a table(s).
- Allow participants to choose one book.
- Set a timer for five-10 minutes and encourage participants to preview and begin reading the book they have chosen.
- Repeat the process three or four more times.
- If possible, allow participants to take the book that interests them the most!

**PARENT FOLLOW-UP:**

- Read novels with your child and look up pictures and information about the actual place of the book's setting.
- Make connections to the story by sharing the similarities and differences to places where you have lived and visited.

**RECOMMENDED RESOURCES:**

- *The Remarkable Journey of Coyote Sunrise* by Dan Gemeinhart
- *Clean Getaway* by Nic Stone
- *The Vanderbeekers on the Block* by Karina Yan Glaser
- *Orange for the Sunsets* by Tina Athaide
- *Nowhere Boy* by Katherine Marsh
- *Me, Frida, and the Secret of the Peacock Ring* by Angela Cervantes



For more tips, check out these free resources at [go.aft.org/ok6](http://go.aft.org/ok6).

# Is My Child on Track for Learning to Read?

What to Look for in Preschool Through Kindergarten



By Beth M. Phillips

**Y**oung children's development takes place across multiple strands—such as physical skills, like learning to hold a crayon, and social skills, like learning to have back-and-forth conversations. All of these strands weave together to support readiness for literacy and other academic learning. Although every child is unique, there are some common things that you as a parent or caregiver can look for within each of these strands when your child is three to five years old. This way, you can seek professional guidance and support if you are concerned about an area of your child's development.

Preparing your child to thrive in preschool, kindergarten, and beyond includes finding out if they are on track in their *physical development*. Check on your child's overall health. Then, think specifically about their eyes, ears, hands, and feet! Be sure to work with a doctor, nurse, or other specialist to see whether your child's vision, hearing, and motor skills are all developing typically.

Another important strand of early development is *social engagement* with others. Your child should be sharing their

interests with you by pointing, bringing you things to look at, or initiating a topic of conversation. They also should respond (most of the time, if not always) when you call their attention to something that you find interesting. If this does not sound like the way your child engages with you and others, then it may be a good idea to schedule a *developmental screening* for them. To complete this screening, contact your local public school district or locate your state's specific version of the national Child Find program, which you can learn about at [go.aft.org/7aq](http://go.aft.org/7aq). A screening is the first step in identifying developmental disabilities—and getting the services your child may need. Another great source of guidance and resources is at [autismnavigator.com](http://autismnavigator.com).

The next strand to check on is your child's *language development*. Language development is critical for literacy development, especially for being able to understand what you read. Language development is also highly connected to successful progress in other academic areas, such as math and science. Plus, strong communication skills are important for the development of strong social skills. There are some questions you can ask about your child's language development to see if they are on track in the preschool to kindergarten period.

- *Can people who do not know your child understand their speech?* By three years old, most of what your child says should

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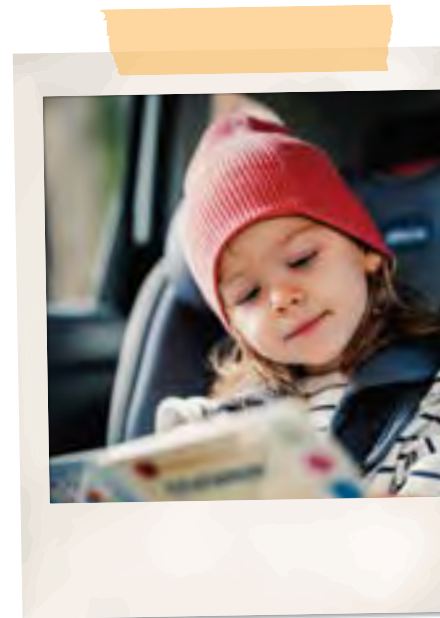
*Beth M. Phillips is a professor of Educational Psychology and Learning Systems and an associate director of the Florida Center for Reading Research at Florida State University.*

be clear, even to strangers who are not used to hearing your child speak. This does not mean that they pronounce all words and all sounds correctly all the time. It takes many children longer to clearly pronounce some sounds, like /th/, /r/, and /l/.

- *Can your child follow two- or three-step directions?* Of course, children do not always do everything their families ask them to do, but your child should usually be able to follow a short sequence of directions when you ask them to. For example, they should complete both parts of “put on your shoes and

Now, let’s focus on skills that are specific to learning to read. There are some very important *early literacy* skills that help children learn to “crack the code” of reading text. When children are stronger in these early literacy skills, formal reading instruction in kindergarten and first grade will make more sense. There are some questions you can ask about your child’s skill development to see if they are on track.

- *Does your child know the names and sounds of the letters?* Children who begin kindergarten already knowing some of the letters in the alphabet will have an easier time learning



come to the door” in the right order. Not sure what your child can do? Play some games for following directions with your child during routines like getting dressed, having a meal, and getting ready for bed.

- *Does your child speak in complete sentences using a variety of words?* By age four, you should hear your child say sentences that include a large variety of nouns (people, places, and things) and verbs (actions). In addition, four-year-olds (and especially five-year-olds) should be including words to describe the color, shape, size, speed, and timing of the objects and actions they are talking about. You might hear: “Jaden has the *green* ball,” “Sofia built the *biggest* tower,” “I ate the cookie *quickly*,” or “We walked the dog *before* school.”
- *Can your child tell you a simple story?* Storytelling is another window into the language skills that are so important for listening comprehension and later reading comprehension. Telling stories is one way that children demonstrate their ability to talk about the past or future, rather than just about what is happening right now. By age four, most children can make up a basic narrative that includes one or more characters and what happens to them. Some children’s stories might include where and why events take place. If your child does not usually share their own real or make-believe stories with you, then tell them a story or read one aloud to them and see how well they can tell it back to you.

to read. Many children learn the letters in their own name first, so you may want to see if your child can recognize and write their name. Name writing before kindergarten is a good predictor of later reading success.

- *Can your child identify and play with the sounds in simple words?* Words are made up of individual sounds. For example, the word *pot* has three sounds (/p/, /o/, and /t/), and the words *pot*, *pig*, and *pan* all have the same first sound. Children who recognize that words are made up of sounds and can play around with words’ sounds have an easier time learning to read. Check to see if your child can put sounds together, such as blending *nap* and *kin* to say *napkin*. Your child should also learn to separate sounds, such as breaking *picnic* into *pic* and *nic*. And, try playing with the sounds in words by leaving sounds off, such as taking /d/ off of *card* to say *car*.

To learn to read, children have to combine their letter knowledge and sound awareness to transform written words into spoken words. Then, they will draw on their language skills to understand the words and sentences they are reading. If you have concerns about your child’s progress in one or more of these developmental strands, there is plenty that you can do to help them. One of the first things to do is to talk to the teachers at your child’s preschool or elementary school. These educators can be a fantastic source of information and support for you. □

# Helping Children with Significant Reading Problems



By Sharon Vaughn and Jack M. Fletcher

**H**elping children learn to read is big business. From expensive literacy curricula and remedial programs to one-day workshops and brain-training fads, there are too many claims of guaranteed success and too little focus on trustworthy findings. As researchers studying mechanisms for improving literacy outcomes for more than 30 years, we are aware that parents and caregivers of youngsters with reading difficulties are often provided either inadequate information or ineffective solutions. We offer families a research-based set of practices for what they can do to support their child with reading difficulties.\*

Lupita Sanchez, a mother, explained it this way: “I am completely frustrated. I just don’t understand why Manuel is having

so much difficulty learning to read. His sister did not have this trouble. I know he is embarrassed about being in third grade and not really knowing how to read.” Many caregivers, like Ms. Sanchez, are concerned about the reading development of their children and puzzled about what to do.

For the vast majority of children, the key to better reading is enhanced instruction within the general education classroom. If your child is struggling, remain hopeful: most children with reading challenges improve considerably with effective instruction. As you think about how to support your child’s reading development, the most important consideration is that *they need as much time in reading and language arts instruction as possible*. This time includes classroom instruction and any type of supplemental instruction or intervention, which should not subtract time from classroom instruction.

As a parent or caregiver, knowing the quality and nature of the reading instruction provided to your child is essential; your youngster’s success as a reader is dependent on a teacher who knows and can implement effective reading practices. Many teachers have been taught to use programs and practices that are not based on the science of reading. Because so few teacher preparation programs, school districts, and commercially available programs represent well what we have learned from the science of reading, far too many youngsters feel like they are reading failures. In fact, many were never provided the explicit

\*For a longer version of this article written for educators, see [go.aft.org/c2u](http://go.aft.org/c2u).

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instruction they need to succeed.<sup>1</sup> Many children with low reading achievement have preventable problems; with explicit, evidence-based instruction, they will learn to read. However, this does not mean there is no such thing as dyslexia (a learning disorder in reading). A relatively small percentage of students (less than 10 percent) have dyslexia, and most of these students learn to read.

## Why Do Some Children Learn to Read Easily, While Others Do Not?

Ms. Sanchez's two children are a good example of what parents often experience. One of their children learns to read readily whereas another has considerable difficulty. Learning to read is a process that occurs so readily for some youngsters that it seems to develop almost naturally. But easily learning to read does not occur for many youngsters. Learning to read is not a natural process. There are no brain systems that are designed for reading. (If there were, learning to read would be as easy as learning to walk or talk.) Rather, for all children, parts of the brain designed to support language and visual processing must be reorganized to support reading.<sup>2</sup> For many children, learning the relationships between sounds and letters (often called the *alphabetic principle*) requires systematic and purposeful instruction; otherwise, reading becomes an effortful, unenjoyable process. While adequately addressing all the issues related to reading disabilities and dyslexia is beyond the scope of this article, we highlight "16 Common Misunderstandings of Dyslexia" on page 37.

## What Can Families Look for to Support Children with Reading Difficulties or Dyslexia?

The most important things are reading programs that are explicit (i.e., teacher-directed) and organized. These programs should

teach how letters represent sounds (known as *phonics*) and provide lots of time to practice reading individual words and connected text (e.g., sentences and paragraphs) to make reading an automatic and effortless process (known as *fluent* reading). They should also teach vocabulary and background knowledge to help build comprehension (so that once your child has sounded out a word like *senator*, they also know what a senator is and how senators get elected, etc.). In addition to reading and writing words, programs that are effective include systematic spelling instruction.

Here are six practices that you can check for in your child's classroom:

### 1. Checking with your child's teacher about how much time is spent on each of the critical elements of effective reading instruction.

Ask, "Could you tell me about how much time you spend each week on phonics (sounding out words), fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and spelling instruction?" The main reason to ask this question is to determine whether the teacher integrates instruction in each of those components into their routine. If the teacher says, "I do not believe in teaching phonics," or "I think students will become more fluent as they get older," or any response that makes you think they don't value instruction in each of those areas, you might want to engage further with the school principal or the school district's reading specialists.

### 2. Providing time each day for extra practice and feedback.

If your child is having a hard time learning to read, they will benefit from mini-lessons in which they are provided a review



of a challenging task, an opportunity to practice word reading with feedback, or a chance to demonstrate what they know with feedback. Mini-lessons that support your child's learning are essential for success. Ask the teacher to give you mini-lessons that you can do at home with your child.

### 3. Tailoring instruction to meet your child's learning needs.

In addition to mini-lessons, your child may need more instruction that is better matched to their needs. Ask the teacher if they have screened or assessed your child's reading difficulties. For example, you could ask: "Can you share the results from the reading tests you have conducted?" and "Can you help me understand how you are using this information to meet my child's reading needs?"

### 4. Providing reading instruction in small groups, in pairs, or one on one.

Whole-class instruction is necessary but unlikely to be adequate to fully meet your child's reading needs. Check to see if your child receives small-group, paired, and one-on-one instruction so that teachers can tailor instruction with appropriate practice and targeted feedback. And, ask for activities you can do at home to provide extra practice on the skills and knowledge being taught to both the whole group and your child.

### 5. Creating many opportunities to read a range of text types and a range of text levels.

It is not uncommon for youngsters with reading difficulties to be assigned a reading level and restricted to reading opportu-

nities only on that level. Your child will benefit from reading across many levels with teacher support (and your support at home) for the upper levels. Your child will also benefit from reading many types of texts, including digital texts, informational texts, and stories.

### 6. Providing explicit instruction that incorporates clear feedback.

What should you be looking for in the types of reading instruction provided? Teachers who offer evidence-based instruction do the following:

- Say what they expect the students to do, such as blend word sounds (known as *phonemes*), read a word, or read a text silently.
- State clearly and in as few words as possible what they need students to know.
- Model what they expect students to say or do.
- Ask children to demonstrate what is expected.
- Provide prompt feedback that is specific and clear. For example, the teacher may say, "I heard several of you blending the sounds /r/, /a/, and /t/ and then saying the word *rat*. That is what I expect. I also heard several of you *only* saying the word *rat* and not blending the sounds. I will give you three more sounds, and I want everyone to both blend the sounds and say the word."
  - Control the difficulty—and help students experience success—by gradually increasing the task difficulty as their performance improves.
  - Maintain high levels of success, engagement, and response.



## Conclusion

There is much that parents and caregivers can do to help their struggling readers, beginning with understanding how reading is taught in the classroom.\* Special programs can help, but these programs are not a substitute for effective classroom instruction. □

For the endnotes, see [aft.org/ae/fall2023/vaughn\\_fletcher](https://aft.org/ae/fall2023/vaughn_fletcher).

\*For more support in talking with your child's teacher, see the questions you can ask about reading improvement at [go.aft.org/t5y](https://go.aft.org/t5y) and the questions about dyslexia at [go.aft.org/uth](https://go.aft.org/uth).

# 16 Common Misunderstandings of Dyslexia

1. *Children benefit from waiting until after second grade to provide reading intervention (False).* If your child is having difficulty learning to read, encourage the school to provide instructional supports immediately. Early instructional reading support provides opportunities for targeting reading needs and reduces the likelihood of long-term reading difficulties.

2. *Dyslexia requires specific and unique screening and identification approaches (False).* If you suspect your child has a reading problem, there are readily available approaches to screening and identifying your child that do not require expensive evaluations.<sup>3</sup>

3. *Providing more opportunities to read books will resolve their reading problem (False).* Others may make you feel guilty about your child's reading difficulties with false statements such as, "If you had read more to your child or if your child just tried harder to read, they would be successful." This is not true; children who have a hard time learning to read need lots of explicit instruction.

4. *Colored lenses or overlays help improve reading for children with dyslexia (False).* There is no evidence to support using colored lenses or overlays.<sup>4</sup>

5. *Children with dyslexia primarily have reading comprehension problems (False).* Children with dyslexia have word-level difficulties that are manifested in difficulty reading text accurately and proficiently. They also have difficulty with spelling.<sup>5</sup>

6. *Dyslexia is rare and most individuals grow out of it (False).* Dyslexia occurs around the world.<sup>6</sup> Most individuals with dyslexia read slowly and with difficulty throughout their lives.<sup>7</sup> But explicit instruction will help them read more easily.



7. *Dyslexia operates on a continuum; it can be mild to severe (True).* Dyslexia does not look precisely the same for all learners, and the range of reading difficulties because of dyslexia also vary.<sup>8</sup>

8. *Many individuals with dyslexia have difficulties with spelling and handwriting (True).* Effective instructional approaches target word reading, spelling, and writing.

9. *Dyslexia has a familial and genetic association (True).* There is a much higher rate of dyslexia in children with a family history of dyslexia—as high as 45 percent in most studies.<sup>9</sup>

10. *Improving home literacy will resolve dyslexia (False).* It is not useful to consider the home environment as the cause of your child's dyslexia. While opportunities to read are beneficial to all learners, improving home literacy will not resolve reading challenges.

11. *Brain training can improve reading outcomes (False).* Cognitive training does not generalize to improved reading outcomes.<sup>10</sup> Your child needs intentional teaching in reading, writing, and spelling skills.

12. *Only certified language therapists can provide effective reading interventions for individuals with dyslexia (False).* You may be told that your child will only benefit from reading instruction provided by a certified language therapist. This is not true. Many educators have extensive knowledge of how to effectively teach youngsters with reading difficulties.

13. *Children with dyslexia see letters and words backwards (False).* Many young children reverse letters when beginning reading and writing—that does not mean they have dyslexia. Most children will learn to write letters correctly over time with practice and feedback.

14. *Vision therapy is an effective approach for children with dyslexia (False).* You may wonder if your child's reading difficulty is because of some type of vision disorder. Many vision training approaches exist, but they have not resulted in improvements in reading.<sup>11</sup>

15. *Dyslexia can be addressed with medications (False).* There is no medication that will remedy word reading difficulties. Some medications may be appropriate if your child has other issues, such as attention problems, but the medications alone do not lead to improved word reading.<sup>12</sup>

16. *Classroom teachers can be a valuable asset to remedying difficulties for individuals with dyslexia (True).* Classroom teachers may be the most valuable resource for children with dyslexia. Classroom teachers are their primary reading teachers as well as the educators who have the most influence on children's self-worth. You can partner with your child's teacher to provide extra practice at home in the reading, writing, and spelling skills being taught in the classroom.

—S. V. and J. M. F.

For the endnotes, see [aft.org/ae/fall2023/vaughn\\_fletcher](https://aft.org/ae/fall2023/vaughn_fletcher).





# ¡Colorín colorado!

## Free, Fun Tips for Raising Bilingual Kids



### What You'll Find in This Section



#### Help Your Child Learn to Read

There are lots of ways that you can help your children learn to read! From the time that they are babies to the time that they are in high school, there are many little steps you can take along the way — rhyming and singing songs, reading out loud, sounding out letters, going to the library, and reading books together in your home language. Helping your children learn to read might also mean finding support if they are having difficulty, which can affect their future success.



#### Learning Together at Home

When you are with your child, there is a lot that you can learn together! This section has all kinds of ideas for activities that you can do around the house, outside, in your neighborhood, and during vacations at different times of year. It also has ideas related to math and science that are easy to try at home (like sorting socks).



#### The Preschool Years

The early years of a child's life make a big difference! From getting ready to read to getting ready to enter school, there are lots of ways to help make the most of this important time. Preschool programs can provide wonderful opportunities for your child to learn and grow, and some bilingual programs offer opportunities to learn in two languages. Even if your child isn't in preschool, there are many things you can do at home together, such as practicing letters and numbers, singing nursery rhymes, and reading with your child.



#### Schools and Families: An Important Partnership

In the U.S., schools and families work together closely to help children succeed. For example, you can contact your child's teacher if you have questions, or you may be invited to events at the school. These resources describe how you can build a relationship with your child's school.

**Para recursos en español, visite [colorincolorado.org/es/familias](http://colorincolorado.org/es/familias).**

[colorincolorado.org/families](http://colorincolorado.org/families)

For family-friendly tips on how to help your child become bilingual, check out Colorín Colorado: [colorincolorado.org](http://colorincolorado.org). It's a trusted, free resource co-produced by the AFT and PBS station WETA for parents, caregivers, and educators that is based on research and best practices.

To get started, watch *Being Bilingual Is a Superpower!* This animated video ([go.aft.org/iyp](http://go.aft.org/iyp)) has easy-to-follow ideas for supporting your child's language and literacy development. And, it's available in eight languages: Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Haitian Creole, Somali, Spanish, and Vietnamese!

If you're looking for more detailed information, visit the "For Families" section of Colorín Colorado ([colorincolorado.org/families](http://colorincolorado.org/families)). Available in English and Spanish, it offers lots of suggestions on everything from learning at home to getting extra help for your child.



[go.aft.org/iyp](http://go.aft.org/iyp)

# Aprender a leer y escribir en dos o más idiomas

To read these articles on becoming bilingual in English, visit [aft.org/ae/fall2023/bilingual](https://aft.org/ae/fall2023/bilingual).

## Introducción



Por Claude Goldenberg, Linda M. Espinosa y Diane August

Las familias juegan un papel importante en ayudar a las escuelas a enseñar a sus hijos a convertirse en lectores y escritores. Mantener el contacto con el maestro de su hijo es importante. Ambos comparten el mismo objetivo: El éxito escolar de su hijo. Lo ideal es que ese éxito incluya que su hijo sea capaz de hablar, leer y escribir en su lengua materna, si es distinta del inglés, y en inglés.

En la escuela, se les enseña a algunos niños a leer y escribir en su lengua materna; otros aprenden solo en inglés. Y a algunos se les enseña en su lengua materna y en inglés. Las escuelas utilizan diferentes enfoques para enseñar a leer y es posible que usted no esté familiarizado con ellos. Pero si pregunta, el maestro de su hijo puede darle algunos consejos para reforzar lo que se enseña en casa.

En casa, los miembros de la familia tienen diferentes niveles de alfabetización en su lengua materna y en inglés (lo cual es importante para que sepan los maestros de manera que puedan personalizar los consejos que comparten). Algunas familias

hablan solo o predominantemente inglés; algunas solo o predominantemente utilizan su lengua materna; otros hablan una mezcla de inglés y otro lenguaje o lenguajes.

Sin embargo, a pesar de la variedad de entornos escolares y familiares y de las diferencias entre las propias experiencias de los niños, hay varias cosas que las familias pueden hacer que ayudarán a todos los niños. Hablaremos de muchas de estas cosas en los artículos a continuación. La información que compartimos se aplica a todos los idiomas, pero proporcionamos ejemplos basados en hablar español en casa y aprender inglés en la escuela simplemente porque esa es la mejor combinación más común en Estados Unidos.

Hay tres ideas clave que se aplican en general a casi todos los niños y en casi todas las situaciones. Esperamos que todas las familias las encuentren útiles. En primer lugar, la alfabetización se desarrolla con el tiempo. No es una habilidad que se desarrolle en un momento concreto. En segundo lugar, aunque aprender a pronunciar, leer y escribir palabras es fundamental para la alfabetización, también son necesarias muchas otras cosas. Por ejemplo, es esencial tener un vocabulario amplio y conocimientos suficientes para comprender lo que se oye o se lee. Además, escuchar, hablar y escribir con distintos fines (como informar, entretener, explicar y persuadir) son importantes. En tercer lugar, hablar dos (¡o más!) idiomas es una ventaja. Aunque todos los estudiantes de Estados Unidos deben llegar a ser competentes en escuchar, hablar, leer y escribir en inglés, debe hacerse todo lo posible por mantener y desarrollar las destrezas lingüísticas y de alfabetización en casa. (Los alumnos angloparlantes también deberían tener oportunidades de desarrollar habilidades en una segunda lengua). El bilingüismo es una ventaja que debería fomentarse para todos. □

*Claude Goldenberg, profesor emérito de la Facultad de Educación de la Universidad de Stanford, es natural de Argentina y enseñó en una escuela primaria bilingüe al principio de su carrera. Linda M. Espinosa es cateórica emérita de educación infantil en la Universidad de Missouri-Columbia y ha dirigido numerosos estudios y publicado numerosos trabajos sobre la educación infantil y los alumnos bilingües. Diane August, profesora de investigación en la Universidad de Houston, dirige D. August & Associates, que realiza investigaciones y consultorías sobre cómo mejorar la educación de los estudiantes de una segunda lengua. Tras iniciar su carrera como profesora, lleva más de tres décadas dedicada a la investigación educativa y trabajo político.*

FOTOS POR ALLISON SHELLEY PARA EDUMAGES

# Aprender a leer y escribir en dos o más idiomas

Primera infancia



Por Linda M. Espinosa

**A**yudar a su hijo a aprender a hablar, leer y escribir en dos o más idiomas es un regalo maravilloso que todas las familias pueden hacer.\* Y es un regalo que a menudo conduce a mejores habilidades cognitivas y al éxito académico, además de los beneficios del bilingüismo en sí mismo. Muchas actividades familiares comunes, tales como mirar revistas con su hijo en edad preescolar, escribir la lista de la compra, enviar mensajes de texto a la abuela, cantar canciones y hornear galletas, pueden fomentar la alfabetización temprana. Independientemente de la lengua utilizada durante estas interacciones, los niños están aprendiendo las habilidades esenciales que desvelarán el misterio de la letra impresa y abrirán el mundo de la lectura y la escritura. Además, como estas actividades tienen lugar en el hogar con las personas más importantes en la vida de su hijo, establecen valores para toda la vida y actitudes positivas hacia la lectura que motivarán el aprendizaje futuro.

Para las familias que hablan una lengua distinta del inglés, el mensaje más importante que tengo que compartir es reconocer

\*Para más consejos sobre cómo ayudar a su hijo a ser bilingüe, consulte [go.aft.org/mxr](http://go.aft.org/mxr).

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el poder de su lengua materna, sus prácticas basadas en la cultura y sus relaciones estrechas para fomentar en sus hijos el amor por la lectura para toda la vida. Por ejemplo, si su familia disfruta de reuniones para contar historias y quizás incluso cantar canciones juntos, sus hijos están aprendiendo habilidades lingüísticas orales (como escuchar y comprender historias y hablar con frases complejas), que son necesarias para la futura comprensión de la lectura.

*Estudiantes que están aprendiendo dos idiomas: niños, desde el nacimiento hasta los cinco años, que adquieren dos o más lenguas simultáneamente y aprenden una segunda lengua mientras continúan desarrollando su primera lengua.*

Una de las claves para desarrollar las habilidades lingüísticas orales de los niños es ayudarles a aumentar su vocabulario. Cuantas más palabras aprenda su hijo, más historias y conversaciones entenderá y podrá expresarse mejor. La mayoría de los niños de 4 años tienen un vocabulario de unas 1,000–1,500 palabras. Para cuando van al jardín de la infancia, los niños suelen saber más de 2,000 palabras y pueden hablar en oraciones completas. Numerosos estudios de investigación han demostrado que la mayoría de los estudiantes de dos idiomas (DLL por sus siglas en inglés) conocen menos palabras en cada una de sus lenguas que sus compañeros monolingües, pero cuando se combinan ambas lenguas, el tamaño de su vocabulario es comparable. Por ejemplo, los DLL que hablan una lengua distinta del inglés en casa y han estado aprendiendo inglés en un entorno preescolar pueden conocer algunas palabras comunes en su lengua materna, como *breakfast* (desayuno), *bedroom* (dormitorio) y *window* (ventana), y otras palabras en inglés (la lengua de la escolarización), como *pencil* (lápiz), *playground* (patio de recreo) y *journal* (diario). Además, es frecuente que los DLL mezclen lenguas: empiezan una frase en una lengua y luego cambian a otra.

Para que su hijo aplique sus destrezas de lenguaje oral para empezar a leer, necesita aprender el *alfabeto*: los nombres de las letras, qué sonidos hacen las letras y cómo juntar los sonidos para formar palabras. Los niños suelen aprender primero las letras significativas, como las de su nombre y después otras letras que ven a menudo, como las de los nombres de los miembros de su familia. Hay muchas formas divertidas de ayudar a su hijo a ampliar su vocabulario y a aprender el alfabeto.

## Actividades familiares

Lo ideal es que las familias apoyen el desarrollo tanto de su lengua materna como del inglés. Es fundamental que siga utili-

zando su lengua materna en las interacciones cotidianas (como las que se describen a continuación), sobre todo si no domina el inglés. Si entiende y habla inglés a un nivel alto, puede seleccionar ciertos momentos del día o de la semana en los que sólo utilice el inglés, como durante la compra o algunas comidas. Sin embargo, su labor principal es fomentar el lenguaje y las habilidades de alfabetización temprana en su lengua materna: esto sentará las bases del bilingüismo precoz y del éxito escolar posterior en inglés.

*Iniciar conversaciones prolongadas:* A lo largo del día, hay oportunidades para hablar con su hijo. Cuanto más *escuche* lo que dice su hijo, *responda* al contenido de su discurso, participe en intercambios repetidos de ida y vuelta y varíe deliberadamente su vocabulario con frases más largas, mayor será el vocabulario de su hijo. He aquí un ejemplo:

Hija de 4 años hablando con su madre: “Ven a ver mi dibujo”.

Mamá: “OK, hágamelo sobre tu dibujo. Parece que has decidido utilizar muchos colores”.

Hija: “Quería que la casa fuera bonita y grande”.

Mamá: Esa es una casa *enorme* que está rodeada de *preciosas* flores que parecen muy coloridas. Me pregunto quién plantó esas flores”.

Esta conversación podría prolongarse durante muchas más vueltas con el uso continuo de palabras de vocabulario más variado y frases complejas. Al mantener frecuentes interacciones lingüísticas receptivas con su hijo e insertar deliberadamente palabras nuevas e interesantes en frases más largas, estará desarrollando habilidades lingüísticas orales que son fundamentales para la comprensión de la lectura. También puede cantar sus canciones infantiles favoritas e inventar palabras nuevas para melodías conocidas.

*Leer libros juntos:* A los 3 o 4 años, su hijo tendrá probablemente muchos libros favoritos que usted habrá leído repetidamente. Cuando tenga que elegir libros para disfrutar juntos, es importante que incluya libros que hayan sido escritos en su lengua materna y representen su bagaje cultural. Por ejemplo, si usted solo habla y lee español, entonces leyendo libros con ilustraciones con cuentos a nivel de preescolar en español, le



ayudará a su hijo a conectar la palabra impresa con los sonidos de la palabra hablada. Su biblioteca comunitaria muy probablemente tenga libros en español como también libros bilingües que son adecuados para niños pequeños. También pueden tener horas de cuentos entre semana a las que puede asistir con su hijo.

Al animar a su hijo a hablar sobre los objetos, las personas, las imágenes y los argumentos de los libros, usted también ampliará su vocabulario y apoyará su comprensión de la secuencia de los cuentos. La lectura compartida también puede ocurrir en otros contextos: leyendo una receta juntos mientras preparan la cena, las etiquetas de los artículos del hogar (incluyendo los envases de alimentos) y los carteles del vecindario. El mensaje importante es que leer puede estimular la imaginación y aportar alegría a nuestras vidas y es esencial para desenvolverse en el mundo.

*Divertirse con las letras:* Usted puede ayudar a su hijo a aprender las letras

- Señalando las letras en nombres y palabras comunes (tales como STOP y BUS en las señales);
- Cantando la canción del abecedario, colocando letras magnéticas en la refrigeradora para deletrear los nombres de la familia; y
- Animando a su hijo a escribir notas cortas a otras personas.

Por ejemplo, a María, de 4 años, le encanta escribir su nombre (de forma casi legible) en la parte superior de cada dibujo que hace. Ha aprendido que la primera letra de su nombre es la M y que suena como “mmm”, así como otros objetos del hogar que empiezan con el mismo sonido/letra: *mop* (trapeador), *magazine* (revista), *microwave* (microondas). Cada vez que María encuentra una nueva palabra que empieza con M, su abuela la ayuda a encontrar las letras magnéticas y a deletrearlas. Esto la ayuda a conectar los sonidos con las letras y ella puede ver cómo se ve la nueva palabra. Su abuela también le da papel y diferentes tipos de lápices, bolígrafos, marcadores y crayolas para ayudar a María a que practique la escritura (lo que también fomenta la alfabetización temprana).

Si realiza actividades como éstas todos los días, compartiendo su amor por su lengua materna y por la lectura, su hijo tendrá una gran base para convertirse en bilingüe y alfabetizado en dos idiomas. □



# Aprender a leer y escribir en dos o más idiomas

Del jardín de infancia

al quinto grado



Por Claude Goldenberg

Las experiencias y el desarrollo del lenguaje en casa son muy importantes durante toda la infancia, por lo que las familias deben seguir comprometiéndose con las actividades descritas en el artículo anterior (véase la página 40). Una vez que los niños empiezan la escuela primaria, también es importante enfocarse en el aprendizaje de las letras, los sonidos de las letras y cómo se combinan para formar palabras. Éstas son la base de la lectura y la escritura, aunque el desarrollo del lenguaje y el conocimiento del mundo también son importantes.

## Consejos para el jardín de la infancia

Una vez que su hijo empieza la escuela, consulte con su maestro para ver lo que le están enseñando y cómo puede ayudarlo a aprender. Usted puede ser útil, aunque sus destrezas en inglés sean limitadas. Asegúrese de consultar con el maestro si observa que su hijo tiene dificultades.

Algunos niños estarán en programas bilingües, aprendiendo a leer primero en su lengua materna, luego en inglés, o en ambas a la vez. Si siguen estudiando ambos idiomas durante la escuela intermedia y la secundaria, es más probable que lleguen a ser bilingües y capaces de leer y escribir en ambas lenguas.

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La mayoría de los niños que hablan una lengua distinta del inglés en casa recibirán clases sólo en inglés. Al tiempo que anima a su hijo en sus asignaturas escolares, también puede ayudarlo a aprender a leer y escribir en su lengua materna. Para la mayoría de las familias de Estados Unidos que hablan una lengua distinta del inglés, esta lengua es el español. Pero lo mismo se aplica a los hablantes de otras lenguas.

A veces les preocupa a las familias que si les enseñan a los niños a leer y escribir en su lengua materna se puedan confundir mientras aprenden inglés. Por lo general, esto no es así. Las habilidades que los niños aprenden sobre la lectura y la escritura en su lengua materna son útiles. Si su hijo se siente confuso, aclárele que cada lengua es valiosa y que existen diferencias a la hora de hablar, leer y escribir en cada una de ellas.

Si usted le ha enseñado a su hijo las letras de su nombre y los sonidos que esas letras representan, el siguiente paso es ayudarlo a aprender los nombres de todas las letras y los sonidos que representan. Utilice letras de plástico, o bloques o tarjetas con letras, y dibujos de cosas que empiecen por las letras. Haga que su hijo escriba las letras mientras usted lo guía (si es necesario). Enséñele la canción del abecedario si su hijo aún no la conoce, y señale las letras mientras usted y su hijo cantan. A medida que su hijo aprenda más letras, juegue a practicar. ¿Cuántas letras puede reconocer su hijo en 30 segundos? ¿Cuánto tarda en identificar 10 letras del abecedario? Conviértalos en divertidas competencias para “vencer al reloj”.

A medida que los niños van aprendiendo los nombres y sonidos de las letras, también pueden empezar a aprender cómo se juntan las letras para formar palabras. Esto puede hacerse en la lengua materna o en inglés. Empiece con palabras sencillas, como *mamá* y *papá* o *cat* (gato) y *bat* (murciélago).

Los niños también deben ser capaces de identificar sonidos individuales (fonemas) dentro de las palabras. Esto es especialmente importante en inglés. Pídale a su hijo que diga una palabra, como “cat” (gato), y muéstrela que cuando diga la palabra, haga hincapié en el sonido “k”. (Recuerde decir sólo el primer sonido, que es una /k/ crujiente, no /ka/). Luego pídale a su hijo que diga la palabra y que le diga el primer sonido que hace al decir la palabra. Haga esto con muchas palabras sencillas.

Otro juego, especialmente útil para aprender a leer en inglés, consiste en decir una palabra por partes, sonido por sonido y luego hacer que su hijo diga cuál es la palabra. Por ejemplo, usted dice los sonidos (fonemas) de la palabra gato: /k/, /a/, /t/. (De nuevo, al decir las “piezas”, límitese a emitir los sonidos consonánticos, /k/ y /t/; no diga /ka/ y /ta/). Su hijo repite los sonidos individuales y luego dice “cat” (gato).

También puede hacer el camino inverso: “Yo diré una palabra; tú me dices las piezas”. Aquí usted dice “cat” (gato), luego el niño dice la palabra y la descompone en sus sonidos individuales: /k/, /a/, /t/. Es posible que su hijo no lo entienda enseguida, así que demuéstreselo hasta que lo haga y sea capaz de jugar con usted. A algunos niños les cuesta aprenderlo, así que tenga paciencia. Manténgalo como un juego divertido, no como una lección.

Al final del jardín de infancia, los niños deberían ser capaces de

- Escribir su nombre y apellidos;
- Identificar y escribir todas o casi todas las letras, mayúsculas y minúsculas;
- Identificar los sonidos dentro de las palabras; y
- Leer y escribir palabras sencillas (por ejemplo, *run*, *mom*, *cat* (corre, mamá, gato); o mamá, mi, mima, papá, Pepe) pensando en sus sonidos y en las letras.

No se preocupe por la ortografía en este momento. Los niños “inventarán” la ortografía de las palabras. Puede corregir la ortografía, pero festeje siempre que los sonidos y las letras coincidan, como “fon” por “phone” (teléfono).

A medida que su hijo aprenda estas destrezas, siga leyéndole en voz alta, teniendo conversaciones y planeando excursiones. Estas actividades aumentarán el vocabulario y los conocimientos, que son importantes para el desarrollo de la alfabetización.

### Consejos para los grados primero a segundo o tercero

En primer grado, es importante que los niños progresen adecuadamente leyendo cada palabra por medio de juntar las letras (descodificando) o “decoding” como se dice en inglés, en la lectura de palabras, primero pronunciándolas (descodificación) y luego pensando si las palabras que leen tienen sentido. Cuando su hijo lea, anímele a fijarse primero en las letras e intentar leer la palabra; una vez que lo haga, debe preguntarse — usted puede recordárselo — si tiene sentido. Si no es así, deberían intentarlo de nuevo. Si siguen teniendo problemas, puede ayudarles a pronunciar la palabra señalando cada letra, de izquierda a derecha, haciendo que su hijo diga el sonido y luego moviendo el dedo rápidamente de izquierda a derecha mientras mezcla los sonidos. Pídale a su hijo que diga la palabra (o dígala por él, si es necesario) y repítala mientras mira las letras. Luego, su hijo debe preguntar (y responder): “¿Tiene sentido?”

A medida que los niños avanzan en el primer grado y pasan al segundo e incluso a principios del tercero, deberían ir adquiriendo más confianza y precisión a la hora de pronunciar las palabras. Esto es más fácil si están aprendiendo a leer en un idioma que ya hablan, ya que conocen y entienden casi o todas las palabras que se les están enseñando a leer. Si están aprendiendo a leer en una lengua que también están aprendiendo a hablar y a comprender — el inglés para los estudiantes de inglés — los niños necesitan que se les enseñe el significado de las palabras que están aprendiendo a leer. De este modo, primero pueden leer las palabras pronunciándolas, juntando las letras (descodificación) y luego pensar si la conocen y si tienen sentido en su contexto. El maestro debe proporcionar esta instrucción, pero las familias también pueden ayudar. Si los padres no conocen el significado de las palabras en inglés, deberían preguntar a alguien que lo sepa o utilizar *Google Translate*.

A medida que los niños aprenden a leer, también deberían escribir. El dictado es una forma excelente de practicar la conexión de los sonidos de las palabras con su ortografía. Esto también ayudará a la lectura de los niños. Empiece dictando letras sueltas y después palabras que su hijo está aprendiendo a leer. Aumente gradualmente los dictados a frases cortas y luego a oraciones.

A medida que los niños adquieren destrezas en la lectura y la escritura, también deberían escribir sus propias composiciones, como cuentos o cartas (con ayuda y de forma independiente). Escribir cartas a sus familiares es una forma excelente de que los niños demuestren sus habilidades de lectura y escritura en desarrollo. Los niños seguirán inventando ortografías, particularmente mientras vayan aprendiendo a leer y escribir en inglés. Los familiares deben seguir festejando cuando los sonidos y las letras coincidan, y también mostrar cómo se escriben correctamente las palabras.

También es importante que los niños vayan aprendiendo las asignaturas escolares como ciencias, matemáticas, estudios sociales y todo lo que necesitan aprender en la escuela. Las familias pueden ayudar leyendo y hablando sobre los libros escolares que los niños traen a casa. También pueden ayudar llevando a sus hijos a museos, al zoológico, a la biblioteca y de excursión a casi cualquier sitio.

### Consejos para los grados tercero a quinto

A principios del tercer grado, los niños deberían ser capaces de pronunciar (descodificar) casi cualquier palabra y aprender cada vez más información nueva leyendo. Leer con rapidez y precisión, con comprensión, es cada vez más importante. Siga haciendo que su hijo lea; ayúdele a leer con fluidez y confianza, y hágale preguntas para verificar su comprensión. Anímelos a leer cosas que les interesen, no solamente lo que los maestros les asignen. Comente sobre el contenido de lo que están leyendo para ayudarles a ampliar su conocimiento y vocabulario.

Una vez que los niños adquieren las habilidades básicas de lectura, el objetivo principal debe ser desarrollar el vocabulario, los conocimientos y la comprensión para que puedan utilizar la lectura y la escritura para los fines previstos: la comunicación y el aprendizaje. Con su ayuda, su hijo estará bien preparado para la escuela intermedia y estudios posteriores. □



# Aprender a leer y escribir en dos o más idiomas

Del sexto al octavo grado



Por Diane August

**H**ay muchas cosas que usted puede hacer para apoyar el desarrollo de la lectura y la escritura de su hijo en los grados intermedios. Este artículo comienza con sugerencias para conectar con los maestros de su hijo, luego ofrece varios consejos y actividades para los miembros de la familia y los cuidadores para fomentar la lectura y la escritura en casa. Independientemente de cómo decida apoyar a su hijo, recuerde que ¡la lengua materna es un tesoro y que el bilingüismo es una ventaja!

## Trabajar con los maestros de su hijo

Casi todas las escuelas invitan a los padres y cuidadores a una conferencia en el otoño de manera que usted puede informarse de cómo está progresando su hijo en la escuela. Si usted no puede asistir, pídale a los maestros de su hijo que se reúnan con usted en otro momento.

Si no le va bien a su hijo de escuela intermedia — especialmente si tiene dificultades con la lectura, escritura y la comprensión del texto en el lenguaje de instrucción — averigüe qué es lo que la escuela está haciendo o puede hacer para apoyar a su hijo y pregunte qué puede hacer para ayudarlo en casa. Muchas

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escuelas suponen que los niños de escuela intermedia que han llegado recientemente a los Estados Unidos pueden leer palabras rápidamente y con precisión en su lengua materna. Si su hijo ha llegado recientemente a los Estados Unidos y no ha aprendido a leer palabras con precisión y rápidamente en su lengua materna, hágase saber a su maestro. A continuación, pida a la escuela que le proporcione apoyo especializado en el lenguaje que se utilice para la enseñanza de la lectura.

Cuando los niños de escuela intermedia tienen dificultades con la lectura o escritura, es importante que los padres y maestros colaboren para resolver el problema. Pídale al maestro de su hijo recursos y actividades que pueda utilizar en casa y asegúrese que esos recursos estén en el nivel correcto. Por ejemplo, deben ser lo suficientemente retadores como para que su hijo pueda completarlos parcialmente solo, pero necesitará el apoyo de un adulto para terminarlos. Y pida recursos tanto en su lengua materna como en el lenguaje de instrucción. Si usted solo habla y lee español, sepa que las habilidades de lectura y escritura que ayude a aprender a su hijo le servirán de apoyo para aprender inglés.

Algunas escuelas ofrecen instrucción adicional, como tutorías gratuitas en lectura y escritura para los estudiantes durante o después de la escuela. Si su hijo está atrasado en lectura o escritura, pregunte cómo puede registrarlos para recibir apoyo adicional.

## Apoyar a su hijo en casa

Si su hijo está aprendiendo en su lengua materna, apoye su desarrollo de la lectura y la escritura en esta lengua. Si está aprendiendo en inglés y usted (u otro miembro de la familia o cuidador) se siente cómodo haciéndolo, apoye a su hijo en inglés. Si no se siente cómodo ofreciendo apoyo en inglés, hágalo en su lengua materna. Muchas habilidades de lectura y escritura adquiridas en la lengua materna se transfieren al inglés — y usted estará ayudando a su hijo a ser bilingüe.

El apoyo que le proporcione a su hijo en la escuela intermedia dependerá de su lenguaje de instrucción y sus habilidades de lectura y escritura, como también sus destrezas en su lengua materna y el lenguaje de instrucción. En el resto de este artículo, le ofrezco sugerencias de cómo puede ayudar a su hijo a adquirir destrezas y conocimientos lingüísticos y de lectoescritura.

## Lectura de palabras

Cuando los niños leen despacio y entrecortadamente, les resulta difícil comprender lo que están leyendo. Para ayudar a su hijo, lean juntos algo que le interese en voz alta todos los días. Ayúdele a pronunciar palabras correctamente y leer con la entonación adecuada. La entonación es la forma en que utilizamos el tono (agudo o grave de nuestra voz) para expresar determinados significados y actitudes.

Ayúdele a prestar atención a la puntuación; por ejemplo, hacer una pausa cuando llegue a una coma y deténgase brevemente cuando llegue a un punto. Y pídale al maestro de su hijo textos para que su hijo pueda practicar leyendo en voz alta todas las noches.

### Adquirir vocabulario

Cuanto más palabras conozcan los niños, más fácil les resultará comprender lo que leen o escuchan.

Ayudar a su hijo a aprender a buscar definiciones de palabras desconocidas es una forma estupenda de favorecer su comprensión del texto y del habla. Una fuente fácil de utilizar para buscar definiciones en su lengua materna es *Google Translate*. Cuando las definiciones en inglés son difíciles de entender, ayude a su hijo a utilizar *wordsmith.net*; tiene definiciones en inglés para los niveles principiante, intermedio y avanzado para cada palabra.

Para fomentar el crecimiento del vocabulario de su hijo, puede recompensarle por mostrarle cada día entre cinco y diez palabras nuevas que haya oído o leído. Es divertido ayudar a su hijo a crear su propio diccionario: Dele un diario, luego pídale que anote la fecha y enumere de cinco a diez palabras por día. Para cada palabra, pídale que de una definición en su lengua materna y en inglés. Al final del día, pídale que lea la palabra y la definición, y que luego aporten su propia frase u oraciones de ejemplo. Con el tiempo, aproveche las oportunidades de utilizar cada nueva palabra de vocabulario en la conversación.

También hay muchos juegos de vocabulario a los que puede jugar con su hijo. Por ejemplo, usted puede participar en un juego de memoria creando tarjetas que tienen una definición en una tarjeta y la palabra objetivo en otra. Ponga las tarjetas boca abajo y luego pídale a su hijo que las empareje.

### Comprender el texto y el habla

Otras formas de ayudar a mejorar la comprensión de su hijo consisten en averiguar cuáles son sus intereses y ayudarlo a encontrar recursos sobre esos temas. A medida que crecen los niños y empiezan a pensar en su propia identidad, pueden interesarse más por sus orígenes, lo que puede contribuir a un sano sentimiento de orgullo por su herencia y su cultura. La lectura es una forma estupenda de que su hijo explore esos intereses. Su biblioteca escolar o local es una buena fuente para buscar recursos como libros, novelas gráficas, revistas, películas (idealmente con subtítulos en inglés o en su lengua materna), podcasts o audiolibros.

Lea y/o escuchen juntos estos recursos. Cuando encuentre palabras que su hijo puede desconocer, defínalas. Después de uno o dos párrafos, hágale preguntas a su hijo y conversen sobre sus respuestas. Las preguntas que ayudan a los niños a convertirse en lectores activos y pensar sobre el texto empiezan con *quién, qué, cuándo, dónde, cómo y por qué*. Mientras leen o escuchan juntos, usted puede pedirle a su hijo que anticipe lo que pasará a continuación y qué lo hace pensar así. Usted también puede hacer una pausa de vez en cuando para pedirle a su hijo que resuma lo que ha leído hasta ese momento.

### Escritura

Para apoyar la escritura de su hijo, relacione la escritura con los recursos que haya leído o escuchado. Los niños de la escuela intermedia deben aprender a escribir

- Narraciones sobre experiencias o eventos reales o imaginarios, como una historia sobre un gran día con un amigo;
- Textos informativos/explicativos para examinar un tema y transmitir ideas e información claramente, tales como describir la vida en el país del que emigró un familiar; y
- Textos de opinión para apoyar el punto de vista con razones e información, tales como por qué las 7:00 de la mañana es demasiado temprano para levantarse para ir a la escuela.



La clave para convertirse en un buen lector es leer, así que dele a su hijo muchas oportunidades.\* Si tiene hijos pequeños o familiares mayores que no sepan leer, pídale a su hijo que lea en voz alta: ¡todos los disfrutarán! También puede haber oportunidades de voluntariado en su comunidad para que su hijo lea a niños pequeños, personas mayores, invidentes o pacientes de hospital. Y asegúrese de tener mucho material de lectura en casa. Juntos, podrían escoger libros de una venta de garaje o de la sección “Jóvenes Adultos” de la biblioteca.

No pasa nada si su hijo lee en su primera lengua, segunda o en ambas. Si prefiere leer en español, por ejemplo, esto le ayudará a mantener fuertes sus habilidades en este idioma y le dará más práctica de lectura, lo que también reforzará sus habilidades de lectura en inglés. Lo importante es leer con comprensión, compromiso y disfrute. □

\*Para más consejos sobre cómo animar a su hijo a leer, consulte [go.aft.org/wob](http://go.aft.org/wob).



# Empowering Families

Supporting African American Children's Reading Development



By Julie A. Washington and Gennie R. Laramore

**R**eading is arguably the most important skill that children learn in school—and yet many children struggle to become strong readers.<sup>1</sup> This is especially true of African American children. Children growing up in low-income, under-resourced neighborhoods often struggle with reading. But even among Black children in wealthier neighborhoods, learning to read can be a challenge. Recent results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress show that fewer than 20 percent of African American fourth-graders are strong readers and more than 50 percent are struggling with reading.<sup>2</sup>

In this article, we are sounding the alarm to African American families! If your child is struggling to learn to read, there are many

things that you can do at home to support them.\* The questions we hope to address here are: (1) What's most important for African American children to become strong readers? and (2) What can you do to help your child?

## What's Most Important for African American Children to Become Strong Readers?

Throughout this issue of *American Educator*, we see that lots of things are essential for helping children learn to read, from developing their oral language and vocabulary to helping them hear the sounds that make up words to showing them how letters represent sounds. That's all true for African American children too. But research suggests that there are three factors that have the most influence on reading growth for African American children: language, access to reading materials, and practice reading.

### Language

Reading is not just about recognizing words on a page. Reading relies heavily on oral language (speaking) skills. Research has

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\*For a longer version of this article written for educators, see "Teaching Reading to African American Children" in the Summer 2021 issue of *American Educator*: [go.aft.org/tx3](http://go.aft.org/tx3).

shown that many African American children come to school using African American English (AAE), which is an oral language variety that differs in important ways from the print that they will see in books.<sup>3</sup> AAE is used by many African American children and adults in their families and communities. AAE influences learning to read, write, and spell, especially for children who use a lot of AAE when they talk. For these children, there will be many instances when text does not match their oral language. When these mismatches are present, children may need to take more time to resolve these differences between the way they talk and what they are trying to read. Resolving these differences can slow children down, contributing to their struggle to develop strong reading skills. The good news is that strength in any oral language variety—including AAE—can support strong reading skills. But children will need more time, exposure to text, and practice reading to do their best. If you do not have many books at home, you can ask your child’s teacher to send more books home for your child.

Books are written in General American English (GAE), not AAE. Reading will become easier as children continue to read, recognize, analyze, and resolve the differences that they encounter between their speech and text. For example, there are sound differences between GAE and AAE. The child who speaks AAE may say *goal* and *gold* the same way because dropping the last sound in a word is common in AAE. There are also differences in sentences between GAE and AAE. An AAE-speaking child may say, “*The boy be runnin\_ home from school to go to his frien\_ house to watch his favorite show.*” In text, the same idea may be written as “*The boy runs home from school each day to watch his favorite show at his friend’s house.*” The two sentences use different words and word orders, but they are both complex sentences that mean the same thing. The more children read, the more they will encounter the second sentence, supporting their ability to make connections between the way they say the sentence and how it appears in books.

### Access to Reading Materials

This analysis process is supported when African American children have enough opportunities to read. Reading daily and reading many different kinds of books provides valuable exposure to the language of texts. If a child does not have many books at home or does not have access to books, both their language and their literacy development can be impacted. In this case, difficulty with reading may not just be about learning to connect oral AAE and text GAE, but about access to print combined with language differences. It is important for any child who uses an oral language that is different from print (including Spanish, Appalachian English, and other languages and varieties of English) to have strong reading instruction that is sensitive to these differences and more opportunities to read books.

In today’s digital age, access to technology and digital resources is increasingly important for reading development. Online libraries, e-books, educational websites, and interactive reading platforms all provide opportunities for engaging with text. It is also important to consider the content of the books you choose because representation matters in reading materials. Your child will benefit from seeing characters, stories, and experiences that reflect their own cultural background, identities, and interests.



### Practice Reading

Parents and caregivers can provide lots of opportunities for children to practice reading at home. You can read together, and your child should also read silently on their own. Encourage your child to read aloud to you or to younger siblings. Reading aloud helps improve pronunciation, comprehension, and fluency (i.e., reading quickly, smoothly, and accurately). It also provides an opportunity for you to listen and offer guidance or support when needed.

While you are reading books, be sure to talk about them. Talking about what has been read is an important way for you to help your child make connections to what is in the book—and a great way for you to find out if your child understands the book. This is especially important for children who are using AAE when they talk! Conversations between you and your child will help them better understand the meaning of the books that you are reading together and that they read on their own. Books about topics of high interest or about experiences that your child recognizes will also increase comprehension and motivation to continue reading practice.

### What Can You Do to Help Your Child?

The good news is that with proper instruction and practice, most children will learn to read. But it can be painful to listen to your child struggle to read words, especially when you think they should be reading better than they are. Most parents and caregivers want to know, “What can I do at home to help my child become a better reader?”

We know that you are not reading teachers, and we don’t expect you to be. But you can help your child become a bet-

ter reader and enjoy reading. You don't need any complicated strategies. Most importantly, remember that all children benefit from as much experience with print as you can provide. Here are several simple things that you can do.

1. Get to know your child's teachers and be sure they know how to teach children who use AAE. If they don't, here's an article you can share with them: "Teaching Reading to African American Children: When Home and School Language Differ." It's available for free at [go.aft.org/tx3](http://go.aft.org/tx3).
2. Set aside a few minutes a day to read with your child. You can be the reader, your child can read to you, or you can take turns reading.
3. Talk about the books you are reading together. Having conversations about books will help your child understand the text better and will help develop their reading comprehension skills. Conversations in AAE are helpful and affirming. You do not need to change the way you talk! Just talk.
4. Play word games and sing songs that bring attention to the sounds in words—this can be fun! Many of the games that

we played as children were really word games that helped us with rhyming and wordplay. Do you remember Red Rover, Red Light/Green Light, the Name Game, and Mary Mack? Teaching your child to play these games (and others that you loved as a child) helps develop their listening comprehension (i.e., understanding when someone is speaking or reading to them). These games also foster flexibility with the sounds in words, which helps with reading. For example, once your child can sound out *cat*, they will more easily read *hat*, *mat*, and *pat*. We were all learning while we were playing!

5. Ask your child what they would like to read about. If you choose topics that your child loves, their motivation to read will increase.
6. Show your child that you value reading. Let them see you regularly reading things that you enjoy and talk about what you learn. Modeling reading is one of the most important things you can do to help your child become a strong reader. □

For the endnotes, see [aft.org/ae/fall2023/washington\\_laramore](http://aft.org/ae/fall2023/washington_laramore).



## How to Help If You Struggle to Read

If you have a hard time reading, you can still help your child learn to read. You can:

1. Read wordless books. These books do not have words; they tell stories using pictures. Look at the pictures with your child and talk about what you see to understand the story. You can use these books to introduce your child to new words, strengthen their listening skills, and teach them about the structure of stories (such as the beginning, middle, and end).
2. Listen to audiobooks (recordings of books being read out loud). Many audiobooks are free at your local library, and many can be found online. Ask your child's teacher if the books they are reading in class also have an audiobook version. And, check YouTube. Many teachers and authors have made videos of reading children's books out loud.
3. Practice your reading while you read with your child. You can take turns reading a sentence or a paragraph, or you can read the same book together and talk about it. Read things that you enjoy—books, magazines, poetry, recipes, or graphic novels.

Doing these things will show your child that you value reading—and help them value it as well.

—J. A. W. and G. R. L.

# Supporting Students Who Use African American English

How Families Can Become Strong Advocates for Their Children



By Anne H. Charity Hudley, Christine Mallinson, Rachel Samuels, and Kimberly Bigelow

**T**hrough our teaching and our research, we have seen the magnificent ways that Black people use language to connect people, families, and communities across the Black diaspora. Unfortunately, Black language and culture do not always get the respect they deserve. Language-based prejudice is common in society and can play a significant and biased role in school-based experiences. It is important for families and educators to understand how racialized beliefs about language can surface in educational settings.\*

\*For a longer version of this article written for educators, see [go.aft.org/1md](https://go.aft.org/1md).

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When students come to school using African American English, they know that many of their relatives, friends, and neighbors speak like them.<sup>1</sup> They may also know that many of their educators do not use this variety of English. The message that African American students may internalize is that educators expect them to learn a new way of communicating—and that it may be at odds with their home language and culture. This messaging can affect students' identities, and over time, the burden takes an emotional toll. Making matters worse, students who use varieties of African American English may not fully benefit from appropriate assessments or resources. Too often, their brilliance goes unrecognized.

As a result, parents and caregivers may need to advocate for their children by connecting with key educators and community members—including guidance counselors, learning specialists, administrators, teachers, and doctors. Through advocacy, we can meet students' needs by working together to ensure that support and resources are fully available for all Black students.

This article focuses on four key educational situations where advocacy may be particularly important: (1) building reading

and literacy skills; (2) accessing speech, language, and hearing services; (3) developing individualized education plans; and (4) identifying support for gifted and talented students.

## 1. Building Reading and Literacy Skills

From the very beginning of school—preschool or kindergarten—it’s important for your child’s teacher to be tuned in to your home language and culture. Be sure to share your child’s strengths!

As you share information about your child, ask about your school’s approach to literacy instruction. *Are foundational skills being delivered through direct instruction following a specific sequence?* Foundational literacy skills include sound play, letter identification, phonics, and word recognition strategies.\* Reading skills are acquired as students learn how speech sounds can be represented with letters. Children’s ability to hear and manipulate speech sounds is an important pre-literacy skill. Without instruction that recognizes and values how speech sounds vary, children who use African American English may face challenges mapping their speech sounds onto standardized representations of English in school.

In addition to asking about literacy instruction, ask about the assessments and how students are expected to progress. *What literacy assessments are used and how are student results and progress shared?* Many elementary schools employ reading specialists. These individuals can usually answer questions about the literacy instruction and support your child may receive at school. If your child is having difficulty, there may be opportunities for specialized literacy instruction, such as in-school support or supplemental instruction. *How is a child’s use of African American English (or any other variety of English) accounted for in the assessment process? How are students’ linguistic and cultural assets affirmed in the classroom?* Many early literacy assessments do not adjust for language variation, and teachers may not know how to adjust reading instruction for students who use African American English. To help your child’s teacher learn about African American English, share our article for educators, “Lift Every Voice”; it’s available for free at [go.aft.org/1md](http://go.aft.org/1md).

\*To learn more about these skills, see Nell K. Duke’s article on page 14 and Linnea C. Ehri’s article on page 17.



As a parent or primary caregiver, you have the right to access information on your child’s proficiency and progress. You know your child best. Through open communication channels, you and the school can work together to support the development of your child’s reading skills.

## 2. Accessing Speech, Language, and Hearing Services

The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association states that all language varieties are equally valuable communicative and cultural resources.<sup>2</sup> Making this statement a reality takes work, however.

Black students face a double challenge with speech and hearing services that families must be aware of. The first is that Black students may be over-referred for services that they do not need. This happens when standardized assessments are not sensitive to the students’ language variety and to the normal range of Black language use. Along with advocating for an appropriate assessment, ask for language samples from your family and your child’s community to be considered in the assessment process.<sup>3</sup>

The second challenge is that being unfamiliar with Black language patterns can lead to the under-delivery of services to Black students. In some cases, clinicians may overgeneralize and misattribute linguistic characteristics to African American English that are not part of the variety at all—thereby overlooking actual speech issues that deserve extra supports (like tutoring). How can this happen? Characteristics of Black language varieties can appear similar to signals of potential concerns in other varieties of English.<sup>4</sup> Even clinicians who are aware of Black language patterns can still misdiagnose a student if they do not have the skill to distinguish linguistic detail and context.

Your perspective on your child’s language matters. Let clinicians know about the language of your home and community and tell them what you notice. The National Black Association for Speech-Language and Hearing’s member referral service (available at [nbaslh.org/member-referral](http://nbaslh.org/member-referral)) can also help you find professionals who use or are familiar with African American English and other Black language varieties. (This list only includes



association members who have opted to be included; it might not include all the professionals in your area. Just because a particular professional is not included on this list does not mean that they lack qualifications or competency.)

### 3. Developing Individualized Education Plans

Coming to terms with your child having a disability can be challenging for any parent or caregiver. For parents of Black students, the experience can be even more daunting. It is well documented that there is an overrepresentation of Black children, particularly Black males, in special education as a result of racial bias.<sup>5</sup> As a result, some parents of Black children may be reluctant to attach a “label” to their child. For others, it may be intimidating to navigate the process from evaluation to the implementation of an individualized education plan (IEP).

If you think your child may have a disability and would benefit from specialized instruction and services, share your concerns with your child’s teacher. If you have concerns, the teacher likely does as well. You have the right to request an initial evaluation to determine if your child has a disability. The local educational agency then has 60 days to complete the evaluation and determine eligibility for specialized instruction. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, you (as a parent or caregiver) are a member of your child’s IEP team and therefore have a voice in the development of your child’s IEP.

In regular and special education, teacher perceptions and bias can play a significant role in students’ educational experiences. When teachers have low expectations for students and view them through a deficit mindset (focusing on what students can’t do or areas where their skills are weak), students’ learning suffers. Bias can also cause specialized services to be inequitably provided for Black families. Evaluations may be delayed, specialized service hours may be distributed unequally, accommodations may be misaligned, and Black students may receive segregated placement.

It is important that educators view students through a strengths-based mindset, aligning their actions and their expectations for students’ behavior and academic achievement. Start by asking your child’s teacher to share three strengths about your child as a learner. How well do they know your child as a person (e.g., their interests)? It’s particularly important to ask questions related to language to see if language variation and cultural differences play a role in your child’s assessment.

### 4. Identifying Support for Gifted and Talented Students

Giftedness occurs in all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups, yet students of color are underrepresented in gifted programs.<sup>6</sup> As the National Association for Gifted Children affirms, Black students are less likely to be identified as gifted and are less likely to have access to gifted education programs and services.<sup>7</sup> Language contributes to this disparity in two ways. First, as we’ve mentioned, standardized assessments tend not to be sensitive to language variation and don’t recognize strengths in African American English. Second, resources are not always transparently offered. Parents and caregivers may not have a full understanding of what programs and services are needed and available for their gifted children.

Author Joy Lawson Davis has dedicated her career to studying the experiences of gifted Black students. She explains that being gifted and talented and also African American creates a “double minority” situation and that Black gifted children may have unique differences in language, demeanor, interests, creative pursuits, intellectual capacity, and so on.<sup>8</sup> Feeling judged or scrutinized by peers and others as “too Black to be gifted” or “not Black enough” can affect Black gifted students throughout their educational journey.

Strong family and community connections are critical for helping Black gifted students remain resilient, tenacious, and strong in spirit as they navigate educational climates that are not always fully welcoming to or inclusive of high-achieving students of color. Davis’s book, *Bright, Talented, and Black: A Guide for Families of Black Gifted Learners*, provides guidance and resources to help parents and caregivers advocate for their Black gifted students.



### Conclusion

The language of Black students, families, and communities is an invaluable cultural and educational resource. With insight into how your child uses language, combined with the resources we have provided here, you have the knowledge and skill to be the advocate we need to help bring about the linguistic justice that all Black students deserve. □

For the endnotes, see [go.aft.org/n7f](https://go.aft.org/n7f).

# 10 Tips for Taking Your Child to the Library



By Maria G. O'Brien

**G**ive a child a book and watch them blossom in more ways than you could possibly imagine! Nothing can replace the feel of a book and the turning of pages in anticipation of a story unfolding picture by picture, chapter by chapter. Books open doors to learning and to the world around us.

Where do we go to find these awesome books? The library, of course. The following tips are a combination of common and creative approaches to library visits with a young child in mind.

1. If your child has been introduced to books, ask them to choose their favorites. Then have an informal discussion about the books they've selected. Suggest that they can find more books like these at a library. Help them get excited about their visit by showing them photos of libraries and telling them about the one you plan to take them to.
2. Speak to your child about how to behave at the library. Discuss the purpose of your visit to the library. Explain to your child that libraries are quiet places, but many also include spaces that allow for more noise, movement, and interaction. They need to understand that libraries are for everyone—shared spaces for each person to read, learn, and grow.
3. Teach them about borrowing versus buying and what it means to be responsible with books that we are sharing with others in our community. Show them how to hold books and

where to keep the books they've finished or are waiting to read. If your child is already attending school, their school librarian has probably covered some of these practices. Consider asking the school librarian for the list of rules and procedures; if need be, add a few of your own.

4. Establish a relationship with your local librarian—and your school librarian. Ask for a tour of the children's section and for a pamphlet or calendar with scheduled activities that promote reading. Also, attend school functions and activities that allow you to visit and communicate with your school librarian. The better these librarians know your child, the better they will be at finding books your child loves.
5. Observe how quickly your child goes through books to help you determine how often to visit the library. Rushing their reading or taking home too many books at once can be daunting for some children. Other children will devour books, and a visit to the library can't come soon enough. Either way, allow your child to set the pace, but don't stop taking them to the library.
6. Over time, library visits can become routine. Switch it up to keep your visits fun: choose books on shelves "A" through "C"; find books with a certain colored spine; make lists on bookmarks and check them off as your child reads them. Consider holidays, celebrations, observations, local history, or some area of interest that they have yet to read about.
7. Most children listen to stories before learning to read themselves. Listening to a book being read aloud can be a magical experience. A good reader brings the book to life—giving the characters unique voices, often transporting children to an

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imaginative place. Listening also helps children learn new words and expand their vocabulary. After a read-aloud, listen to your child's retelling of the story. Use this information, excitement, or lack thereof to choose the next book and future book interests.







8. Explore beyond books. Today's libraries, including the ones in our schools, are often described as the *hub* or the *commons*. They have areas where people gather to participate in activities that allow them to innovate, create, and partner with others, such as STEM\* rooms or makerspaces. Today's libraries also have story times, book clubs and sales, free access to computers, digital resources, and activities that engage not just your child, but your whole family.
9. Help your child find books that capture the essence of their heritage, culture, and customs. In addition, select books that allow them to see the world beyond their home and community, including how we coexist with and appreciate others. Books like these can be used to guide a conversation about empathy, understanding, and humanity. The best books make us laugh, cry, and think critically.
10. Last and most important: read! As parents and caregivers, we often assume that taking our children to libraries will be enough to engage them in book collecting and reading. But the truth is, they're watching all of us. Find a balance between technology and books. Consider that visits to the library will be memorable experiences, contributing to their autonomy and understanding of intellectual freedom. □

\*STEM stands for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

# Where to Find Great Books

The best place to look for great books is your local library. Librarians know all about books—and they are experts at finding books the whole family will enjoy. Your child's teacher may also have some favorite books to recommend.

Another place to find great books is online. Here are several websites that feature excellent children's books.

-  **Reading Rockets**—[go.aft.org/zpa](http://go.aft.org/zpa)  
Reading Rockets, which is a great website for families and educators to learn about literacy, links to more than 50 book awards and lists of notable books.
-  **Social Justice Books**—[go.aft.org/hyp](http://go.aft.org/hyp)  
This site offers critical reviews of multicultural books and books that advance social justice by covering topics like organizing, civil rights, and climate change. It offers more than 90 lists of recommended books (and has a section on books that are *not* recommended).
-  **We Need Diverse Books**—[go.aft.org/bil](http://go.aft.org/bil)  
Books for children and young adults too often don't represent the rich diversity of peoples and cultures that we see all around us. This nonprofit is working to change that. It also highlights outstanding books with meaningful diversity through the Walter Awards.
-  **Mathical Book Prize**—[go.aft.org/odx](http://go.aft.org/odx)  
Math is everywhere, and the books awarded the Mathical prize help children from prekindergarten to high school see and enjoy it.
-  **National Council of Teachers of English**—[go.aft.org/mli](http://go.aft.org/mli)  
It's no surprise that English teachers have a love of books! To help children fall in love with books too, here are awards for the best in fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.
-  **National Science Teaching Association**—[go.aft.org/iu8](http://go.aft.org/iu8)  
For fascinating books for kindergartners through 12th-graders about everything from sloths to outer space to dirt to x-rays, check out this list of outstanding science books.

—EDITORS





# READING OPENS THE WORLD



The AFT is dedicated to spreading the joy of reading. That's why we created Reading Opens the World. It's a multiyear campaign to give millions of books to children, school staff, and educators in marginalized communities and to offer parents and caregivers fun and research-based tips for boosting literacy.

So far, we've given away 1.5 million books through over 250 events all across the country!

[aft.org/read](https://aft.org/read)



# How to Get Involved in Your Child's School

## Top Tips from Parents, for Parents

By Danilza Martinez, Catherine Kennedy, Jairalis Mercado, and Claritza Rodriguez

**O**ur names are Danilza, Catherine, Jairalis, and Claritza. We each have a unique story. Some of us have one child, and some have five. Some of us speak Spanish, and some speak English. Some of us are single moms, and some of us have partners. Some of us are recent immigrants,

*Danilza Martinez, who moved to Boston from the Dominican Republic three years ago, works as a parent mentor in the Boston Public Schools and has one daughter. Catherine Kennedy, a mother of two children, has worked in various education settings since earning her GED at age 16 and is currently a parent mentor through St. Stephen's Youth Programs. Jairalis Mercado is the proud mom of two daughters who love basketball and cheerleading and a parent mentor in the Boston Public Schools. Claritza Rodriguez, a parent mentor coordinator at St. Stephen's Youth Programs, has five kids, ages 4-18, who attend five different Boston public schools.*



# Los mejores consejos de padres a padres para involucrarse en la escuela de su(s) hijo(s)

Por Danilza Martinez, Catherine Kennedy, Jairalis Mercado y Claritza Rodriguez

**N**osotras somos Danilza, Catherine, Jairalis y Claritza; nuestras historias son únicas. Algunas de nosotras tenemos un sólo hijo, mientras otras tienen cinco. Algunas hablamos español y otras hablan inglés. Algunas somos madres solteras, y otras tenemos parejas. Algunas somos inmigrantes recientes, otras crecimos en Boston. Algunos de nuestros



*Danilza Martínez, quien se mudó a Boston desde República Dominicana hace tres años, trabaja como madre mentora en las Escuelas Públicas de Boston y tiene una hija. Catherine Kennedy, mamá de dos niños, ha trabajado en varios entornos educativos desde que obtuvo su GED a los 16 años. Actualmente es madre mentora a través del Programa de Jóvenes de St. Stephen. Jairalis Mercado es la orgullosa mamá de dos hijas a quienes les encanta jugar baloncesto y ser porristas, también es una madre mentora en las Escuelas Públicas de Boston. Claritza Rodríguez trabaja como coordinadora del programa de padres mentores de St. Stephen, tiene cinco hijos, entre los 4 y los 18 años, quienes asisten a cinco escuelas públicas distintas de Boston.*

PHOTOS BY THE AFT AND COURTESY OF ST. STEPHEN'S YOUTH PROGRAMS

and some of us grew up in Boston. Some of our children have disabilities, and some do not. All of our children attend Boston public schools.

We all have one thing in common: we are dedicated to getting involved in our children's schools and advocating for a better education. We're here to tell you how we do it and to let you know that even if you feel scared or unsure or unwelcome, you can make a difference in your child's education. Here are our top 10 tips:

1. Connect with the resources that your child's school has. If you are immigrating from another country, you might be feeling disoriented or anxious about learning a new education system and language. Find your school's parent council, social worker, counselor, or family liaison, if there is one. Ask for support.
2. Connect with community organizations that promote educational equity. Through learning others' stories, you will realize that you are not the only person who is going through your situation, and you will not feel so alone.

3. Read with your child, even if you don't speak English. It's just as good to read together in your home language! If they have homework in English, sit with them and ask them questions about it. Play word games with them. And if you show them that you're trying to learn English too, it will motivate them.
4. Pay attention to your child's mental and physical health. Making friends and learning valuable social and emotional skills can be just as important as their academics. Ask them how they're feeling. Disconnect from devices and get some fresh air. Dance and sing with them.
5. Talk to other families at your child's school. Chances are, other parents are feeling just as shy or nervous as you are. Say hi to them at pickup and drop off, and share information with them about what's going on in the school. You don't have to be best friends, but you might be surprised at how quickly you end up being a great support system for each other.



hijos tienen discapacidades y otros no, pero todos nuestros niños asisten a las Escuelas Públicas de Boston.

Las cuatro tenemos una meta común: queremos involucrarnos en las escuelas de nuestros hijos y poder abogar por una mejor educación. En este artículo, queremos exponer cómo lo estamos haciendo, pero también mostrarle que, aunque a veces se puede sentir asustado, inseguro o no bienvenido, usted puede hacer una gran diferencia en la educación de su hijo. Aquí están nuestros 10 mejores consejos:

1. Familiarícese con los recursos que tiene la escuela de su hijo. Si está inmigrando de otro país, es probable que se sienta desorientado o ansioso por aprender un idioma nuevo o por entender un sistema educativo diferente. Busque en su escuela consejo de otros padres, del trabajador social, del consejero o del encargado de enlace familiar. Siempre habrá alguien que lo podrá ayudar. Pida apoyo.
2. Conéctese con Organizaciones Comunitarias que promueven la equidad educativa. Al escuchar las historias de los demás, se dará cuenta de que no es la única persona que está pasando por su situación. Se sentirá acompañado y apoyado.

3. Lea con sus hijos, incluso si no habla inglés. ¡Es excelente leer juntos en el idioma materno! Si tienen tareas en inglés, siéntese con ellos y hágales preguntas al respecto. Juegue juegos de palabras con ellos. Si usted demuestra que también está tratando de aprender inglés, sus hijos se motivarán.
4. Preste atención a la salud mental y física de su hijo. Las valiosas habilidades sociales y emocionales se cultivan haciendo amigos; aprender estas habilidades puede ser tan importante como los estudios. Pregunte a sus hijos cómo se sienten. Desconéctese de los dispositivos y tome un poco de aire fresco. Baile y cante con ellos.
5. Hable con otras familias de la escuela de su hijo. Lo más probable es que otros padres se sientan tan tímidos o nerviosos como usted. Salúdelos cuando deje y recoja a sus hijos, y comparta información con ellos sobre lo que está sucediendo en la escuela. No tienen que ser mejores amigos, pero se sorprenderá de lo rápido que terminan formando un gran sistema de apoyo los unos para los otros.
6. Conozca a los maestros de su hijo. Siéntase cómodo contac-

6. Get to know your child's teachers. Feel comfortable reaching out to them with any questions you have and praise them when they do things right (trust us, this makes a world of difference!). Don't wait for something to go wrong to contact them. Ask them about their perspective on how you can best support your child. And don't just talk to your classroom teacher. Meet your school's principal, specialists, paraprofessionals, and secretary.
7. Show your culture at your child's school so your child—and all children—don't lose their roots. No doubt your child will learn about American culture, but keeping your family's culture alive is also extremely important. Through this, you will maintain strong family ties. Share about your heritage with your child's school. Songs, stories, and foods are fun to share—and you and your child will get to learn about other cultures too.
8. Volunteer at your child's school, if your schedule allows. Coordinate with your child's teacher or even another teacher

at the school. Work with all the students. You will learn more about the school than you ever imagined. You will become familiar with the school's instructional practices, and this will make it easier to help your child at home. And, there really is nothing that makes a child more proud than seeing their parent at school.

9. Learn about your rights. It is always good to be aware so you can advocate when unfair things happen at your child's school. Don't be afraid to boldly take your concerns to school officials, including district leaders, if you are not satisfied with how your school leaders respond. Testify and protest. By raising your voice, you will contribute to improving the educational system not only for your child but also for others.
10. Follow your own dreams, too. The best legacy you can give your child is seeing their parent growing and improving, achieving their goals, and finding their best self. Show your children through your example that with work, discipline, and perseverance, they can achieve their dreams. □



tándolos para preguntarles sobre cualquier duda que tenga y elógielos cuando hagan las cosas bien (confíe en nosotras, ¡Esto hace una gran diferencia!). No espere a que algo salga mal para contactarlos. Puede pedirles su opinión sobre cómo puede apoyar mejor a su hijo. Además, le aconsejamos que no solo hable con su maestro de clase. Conozca al director, a los especialistas, a los paraprofesionales y a la secretaria de la escuela.

7. Muestre su cultura en la escuela de su hijo para que su hijo, y los demás niños, no pierdan sus raíces. Sin duda, su hijo aprenderá sobre la cultura estadounidense, pero mantener viva la cultura de su familia también es extremadamente importante. A través de esto, se mantienen fuertes los lazos familiares. Comparta sobre su herencia con la escuela de su hijo. Es divertido compartir canciones, historias y alimentos; usted y su hijo también aprenderán sobre otras culturas.
8. Si su horario se lo permite, ofrezca su tiempo para ser voluntario en la escuela de su hijo. Coordine con el maestro de su hijo, o incluso con otros maestros de la escuela. Trabaje

con todos los estudiantes. Aprenderá más sobre la escuela de lo que nunca imaginó. Se familiarizará con las prácticas de instrucción de la escuela y será más fácil ayudar a su hijo en casa. Realmente no hay nada que haga que un niño se sienta más orgulloso que ver a sus padres en la escuela.

9. Conozca sus derechos. Siempre es bueno estar atento para que pueda abogar cuando suceden cosas injustas en la escuela de su hijo. No tenga miedo de llevar asertivamente sus preocupaciones a los funcionarios escolares, incluyendo a los líderes del distrito, si no está satisfecho con la manera en que responden los líderes escolares, testifique y proteste. Al hacer valer sus derechos, contribuirá a mejorar el sistema educativo, no sólo para su hijo, sino también para los demás.
10. Siga sus propios sueños. El mejor legado que puede dejarle a su hijo es ser su modelo de crecimiento y superación, alcanzando sus metas y encontrando la mejor versión de usted mismo. Muéstreles a sus hijos con su propio ejemplo que, con trabajo, disciplina y perseverancia, pueden alcanzar sus sueños. □

# How to Read Difficult Books

A Guide for High School and College Students



By Daniel T. Willingham

**I**t seems obvious why textbooks are hard to read. The material is dense; there's a lot of information packed into relatively few words. Authors often feel obligated to give you a broad, complete understanding of a topic rather than to weave an interesting story from selected details. Teachers are ready to assign a textbook, even if it's boring; it's seen as a regrettable but unavoidable problem.

But there's a more subtle reason that it's hard to stay engaged when you read a textbook. To find out why, read this paragraph, one you might find in a typical high school textbook.

The Manhattan Project was the United States' effort to produce a nuclear weapon, and it was the largest construction enterprise in the history of science. Because of its sensitive nature, a massive effort was made to keep the project secret.

*Daniel T. Willingham is a professor of cognitive psychology at the University of Virginia. He is the author of several books, including the bestseller Why Don't Students Like School? This article is drawn with permission from his latest book, Outsmart Your Brain: Why Learning Is Hard and How You Can Make It Easy.*

Famous scientists traveled under aliases; Enrico Fermi was known as Henry Farmer, for instance. And all telephone conversations at the test sites were monitored. Despite those efforts, historians agree that it probably would have been impossible to keep the secret if not for the fact that the project was of relatively small size.

Did you notice that the last sentence contradicted the first? Embedding a mistake or contradiction into a text and seeing whether readers notice it is a common research technique to measure comprehension. Readers are asked to judge each text on how well it's written and explain their rating.

Readers are *very* likely to notice a word they don't know. They are also very likely to notice if the grammar of a sentence is wrong. But they are **much less likely to notice when two sentences contradict each other**. Forty percent of high school students missed the contradiction in the paragraph above. To put it another way, if readers simply understand each sentence on its own, they figure they are doing what they're supposed to do.

Coordinating meaning across sentences is crucial to reading comprehension, because sentences can take on quite different meanings depending on the surrounding context. For example, consider a simple sentence, "Maxim waved," in different contexts:

Ann walked into the pizza parlor, looking for her friends.  
Maxim waved.

The boat slowly circled the wreckage, looking for survivors.  
Maxim waved.

“Oh, my God, that’s my husband!” Kate whispered. “Don’t do anything that would attract his attention!” Maxim waved.

In one way, the sentence always means the same thing (the physical act of waving by Maxim), but the more important meaning—why Maxim waved and the likely consequences of his action—is very different. It can be appreciated only if you interpret the sentence in light of what you’ve already read.

The same issue applies in a far more complex way to reading textbooks. Writers organize the material hierarchically, so readers often need to connect what they’re reading now to something they read a few pages ago. But readers expect a simple format. We first learn to read storybooks. Stories are easy to understand because the structure is simple and linear: A causes B, which causes C, and so on. Textbooks’ hierarchical format and content are more challenging, so you shouldn’t sit down to read a textbook and expect that the author will make your job easy. You need a different approach to reading such content.

## When Reading to Learn

**What your brain will do:** It will read the way you read for pleasure, because that’s familiar to you and it’s not obvious that it won’t work. You’ll read making minimal effort to coordinate ideas, trusting that the writer will make the connections explicit and easy to follow.

**How to outsmart your brain:** Use specialized strategies for comprehension that fit both the kind of material you’re reading and the goals you have for reading it.



Learning by reading is a substantial challenge, but with a few strategies under your belt, you can be much more successful in connecting the ideas as the author hoped you will. Here I share a couple of essential strategies; in a longer online version of this article ([aft.org/ae/summer2023/willingham](https://aft.org/ae/summer2023/willingham)), I also share how to take notes while reading and tips for allocating enough time.

Plus, I have a short guide for educators to help their students learn from challenging texts.

## Use a Reading Strategy That Fits Your Goal

With a textbook or other difficult text, you can’t just start reading. You need to bring something to the process rather than wait for the author to intrigue you. At the same time, the advice “Read actively” is nearly useless. You may earnestly set the goal “I’m really going to think as I read, and I’m going to connect ideas,” but it’s just too easy for your attention to drift.

The solution is to **set a concrete task to be completed as you read**. The best known is called SQ3R, which has been around in various versions since the 1940s. SQ3R is an acronym for these steps:

**Survey:** Skim the reading, looking at the headings, sub-headings, and figures. Get a rough idea of what it’s about. This is how you’ll determine, for example, that an article about the Human Genome Project is about its economic consequences, not the ethical implications of sequencing human DNA.

**Question:** Before you read, pose questions that you expect the reading to answer. Headings can be especially useful for this task; for example, if you see the heading “Marr’s Contribution to the Philosophy of Science,” the obvious question to ask is “What was Marr’s contribution to the philosophy of science?”

**Read:** Keeping in mind the rough idea of the article’s content you developed when you surveyed the reading, it’s time to actually read. And now you have a concrete task to be completed as you read: look for information that answers the questions you’ve posed.

**Recite:** When you’ve finished each section, recite what you’ve learned as if you were describing it to someone else. Summarize it and decide if it answers any of your questions.

**Review:** Reviewing is meant to be an ongoing process in which you revisit the content, focusing especially on the questions posed and the answers you derived.

Research confirms that using SQ3R improves comprehension, and it’s easy to see why. I’ve explained why you shouldn’t just plunge into a reading; if you first consider what it’s about and why you’re reading it, you will actually read it differently. The Survey and Question parts of SQ3R get you to do exactly that. I also emphasized that it’s essential to build meaning across sentences, and reading with the questions in mind also helps accomplish that.

The Recite step of SQ3R ought to help you pull your thoughts together and retain content, but even more, it’s a check of your comprehension. Remember that people can easily fool themselves into thinking they understand when they don’t. Reciting will help you better evaluate your comprehension.

The one drawback to the SQ3R method is that you may slip into “just reading” without thinking much. Here’s a trick that might help: after you’ve posed your questions (and before you start reading), **place some blank Post-it notes in the text**—maybe one at the end of each section. They’ll serve as visual

reminders that you should stop, try to summarize the section you've just read, and think about whether the section answered any of the questions you posed.

SQ3R is useful, and it's the best known of this sort of strategy, but there are others, including KWL (think about what you Know; what you Want to know; what you've Learned), SOAR (Set goals; Organize; Ask questions; Record your progress), and others. It's no accident that most reading strategies have two important properties in common: they get you to **think about your goal for reading before you start** and **connect the pieces of the reading** by asking big-picture questions.

If these strategies seem like overkill, let me offer an alternative with just one step that may be an easy start to this kind of work. Instead of posing questions in advance, **pose and try to answer questions as you're reading**, especially "Why?" questions in response to stated facts. For example, when you read, "The president can propose legislation, but a member of Congress must introduce it if it's to become a bill," you might ask, "Why must a member of Congress introduce it?" "Why?" questions tend to lead you to deeper principles and connections, in this case perhaps to the idea of the balance of powers among the three branches of the US government.

The advantage of this method is its flexibility—you don't commit yourself to a set of questions before you've started reading. In addition, it's easy to adapt this strategy to readings that tell you how to do something rather than telling you a bunch of facts. How-to information tends to occur in stages, so you can ask, "Why does this step come next?" The disadvantage of this

method is that you can't pose a question to yourself every time the author states a fact—that would slow you down too much—so effective question posing takes some practice.

Again, there's no definitive evidence that one strategy is superior to another. What the evidence shows is that **using a strategy is better than not using one.** □

*In a sentence:* Good reading strategies prompt you to think about the content and set concrete goals for what you're to learn before you read, and help you connect ideas as you read.



## Outsmart Your Brain

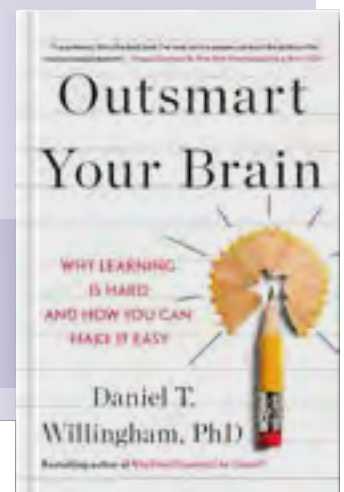
By your early teens, you were expected to be an independent learner. But your brain doesn't come with a user's manual. Surveys of college students show that the vast majority devise their own strategies for studying, but these strategies aren't very good. That's why I wrote this book. It's a user's guide to your brain that will allow you to fully exploit its learning potential and become an independent learner.

—D. T. W.

### Free Online Extras!

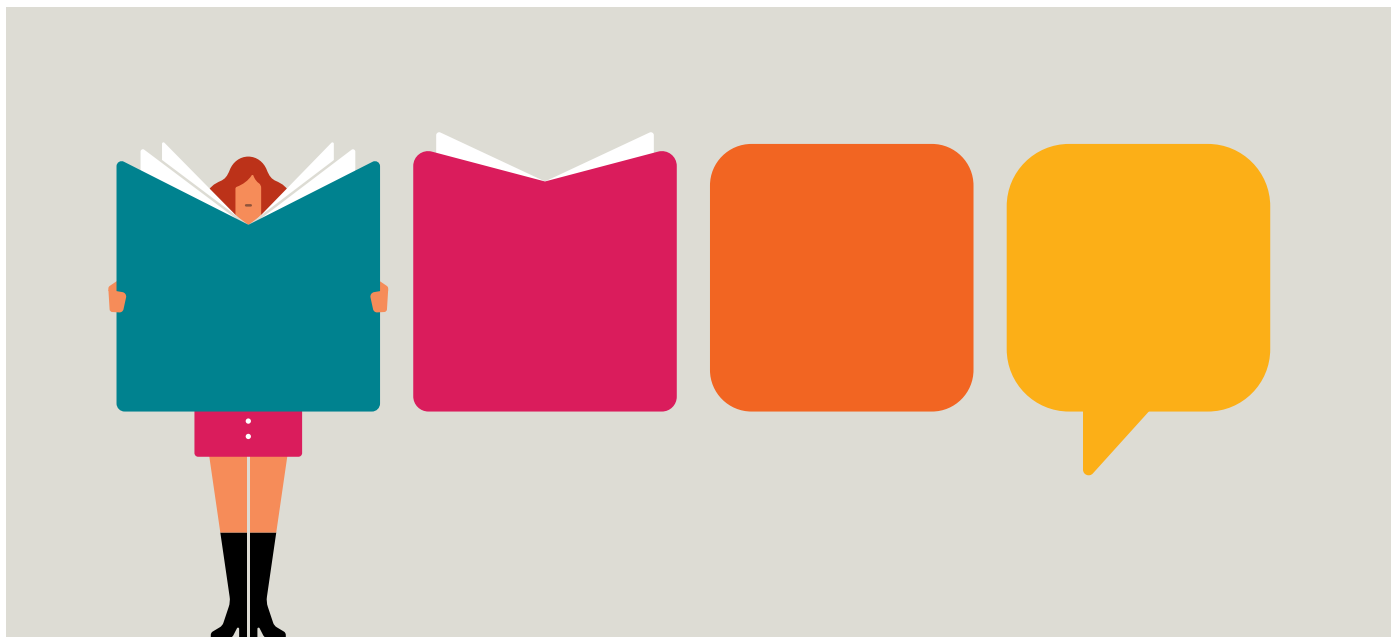
- For a quick introduction to becoming a better learner, check out Daniel Willingham on Tik Tok: [tiktok.com/@daniel\\_willingham](https://www.tiktok.com/@daniel_willingham).
- To read a longer version of this excerpt that explains why highlighting often doesn't work and how to take notes, see [aft.org/ae/summer2023/willingham](https://aft.org/ae/summer2023/willingham).

Excerpted from **OUTSMART YOUR BRAIN** by Daniel T. Willingham, PhD, published by Gallery Books, a division of Simon & Schuster.



# Civil Dialogue

## How to Prepare for and Participate in Text-Based Discussions in High School and College



By Mike Schmoker

**P**articipating in fair-minded, text-based classroom dialogue has immense benefits. It contributes not only to your learning and academic success but also to your ability to effectively participate in our democracy. Here's how you can prepare for and participate in discussions that will powerfully equip you to listen carefully, learn from your peers, and express yourself with skill and sensitivity.\*

### Prepare with Purpose

Preparing for a text-based discussion begins with thoughtful analysis of the text(s). Ideally, you would have a compelling purpose for that analysis. It makes reading more engaging and helps you overcome the natural tendency to drift or lose focus.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the clearest form of such purpose is a guiding question or prompt. For instance, if you are reading about the possible factors that led to a war, epoch, or event, your teacher might ask you to evaluate or rank-order the factors' relative impact or plausibility as you read. This type of prompt stimulates thought

\*For a longer, educator-focused version of this article with instructional guidance, see [aft.org/ae/summer2023/schmoker](https://aft.org/ae/summer2023/schmoker).

*Mike Schmoker, a former English teacher, administrator, and football coach, is an author, speaker, and consultant. His most recent books are Focus: Elevating the Essentials to Radically Improve Student Learning, 2nd ed. (ASCD, 2018) and Results Now 2.0 (ASCD, 2023).*

and makes you more attentive to important details that you can share and interpret with classmates.

If your teacher doesn't give you a compelling purpose, politely ask for one during class or afterward. Say that you want to be well prepared for dialogue on the text. Even in large college classes, most instructors will appreciate your interest and will welcome the opportunity to help you contribute to the conversation.

But if you aren't given a purpose, you can develop your own.

*For nonfiction*, you can start by skimming headings and sub-headings.<sup>2</sup> Does the writer explain the workings and interactions among bodily systems or of chemical qualities, or the application of physical principles? Or does this text invite you to analyze the words, behavior, and contributions of prominent figures?

*For fiction*, you can't go wrong with a focus on characters: What do we learn from their words, actions, and interactions? Do we admire or disdain them? Or are we ambivalent? How does the author's portrayal of characters help us understand the author's message? And what do the characters' experiences teach us about our own lives or about people in general?

Once you have a workable purpose, you can mark, annotate, and/or take notes with greater confidence and effectiveness. This work will provide you with the text-based information you will need to make a solid contribution to classroom dialogue.

### Rehearse for Confidence

It might feel like you're done preparing once you've read the text, but rehearsing will boost your confidence. Start with a brief review of your notes and markings. Select a few items that

strongly resonate with you. Then turn them into sentences. You can do this under your breath or aloud.

If you're like me, you'll notice that you aren't as articulate as you'd like to be at first. So give it another shot as though you are talking to a friend. It can be helpful to use phrases like "That is" or "In other words," which transfer readily to the eventual classroom dialogue. Your ability to be clear, logical, and succinct will improve appreciably with each attempt. You'll be even better prepared if you combine this verbal practice with writing, which has a similarly powerful effect on your ability to speak with precision and economy.

You might also find sentence stems useful. Here are a few to get you started.<sup>3</sup>

*According to the \_\_\_\_ (article/author) \_\_\_\_ (opinion). I agree/have to disagree because.... [or] I think this is only partially true because....*

*The textbook/article tells us that \_\_\_\_ (person) did/said \_\_\_\_ . I believe this demonstrates that he/she/they.... [or] This implies/convinces me that....*

*In this \_\_\_\_ (chapter/paragraph) \_\_\_\_ (character) says/does \_\_\_\_ . I think this indicates that he/she/they (description of character or trait).*

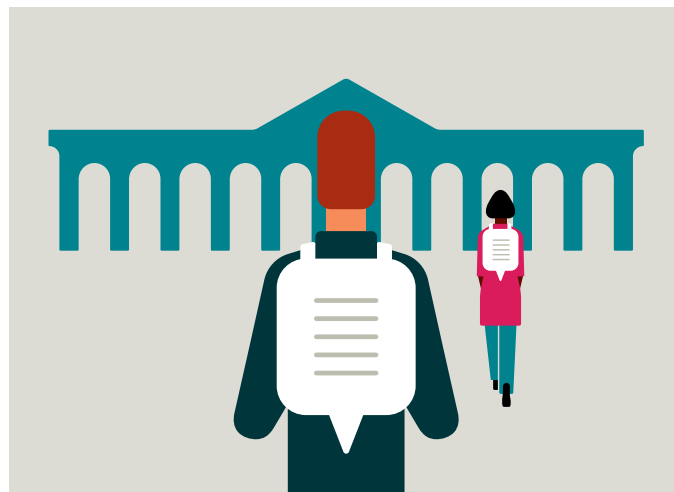
To elaborate on any of the above, start your thoughts with *That is,..., For example,..., or Another reason....*

These tips apply to any text-based dialogue. But what about more challenging discussions on issues for which people hold starkly divergent views and passions run high? How can you cultivate your capacity for civil discourse?

## Engage in Civil Discourse

When discussing sensitive topics, you deserve the opportunity to read and discuss texts that reflect legitimate views from all sides of an issue. If you haven't been given texts with multiple perspectives, you may want to approach your instructor and suggest or ask for texts that are more balanced. Excellent, free resources on a wide array of controversies can be found on websites like ProCon.org and AllSides.com.

In these polarized times, it is critical that we enter into challenging discussions with the proper spirit. It is imperative



that we listen conscientiously to each other—that we honestly and objectively weigh the evidence and reasons offered by our peers.

But this isn't easy. When we discuss contentious issues, we are prone to think quickly, reflexively, and defensively. When our views are challenged, we naturally want to *debate* rather than *deliberate*.<sup>4</sup> We default to "fast thinking," which affirms our existing convictions and can be the enemy of "slow" thought—the kind that forces us to more objectively contemplate opposing views.<sup>5</sup>

Careful listening and cool-headed deliberation allow us to refine or even change our views in light of new facts and reasons as we seek common ground and solutions to seemingly intractable problems. It is often said that in a democracy, there are no solutions—only compromises. Being willing to seek sensible, informed compromise may be *the* democratic virtue.

At the right time, there is certainly room for orderly, rational, evidence-based debate. But I'm increasingly convinced that the current moment demands more emphasis on listening and learning through civil discussion—not winning a debate.<sup>6</sup>

To develop and sustain a rational, inquiring disposition, you might consider using sentence stems like the following when you disagree:

*I agree with you in this respect..., but it's harder for me to understand or relate to the other point you make....*

*I see what you're saying. I wonder, however, if you might consider....*

*I'm thinking out loud here and trying to weigh what you're saying. It seems to me that....*

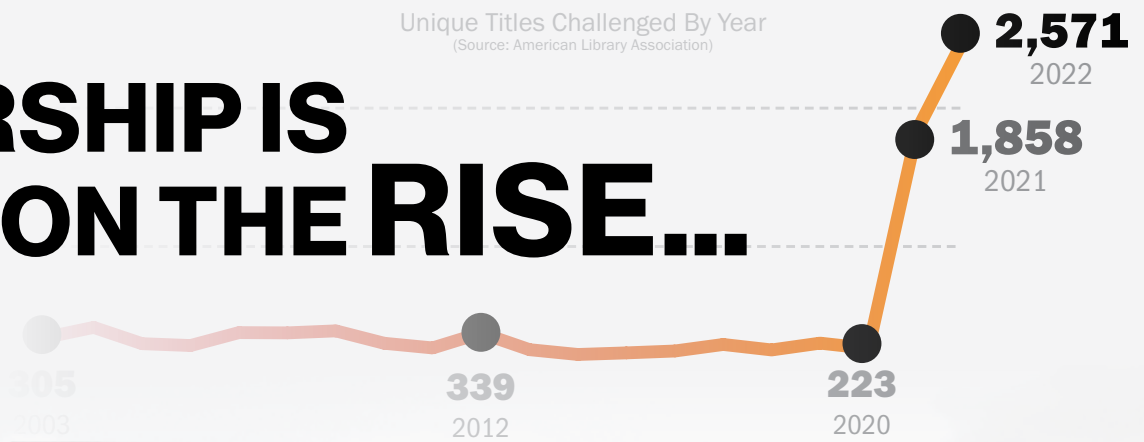
If you engage sincerely in such dialogue, you and your classmates will benefit as effective learners, critical thinkers, communicators, and participants in our democracy. Evidence from numerous programs demonstrate that through such civil interaction, even the most polarized groups and individuals can learn from each other, solve problems, and even forge bonds.<sup>7</sup>

So, start practicing these skills and dispositions! And maybe offer to help your teachers support them in the classroom. □

For the endnotes, see [aft.org/ae/fall2023/schmoker](https://aft.org/ae/fall2023/schmoker).

# CENSORSHIP IS ON THE RISE...

Unique Titles Challenged By Year  
(Source: American Library Association)

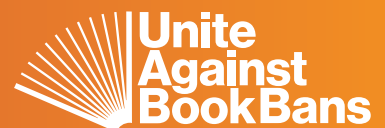


The AFT is proud to be among more than 80 national partners fighting censorship in schools and libraries through Unite Against Book Bans.



A Union of Professionals

Stand with us. Join the campaign.



[UniteAgainstBookBans.org](https://UniteAgainstBookBans.org)

# Real Solutions for Kids and Communities

Addressing Loneliness, Learning Loss, and Literacy



By Randi Weingarten

I'm so glad we're back at our first in-person TEACH since 2019.\* It's been a tough year. Actually, it's been several tough years. And how do you "reward" yourself during your time "off"? By signing up for some sizzling professional development in sweltering Washington, DC. That's who educators are. Working together to improve our craft, recharging through our connection and camaraderie. That's what keeps us going.

Same with me. After Mike Pompeo, the former secretary of state and CIA director, called me the most dangerous person in the world,<sup>1</sup> our members had my back. Teachers, being teachers, reached out, telling me others who were so labeled: Mother Jones, the most dangerous woman in America.<sup>2</sup> Walter Reuther, the most dangerous person in Detroit.<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., the most dangerous Black man in America.<sup>4</sup> You get the point.

Why were they dangerous? They challenged deprivation and discrimination. They fought for a better life for their families

\*To learn about the AFT's TEACH conference, visit [aft.org/teach](http://aft.org/teach).

*Randi Weingarten is the president of the AFT. Prior to her election in 2008, she served for 11 years as president of the United Federation of Teachers, AFT Local 2. A teacher of history at Clara Barton High School in Brooklyn from 1991 to 1997, Weingarten helped her students win several state and national awards debating constitutional issues. Widely recognized as a champion of public schools and a better life for all people, her recent commendations include being named to Washingtonian's 2021 Most Influential People in Washington and City & State New York's 2021 New York City Labor Power 100.*

and their communities. I'm honored to be in their courageous, righteous company. And that righteous company includes all of you—and teachers and school staff across the country. The malicious attacks and outright lies to which our members have been subjected are appalling. So why have Pompeo, the president he served, and others unleashed this vitriol against educators and their unions?

Remember the beginning of the pandemic? Parents showered praise on teachers and school staff. People saw just how essential the connection is between educators and public schools, and kids, families, and communities. And then the far right wing started their smears.

That's no accident. As extremists try to divide Americans from one another, they know that public schools unite us. As they wage culture wars in our schools, parents know we have children's best interests at heart. We teach. We help young people learn how to think critically—to discern fact from fiction, to be curious and tolerant, to learn the basics and discover their potential and passions.

That's why 90 percent of parents send their children to public schools. Most parents trust teachers, and they want public schools strengthened, not privatized.<sup>5</sup>

So why do extremists demonize, distort, and demagogue public education? And why don't they offer a single idea to strengthen public schools?

Because they don't want to *improve* public education. They want to *end* it. When they're not trying to slash public school funding, they are diverting it to private and religious schools through vouchers. That's despite the evidence that vouchers do not improve achievement. That voucher schools often discriminate

against children and families. And that vouchers siphon funds from already underfunded public schools.<sup>6</sup>

Never forget what Christopher Rufo, who invented the conflict over critical race theory, said: “To get universal school choice, you really need to operate from a premise of universal public school distrust.” Toward that end, he said, “you have to be ruthless and brutal.”<sup>7</sup>

Distrust. Ruthless. Brutal. That’s the playbook of fearmongers who call hardworking teachers “groomers” and say we teach “filth.”<sup>8</sup> Of the culture warriors who censor honest history and ban books like *Autocrats*, and who pretend racism doesn’t exist. Of the bullies who target and torment LGBTQ kids and families. That’s the playbook of those who want to end public education as we know it.

And while the fearmongers are out of step with the vast majority of parents and the public, they are determined, well-funded, and, yes, ruthless.

Nowhere do you see this more than in Florida. Governor Ron DeSantis hopes his anti-teacher “war on woke” will propel him to the White House. And it wasn’t enough for him to ban students from taking AP African American Studies. He’s whitewashing Black history with his new African American history standards that say enslaved people “developed skills” during slavery that “could be applied for their personal benefit.”<sup>9</sup> It’s disgusting. And groups like Moms for Liberty, which was founded in Florida (and which has been labeled “extremist” by the Southern Poverty Law Center<sup>10</sup>), are attempting ideological takeovers of school boards. You may have heard of Shannon Rodriguez, a Hernando County school board member backed by Moms for Liberty, who targeted a teacher for showing a Disney movie with a gay character.<sup>11</sup> Well, Rodriguez also went after high school teacher Patti Greenwood for having stickers on her classroom door, including intertwined white and black hands wearing rainbow nail polish. Because like you, Patti wants all her students to feel safe, welcome, and respected. And Patti, who is the treasurer of her union, is here at TEACH with her local president, Lisa Masserio. Thank you for your courage and righteousness.

“Ruthless and brutal” is a thing in Washington as well. In April, some members of Congress called me to testify—a whole hearing

in my name.<sup>12</sup> Was it about how to help kids learn? No. About the resources schools need? Nope. About school infrastructure? Or civics? Or community schools? No, no, and no. They wanted to place blame for school closures during the pandemic—not on the pandemic itself or on officials who prioritized opening bars and gyms over schools. No. They wanted to make teachers, teachers unions, and me their political punching bag.

Never mind that in April 2020, a month after the pandemic shut down schools and most of society, the AFT released a comprehensive plan of action to reopen schools—safely.<sup>13</sup> Safe for you and safe for kids. Never mind all the work you did during the pandemic to meet your students’ needs. Never mind that educators understood long before the pandemic the value of in-person teaching, learning, and connecting with students.

Frankly, if certain members of Congress didn’t interrupt as much as they did, I would have testified about everything we did during the pandemic—to reopen schools safely, to secure the support kids and families needed—and about what we all need to do to get it right if, God forbid, there is a next time.

But for a moment, let’s imagine I had a modicum of the power they ascribe to me. Here’s what I’d do: I would make sure that every school has enough counselors, nurses, librarians, therapists, teachers, bus drivers, and other support staff. That every kid has a rich curriculum that embeds joy and resilience—arts, sports, clubs, recess, field trips, summer camps, and a lot more. I’d abolish all unnecessary paperwork for teachers. There would be lower class sizes and less standardized testing—and it wouldn’t be high-stakes. The professionals who teach and support America’s children would be treated with the respect they deserve, with wages they and their families can live on comfortably. And, while we were at it, we’d do the same for every family in America.

Alas, I don’t possess those powers, but together *we do* have a superpower. Because in our union, in our democracy, we can achieve things together that are impossible alone. That is the essence of unionism: showing up when it counts; fighting, caring, and working together for the things that make life better—for our students, our families, our communities, and our society.



## Host a Watch Party!

This article is based on Randi Weingarten’s speech at the AFT’s TEACH (Together Educating America’s Children) conference on July 21, 2023. She lays out five essential solutions for meeting kids’ needs, highlights educators leading the way, and shows how all of us can join the fight. Hosting a watch party is a great first step in joining the AFT’s Real Solutions for Kids and Communities campaign.

—EDITORS



## Five Essential Solutions

The responsibilities placed on your shoulders probably feel impossible at times. It can be daunting to help even one child who is suffering with anxiety or who is struggling academically. Yet you give your all to meet the needs of *all* your students, too often without the supports you and your students need and deserve.

Even before the pandemic, the United States had a youth mental health crisis<sup>14</sup> and a crisis of lagging student achievement, particularly for marginalized youth.<sup>15</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences have exacerbated loneliness, learning loss, absenteeism, and so much more.

No one has to cite drops in test scores or attendance for us to know that students aren't recovering as fast as we'd like and that many of our kids are not all right. Educators and families know the condition of our children better than anyone—how they are struggling and what they need.

Helping kids recover and thrive is your priority. I've seen it—in classrooms from coast to coast and in between; in cities, suburbs, and small towns. What I have witnessed, what educators like you have shown me, what research has proven—all form a set of strategies and solutions that have helped and will help young people and strengthen public education. But it must be a national priority. And it must be our union's priority.

Too often, things get siloed in education. We'll work on academic learning here and social and life skills there. But brain science—and common sense—show that physical health, emotional wellness, and feelings of connection all influence academic learning—in fact, all learning.<sup>16</sup> Our brains aren't siloed, and our schools shouldn't be either.

How can we do this? By committing to these essential solutions that meet kids' needs:

- Unlocking the power and possibility that come from being a confident reader.
- Ensuring that all children have opportunities to learn by doing—engaging in experiential learning, including career and technical education.
- Caring for young people's mental health and well-being,

including by demanding that social media companies protect, not prey on, children.

- Catalyzing a vast expansion of community schools that meaningfully partner with families.
- And, of course, fighting for the teaching and support staff, and the resources, students need to thrive.

These are the foundations of the \$5 million, yearlong campaign the AFT is launching today, Real Solutions for Kids and Communities. These strategies work. And we will do everything we can to scale and sustain them: visiting classrooms and communities across the country, lifting up these solutions and the countless other things you are doing to help kids succeed.

## Reading

It starts with *reading*: the foundation for all academic learning.

The AFT's Reading Opens the World program, in partnership with First Book, has given away 1.5 million books to children and families over the last year—and we're well on our way to giving away 1 million more. Sharing the joy of reading when kids choose their own books at these events is one of the best endorphin rushes you could have. The wonder in their eyes; the smiles on their faces.

But getting books in young people's hands is just the start. The ability to read is a fundamental right, and teaching children to read is the most fundamental responsibility of schooling.

The AFT has been advocating for an evidence-based approach to reading instruction for decades. That science of reading points to a systematic approach that includes phonics instruction along with giving students plenty of opportunities to read high-quality books, develop their background knowledge, and build their vocabulary.<sup>17</sup>

These principles must be included in teacher preparation programs, in curriculums, and in high-quality professional development.

And while some districts continue to ignore the science of reading or think tutoring alone will boost literacy, the good (and surprising) news is that our country is on the cusp of the most comprehensive approach to reading ever. New research from the Albert Shanker Institute evaluating state reading reform laws shows more consensus in this evidence-based approach than we have ever seen.<sup>18</sup> School districts such as New York City<sup>19</sup> and Detroit<sup>20</sup> are pledging to teach reading using this evidence-based approach.

This is good news, but teachers need to be supported in this work. This change won't happen overnight. The AFT is committed to fighting for and providing opportunities for teachers to learn, practice, and be mentored in evidence-based approaches. We're also investing in an exciting new project, Reading Universe, led by one of our longtime partners, WETA, along with First Book and the Barksdale Reading Institute, whose work in Mississippi\* has moved fourth-grade reading achievement from the bottom of the country up to the national average.<sup>21</sup>

Reading Universe is an online, step-by-step pathway for teachers, paraprofessionals, and reading coaches to learn more

\*For details on Reading Universe and how Mississippi is increasing reading achievement, see page 24.

about evidence-based reading instruction and then use it in their classrooms to complement any curriculum. It offers videos filmed in real classrooms, with real kids, in diverse settings around the country. There will be a focus on serving English learners, students with dyslexia or other learning issues, and students from marginalized communities.

Reading Universe will offer educators everywhere access to the strategies and skills that enable them to help kids be confident and joyful readers, regardless of the curriculum a district or school requires. And it's been built from the start with a cadre of skilled teachers and researchers.

I am thrilled to announce the launch of this powerful tool today. And to announce that it's free—yes, free—and available online to every educator, because all students need and deserve high-quality literacy instruction.

But reading, as important as it is, is just one part of the Real Solutions for Kids and Communities campaign.

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## Helping kids recover and thrive is our priority.

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### Experiential Learning

We know that many kids are disengaged or don't want to go to school at all. Honestly, I get it. There are a lot of school experiences that don't interest or inspire young people.

But not in Raphael Bonhomme's classroom. Raphael teaches third grade at School Within School on Capitol Hill, in the District of Columbia, and he is an AFT Civics Design Team member.

Raphael's students learn about local government by role-playing that they are DC Council members, addressing real issues affecting their city. At the end of third grade, his students create DC tour companies, researching the city's historical sites. They then role-play how they would attract people to take their tour.

Denise Pfeiffer, a high school chemistry teacher in Cincinnati, creates escape rooms in her classroom. Her students work in pairs, and, to get out, they have to solve puzzles that embed the content they have learned.

These are examples of *experiential learning*. And many of us do this. I had students in my Street Law classes at Clara Barton High School role-play housing court mock trials. And in my AP government course, my students acted out mock appellate court arguments.

Now, in the age of artificial intelligence and ChatGPT, this type of learning is essential to being able to analyze information, think critically, apply knowledge, and discern fact from fiction. Experiential learning engages students in deeper learning, provides them with real-world, real-life skills, and boosts academic achievement.<sup>22</sup>

Career and technical education (CTE) is project-based experiential learning at its best. It is a 21st-century game changer. CTE prepares students not only for traditional trades programs like welding, plumbing, carpentry, and auto repair, but also for careers in healthcare, culinary arts, advanced manufacturing and aeronautics, information technology, graphic design, and so much more. And it works. Ninety-four percent of students who concentrate in CTE graduate from high school, and 72 percent of them go on to college.<sup>23</sup>

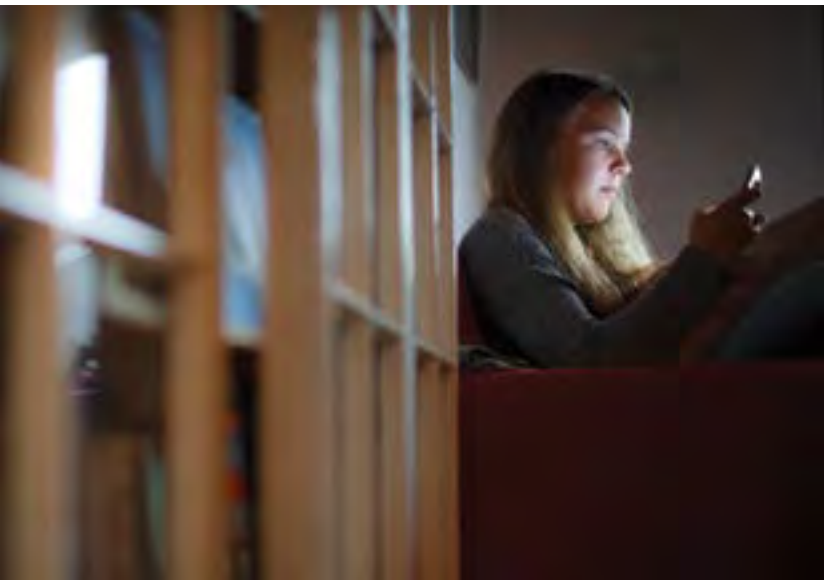
In June, the AFT's CTE committee visited Lynn Vocational and Technical High School in Massachusetts. Students in the culinary program catered a delicious sit-down breakfast for our group of 40 visitors. We saw beautiful porch swings and sheds handcrafted by carpentry students. Students demonstrated their knowledge of plumbing and pipefitting. These young people graduate from high school with lots of options and opportunities.

In Syracuse, New York, a new plant being built by the semiconductor manufacturer Micron will create tens of thousands of jobs. At the AFT's initiative, Micron is partnering with school systems and teachers unions in New York to develop a curriculum framework that prepares high school students for engineering and technical careers. And we are working with the region's school systems to develop the teacher training necessary to teach this curriculum.

In rural southeast Ohio, again with the help of our union, schools in New Lexington have expanded CTE to include everything from robotics for third-graders to a partnership with the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers to train high school students for in-demand electrical jobs. Their graduation rate has shot up to 97 percent, and 30 percent of students earn college credits before high school graduation.

By being intentional about this—starting by high school, identifying school-to-career pathways, partnering with employers, creating paid internships, and offering industry-approved credentials or college credit—we can set young people on a path to a career or higher education, or both, right out of high school.





UTE GRABOVSKY / GETTY IMAGES

Preparing kids for college, career, civic participation, and life— isn't that the job of public schools?

If you have been empowered to engage in experiential learning with your students, you know how transformational it is. And you know that standardized test-based accountability systems can't capture the richness of experiential learning. As I have advocated repeatedly, we need to reimagine our accountability systems to assess what is needed in today's world, not yesterday's, such as the ability to communicate, work cooperatively, think critically, troubleshoot, and be creative. These are the lifelong skills that will enable students to thrive no matter what the future holds, no matter what the next version of AI brings, no matter the challenges they may face.

### Community Schools

Experiential learning prepares students for the opportunities of tomorrow, and *community schools* help solve the challenges students and families confront today.\*

Hunger, housing insecurity, trauma, physical health problems—even the lack of clean clothing—all negatively affect children's ability to learn. And now, after the isolation, stress, and, for many young people, loss of loved ones during the pandemic, their needs are even greater.

Educators are heroic. You do it all in your classrooms. Who here keeps snacks for when students are hungry? Who's had to interrupt your teaching to comfort a student who is distraught? Who's had students with a health or family problem that interfered with their learning? How about this: Who would welcome having support services in your school that meet kids' needs and allow you to focus on teaching? That's what community schools do.

Community schools can wrap so much around public schools—healthcare, mental health services, food assistance, child care, enrichment, tutoring, and sports and afterschool activities. It all supports what students and families need to learn, live, and thrive. Through meaningful partnerships with families and deep community engagement, they become centers of their communities.

\*Turn to page 77 to learn more about community schools.

United Community Schools, a network of community schools in New York City that has expanded into Albany, has higher rates of vulnerable students than other public schools. Yet they perform better on measures like college readiness and the progress of English language learners and students with disabilities.<sup>24</sup>

Likewise with San Francisco's Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Academic Middle School (MLK). Prior to becoming a community school in 2015, MLK struggled with enrollment and academics, and educators were burned out. Now, with support from 40 community partners, there have been significant increases in math and reading scores at MLK, and teachers are choosing to stay. And United Educators of San Francisco saw the possibilities and worked with a community coalition to pass Proposition G last November, which expands this community school model.

When I advocated for a broad expansion of community schools in my first speech as AFT president in 2008, our North Star was Cincinnati. Today, there is a constellation of community schools. We're in Albuquerque and Albany, El Paso and Pittsburgh, Masena and McDowell. AFT members have helped create more than 700 community schools across the country, and we are part of a movement calling for 25,000 community schools by 2025.

We are fighting to make community schools the norm, not the exception. And we have allies in this fight. California is investing an additional \$4 billion in community schools. President Joe Biden doubled federal funding for community schools. And Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson—the Chicago Teachers Union's and AFT's own—is dramatically expanding the district's community schools program, with the goal of all district schools functioning as community hubs through community partnerships.

### Mental Health and Well-Being

While community schools can provide a safe and supportive physical environment for young people, there is an environment that threatens their physical and emotional well-being—social media and the online world.

Even before the pandemic, many experts connected the *harmful impacts of social media* and the nefarious practices of social media companies to the youth mental health crisis.<sup>25</sup>

Social media can have benefits, but research has shown that teens who spend more than three hours per day on social media are at double the risk for experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety.<sup>26</sup> Social media can increase bullying and diminish people's ability to interact face to face, and it has been tied to eating disorders, suicidal thoughts, and feelings of being less than or left out.<sup>27</sup> Too many children have an addictive relationship with social media that families can't fix on their own.

Schools are also grappling with an increase in dangerous and disruptive behavior linked to social media, such as viral challenges. Challenges to destroy school property, or to slap a teacher, or to "swat"—the one that encourages students to report hoax shootings—are dangerous and traumatic for students, staff, and families.

And all of these detract from the primary mission of our schools, which is to protect and educate our children.

So as schools are struggling to hire mental health professionals and to provide training to teachers to better support students with their mental health, we are calling on social media companies to step up.

Social media companies have shirked their responsibility to protect kids. Facebook's own research showed how their algorithms harm users, especially adolescent girls. Did they change their practices to protect kids based on what they knew? No—they hid it.

These companies must protect young people, not prey on them for profit. It's not enough to issue press releases promising to "improve the viewing experience" when "Recommended for You" feeds send content that glorifies eating disorders, or to settle lawsuits with families grieving for children who received unsolicited videos about suicide.<sup>28</sup>

## Educators and families know our children are struggling and what they need.

The AFT is taking action. Working with ParentsTogether (a platform of 2.5 million parents), Fairplay for Kids, Design It for Us, and the American Psychological Association, we are calling on social media platforms to make fundamental changes to prioritize safety for children. Our report, *Likes vs. Learning: The Real Cost of Social Media for Schools*, calls for the following safeguards: (1) turn on the strongest safety features by default; (2) make changes that deter students from overuse and addictive behavior; (3) protect their privacy; (4) shield them from risky algorithms; and (5) directly engage and work with schools and families. Social media platforms could implement these today.<sup>29</sup>

Our coalition of students, educators, and parents won't let up until they do.

I'm glad ParentsTogether is with us today. And I'm glad many students are here, including 15-year-old Ryan Lomber from Oregon. Ryan makes and sells art to fund her program to make everyone in her school community feel welcome and to bridge differences between people.<sup>30</sup>

When we join in common cause and common purpose with parents, educators, students, employers, faith leaders, and the broader community, we multiply our power to achieve our shared goals. That is why fearmongers and demagogues try so hard to divide. It takes work to create trust. But it's transformational. Look at New Haven, Connecticut, where educators and families went to the state capital together to fight back against school privatization and for much-needed education investments. And the Michigan Education Justice Coalition, which has trained thousands of people to get involved in their school boards. Thousands of parents and educators from Yonkers, New York, to the ABC Unified School District in California, from Houston to Detroit, have fought for the schools our kids need.

And, of course, we must continue to work collectively to combat the leading cause of death for children in the United States:

firearms.<sup>31</sup> Parties, parades, concerts, and classrooms—all places where our children should feel safe; all places that have been devastated by gun violence. Here's an idea: ban assault weapons, not books.

### Educators, Staff, and Resources

What I'm about to say is obvious to all of you, but we have to fight for it. We need *appropriate funding for our public schools* and the three R's: *educator recruitment, retention, and respect*.

The report of the AFT Teacher and School Staff Shortage Task Force that we released last year is chock-full of solutions: family-sustaining wages; time to plan and prepare for classes, collaborate with colleagues, and participate in meaningful professional development; and the power to make day-to-day classroom decisions.<sup>32</sup>

It's easy to see what's needed. What is hard is making it happen.

But we have, in recent collective bargaining contracts. United Teachers Los Angeles' new contract includes higher pay and smaller class sizes, more funding for community schools, and support for vulnerable students. In New York City, the United Federation of Teachers' new contract increases pay and provides more ways for teachers to engage with parents and to support multilingual learners and students with disabilities. The Saint Paul Federation of Educators won an agreement for all schools to have mental health support teams. And the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers' contract requires an Instructional Leadership Team in every school that puts decisions about school operations and improvement in the hands of those closest to students.

We have allies in this fight, including the fight to pay educators more. New Mexico Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham enacted a \$10,000 raise for teachers. Sen. Bernie Sanders of Vermont and Rep. Frederica Wilson of Florida proposed bills that would raise teacher salaries. And President Biden called on lawmakers to give public school teachers a raise during his State of the Union address.

In years past, when I and others advocated for higher pay for teachers and *adequate and equitable education funding*, the





right wing would fire back, “money doesn’t matter.” But evidence matters, and I admire those willing to follow it, like researcher Eric Hanushek, who argued for decades that more funding didn’t lead to better educational outcomes. He has made a stunning turnaround. Hanushek has reviewed the most rigorous research on education funding and finds what you and I know—that money does, in fact, matter.<sup>33</sup> As the Albert Shanker Institute documented a decade ago, research shows that when schools get more money, student achievement goes up and students tend to stay in school longer.<sup>34</sup>

But others still operate ideologically. As we speak, House Republicans are trying to cut billions in funding for public education. This will hurt preschoolers, English language learners, and millions of children from low-income families because these lawmakers propose *slashing Title I by 80 percent*. It’s inexcusable. (I am so grateful to all of the TEACH participants who lobbied on Capitol Hill to turn this around.)

Public education must be supported, not stripped. And thankfully we have allies here too. President Biden’s budgets reflect his unwavering support for public schools. Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker signed a budget last month with an additional \$570 million for K–12 education. In Minnesota, Governor Tim Walz approved \$2.2 billion in new K–12 spending over the next two years. And in Wisconsin, Republican politicians are reeling over the clever way Governor Tony Evers increased per-pupil spending *for the next 400 years*. Elections matter.

## Together, These Real Solutions Will Succeed

The solutions I have outlined are worthy on their own. Together, they are transformational: Reading truly opens the world. Community schools help students and their families thrive. Experiential learning prepares young people to seize the opportunities in our changing economy. Together, everyone in students’ circle of care must work to address learning loss, loneliness, culture wars,

gun violence, and unrestrained social media. Educators must be supported, respected, and compensated befitting their essential role. And public schools must be adequately funded.

Those are the elements of the Real Solutions for Kids and Communities campaign that we are launching today.

Look, we know how to run contract campaigns and political campaigns. Let’s put that same energy and expertise into this campaign to win these solutions for our kids, for educators like you, for our public schools, and for our democracy. Because without public schooling, and the pluralism and opportunity that arise from it, there can be no broad-based, multiracial democracy.

We need you to tell your stories and showcase the great things happening in your classrooms.

We want to lift up the teaching and learning happening all over. We want to lift up these foundational strategies and solutions. We need to embed them into collective bargaining and enshrine them into district policies and state laws so they can be scaled and sustained.

And I bet, as we address hard issues like loneliness, literacy, and learning loss, we will have not only long-term allies rooting us on, but also people who we have at times been at odds with. Because everyone wants children to recover and thrive, and that’s only possible when our beloved community comes together and supports, not smears, public education and educators.

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## When we join in common cause, we multiply our power to achieve our shared goals.

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Are you with me?

Ready to tap into the literacy tools in Reading Universe? Ready to give kids great, free books as others ban them? Ready to help kids with practical skills and critical thinking with experiential learning in your classroom? Ready to make community schools the norm? Ready to take on social media companies?

Are you ready to join this campaign to make every public school in America a safe, welcoming, and joyful place where educators are respected and supported, parents are happy to send their kids, and students thrive?

No one can do all of this, but we all can do something. And through our union, we can achieve great things together that would be impossible alone.

Never ever forget, in this fight between hope and fear, between aspiration and despair, between light and darkness, you are the hope, the aspiration, and the light. □

For the endnotes, see [aft.org/ae/fall2023/weingarten](https://aft.org/ae/fall2023/weingarten).



# TEACH

Together Educating America's Children

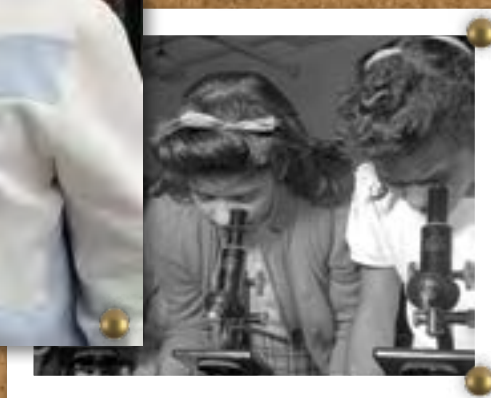
The AFT's TEACH conference in July was a huge success, with over 1,000 educators coming together to be inspired for the 2023–24 school year.

**Learn all about it—and watch videos of the general sessions—at [aft.org/teach](https://aft.org/teach).**



# THE POWER OF BELONGING

HBCUs Cultivate Excellence in STEM and Beyond



By Fedrick C. Ingram

**T**here's a point in your life as a parent, as a father, when you find yourself in uncharted territory. One point is when your child has an idea about their future that you never considered. That point for me was when my daughter told us that she wanted to be a doctor.

Of course, I was proud. Medicine is an incredible field filled with talented, giving people who spend their lives trying to help others. But I had nothing in my background to pull from. No life experience I could impart to help her along this journey. All I knew for sure is what my parents told me and what I'm sure every Black person has heard a million times in their lives: "If you are going to be successful, you will have to work twice as hard to be considered just as good."

For those reading who are not Black, understand that little Black boys and girls are raised knowing that this country has a

*Fedrick C. Ingram is the secretary-treasurer of the AFT. Previously, he served as the president of the 140,000-member Florida Education Association and as an AFT vice president. In 2022, he was elected to serve as a trustee on the board of the NAACP Foundation. Early in his career, he was a music teacher and band director in Miami-Dade public schools; he has performed nationally as a saxophone soloist and conductor.*

long history (distant and recent) of undermining and sometimes erasing Black achievement. They know that mediocre will not cut it, not for long. If you want to appear competent, you study for four hours where others study for two. If class starts at 9 a.m., be there at 8:55. It is tiresome, draining, and ultimately necessary to always strive for excellence just to be seen as competent.

I've done a lot of hard work in my life. As someone who grew up playing music in the school band, I've spent thousands of hours practicing on my saxophone—devoting nights and weekends to chasing excellence. And while I never pursued medicine, I know it's *very* hard work. I know the hours are notoriously tough. The exams are brutal. I would be lying if my knees didn't shake a little when I contemplated what it would take to succeed as a Black woman in a field that is already incredibly taxing. Not due to lack of faith in my daughter, but because I could not see far enough down that road to prepare her for what was coming. I could not look back in my own life to offer any clues because my life had been so different.

In 1991, I was a smart kid and pretty good musician about to graduate from high school in Southern Florida. Even though I had no political dog in the fight or any military background, I had all but decided my future was in the Army as part of the military band. Chance had it that my high school band director was a graduate of Xavier University of Louisiana, an HBCU (historically Black

college or university) in New Orleans. He suggested I think about college, specifically a Black college, instead of the military. This one conversation changed the trajectory of my life.

Ultimately, I chose Bethune-Cookman University in Daytona Beach—mainly because it was the closest HBCU to my house—making me the first in my family to attend and graduate from college. So you can imagine that I was not particularly prepared for the experience, which was highlighted by a phone conversation I had with my mother shortly after meeting my band director, Dr. Harold Bray.

“Yeah, he’s a doctor, too. I guess he teaches and then works in a hospital to deliver babies,” I told my mom on the phone, astonished. I laugh now, but 18-year-old me had never met a Black PhD before. I had no frame of reference for what the fruits of academic labor looked like. I had never thought about education as a goal in and of itself—just a requirement. But at Bethune-Cookman, I began to understand and admire people my age who strove to be greater, who did not aspire to hang out on the corner for the rest of their days.

At Bethune-Cookman, the kids *wanted* to be better. They had ambition, and that ambition began to rub off on me. Soon, I was joining organizations I’d never thought to join, taking courses I’d never thought to take. I thought, “If these people can do it, so can I!”

What I didn’t quite appreciate at the time but am grateful for now is that Bethune-Cookman was giving me models of success I had never seen before. I was witnessing ambition in real time as my fellow students booked it to class and camped out in libraries. I was seeing the results of that ambition in my professors, who opened the world of science and history to me while treating me like their own child. This university gave me a new appreciation for Black people, *my people*, and everything we have contributed to the world, sometimes despite the world. Every day I swam in the waters of Black excellence, and it made my chest big with pride.

I couldn’t have known then, but that sense of belonging would be crucial for my success; indeed, the success of most students, especially in their first year, is dependent on that feeling of belonging. According to a summary of research by the Teaching + Learning Lab\* at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, “Numerous ... studies spanning the K-20 spectrum have reported a connection between a student’s sense of belonging to a community or set of communities, and the student’s achievement motivation, expectations to achieve, as well as actual academic achievement.”<sup>1</sup>

When I was at Bethune-Cookman, I didn’t know all of this research on the importance of belonging. But I lived it. So when my daughter declared she wanted to be a doctor, I knew that one piece of the puzzle would be finding the right HBCU for her. And I knew there would be several to choose from. One of the reasons I was so confident in HBCUs was not just my personal experience but their track record for graduating roughly 50 percent of all Black doctors in this country.<sup>2</sup>

Consider Spelman College in Atlanta, which “has been recognized by the National Science Foundation as the leading producer of Black women who earn doctorates in the sciences—even while 45 percent of its students come from low-income families.”<sup>3</sup> Spelman has graduated the likes of Audrey F. Manley, the first Black female chief resident at Cook County Children’s Hospital in Chicago and the first Black female assistant surgeon general.<sup>4</sup> While the push for

more people of color in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) feels recent, Spelman was ahead of the curve: nearly 40 years ago, the school “committed itself to becoming the nation’s principal educator of Black women in STEM fields.”<sup>5</sup>

But Spelman isn’t the only HBCU excelling in STEM. Xavier University of Louisiana “produces more Black students who graduate from medical school each year than any other university in the United States.”<sup>6†</sup> These are the stories and headlines too often left out of the narrative about the state of Black education and replaced with narratives about failure and dysfunction.

My confidence in HBCUs is not simply personal. These schools—a network of more than 100 schools nationwide—have been serious about Black excellence since the 1800s. A recent study by the United Negro College Fund<sup>7</sup> showed that while HBCUs make up roughly 3 percent of all colleges and universities, they educate 10 percent of all Black college students and nearly 20 percent of Black students in STEM majors. (And even though my focus here is STEM, I have to mention our judicial system: HBCUs account for 80 percent of Black judges and 50 percent of Black lawyers.)

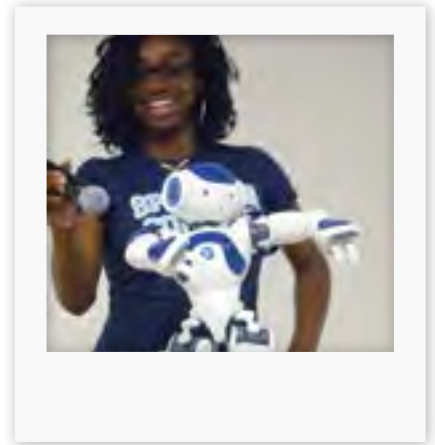
When we coupled that with the fact that Black STEM students at HBCUs are less likely to experience identity threat than their peers at predominantly white institutions (PWIs),<sup>8</sup> the choice seemed even clearer.

Ultimately, my daughter chose Howard University—not far from where her old man works—and earned a degree in chemical engineering. As an undergrad, she had access to Howard University Hospital, where she developed and applied practical knowledge, and to professors who looked like her and who went from the operating room to the classroom. Now, she’s in medical school at Emory University. But that win is bittersweet, because I know for every one child with her story, there are 10 more without it.

## Equalizing STEM Opportunities

When my daughter told me she wanted to be a doctor, I was a long way from the college freshman who didn’t know the difference between an MD and a PhD. I knew it would take years of planning, researching, and money to properly nourish her dream. And because I was lucky enough to have Black teachers and professors who saw promise in me (and because I had made good on that promise through hard work), I had the financial resources to supplement my daughter’s STEM education. For example, she attended STEM programs at the University of Michigan and Boston College while moving through high school. And unlike many Black students, she was able to take many challenging STEM courses at her public school.

Obviously, all public school students are introduced—to varying degrees—to subjects like math, biology, chemistry, and other sciences as they progress from elementary to high



\*For tips on how to enhance students’ sense of belonging, visit [go.aft.org/v75](http://go.aft.org/v75).

†For an in-depth look at how Xavier supports aspiring doctors, see [go.aft.org/tgb](http://go.aft.org/tgb).

school. But that picture becomes less equitable as coursework becomes more specified and intense. One critical disparity is in access to calculus. A shocking 20 percent of Black students (compared with 13 percent of white and Hispanic students) are in high schools that don't offer calculus, according to researchers with the Urban Institute. They framed that inequity as a civil rights issue because Black students are among those who benefit the most from advanced math courses—such courses increase both learning and the likelihood of choosing and completing a STEM degree.<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, advanced coursework in all subjects has been found to enhance students' self-esteem and increase engagement, resulting in fewer absences and suspensions.<sup>10</sup> But the on-ramps to advanced coursework in high school can appear

There are plenty of reasons for this, but there are two I feel the need to highlight: the legacy of redlining and the lack of diversity among teachers.

## Redlining

The biggest culprit began nearly 100 years ago, when the federal government took steps to protect homeownership during the Great Depression—but only for white homeowners. The government-sponsored Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) bought up mortgages that were about to default and offered new loans with more favorable terms. In determining which loans to refinance, the HOLC implemented the practice of redlining, a (fully legal) housing segregation policy that identified which neighborhoods were safe or unsafe for investment, using explicitly racial criteria; regardless

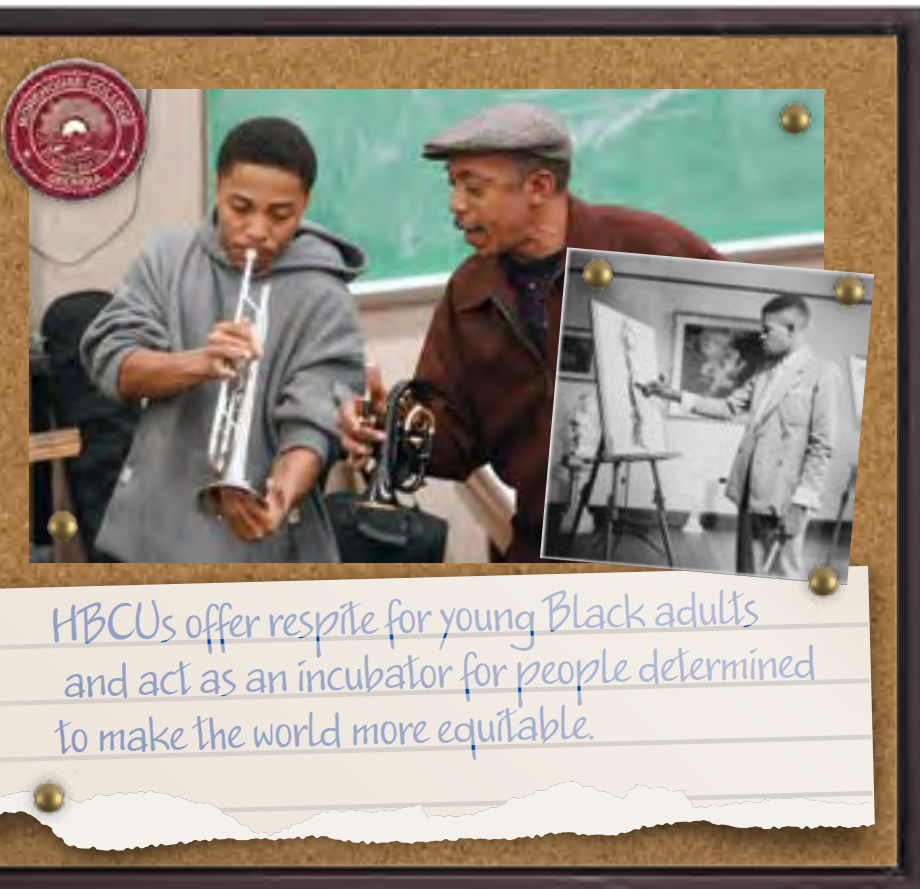
of socioeconomic status, neighborhoods with Black residents were designated red, or highest risk, while neighborhoods with white residents were much more likely to be designated green, or safe for investment. The Federal Housing Authority (FHA), which was created to help renters become homeowners, also refused to insure mortgages in or near Black neighborhoods—with the explicit goal of maintaining segregated schools as well as neighborhoods. To make matters worse, the FHA—an arm of the federal government—funded and worked with builders who refused to sell homes to Black people. Under these policies, Black neighborhoods or even the appearance of Black neighbors became a sign of trouble, places and people to be avoided by white people for fear of losing their investments or bringing harm to their children.<sup>13</sup>

These practices didn't just explicitly maintain a system of racial segregation—they also exacerbated the wealth gap. Black people were essentially trapped in neighborhoods and homes that could not accrue the same levels of value to be passed down to their kids, systematically ending this cornerstone of wealth-building to white people.

However, another cost was the quality of education these Black families were—and still are—able to obtain. In addition to maintaining school segregation (explicit or de facto), redlining impacted and continues to impact the health of local schools,<sup>14</sup> which are primarily funded on the local level by property taxes.

The lower the value of homes, the less money flows into schools. That means lower-paid teachers and fewer resources for those who need it most. Some of those resources, like AP courses, end up being the purview of wealthier, whiter neighborhoods that are often out of reach for Black families.

In many ways, HBCUs have been our conduit to the middle class when other ways were closed to us. While white men returning after World War II took advantage of the GI Bill, which helped them buy houses and build the generational wealth that is still being enjoyed today, Black soldiers were barred from that government handout. This is one reason you so often see the Black community relying on itself to save itself, to feed and clothe itself. Our HBCUs, though built primarily to educate when others refused, have had another purpose: building the Black middle class and building equity at the same time. HBCUs not only give us access



HBCUs offer respite for young Black adults and act as an incubator for people determined to make the world more equitable.

as early as elementary school with “gifted and talented” programs, or in middle school with Algebra I and other advanced coursework; for students who are not identified as “gifted” early on, it can be much more difficult to gain access to these kinds of preparation, requiring persistent advocacy and significant time and energy that families may not have.<sup>11</sup> An analysis by the Center for American Progress found a concerning “funnel” reducing Black and Indigenous students’ opportunities to experience Advanced Placement (AP) and other advanced courses. While Black students were only slightly less likely than white students to attend a school that offers AP courses, Black students were far less likely to enroll in those courses. And, of those who enrolled and took an AP test, Black students were far less likely to earn passing scores.<sup>12</sup>

to high-quality education—they also correct the wrongs of redlining by helping students from families with low incomes seek the American dream.

By providing “nearly twice as much college access to low-income students than other colleges and universities,”<sup>15</sup> HBCUs have become a crucial lifeline for Black folks. At non-HBCUs, only about 32 percent of students receive Pell grants (which are only for students with low incomes), but the percentage is more than double that at HBCUs.

The cumulative impact is enormous. Evidence suggests that HBCUs are far more effective than highly ranked universities in moving students up the economic ladder.<sup>16</sup> That is a real, tangible impact on the wealth, and therefore the health and well-being, of the Black community. This is the reason Black folks treat high school graduations like parties—we know our babies are on a path to do better for themselves and, ultimately, for the community they came from.

As impressive as this is, HBCUs should not be shouldering so much of the weight of recovering from redlining. There is a consistent correspondence between redlined neighborhoods, concentrated poverty, and school funding inequity. Our K–12 funding system depends heavily on local property taxes, and Black homeowners tend to have lower incomes and home values than white homeowners. That means less local money available for Black students, even as greater investments are needed to help them reach the same educational outcomes.<sup>17</sup>

While redlining is no longer legal, it’s still setting up Black families and students to fail. Districts serving majority Black students are far more likely to have inadequate funding and to have poor student outcomes—in a recent study from the Albert Shanker Institute, 76 percent of the nation’s majority Black/Hispanic districts were underfunded and scored below the US average on math and reading tests, compared to only 14 percent of majority white districts. Racial segregation in the United States was intentional, coordinated, and large-scale, and we need similarly intentional, coordinated, and large-scale interventions in both housing and K–12 school funding systems in order to right these wrongs.<sup>18</sup>

This vicious cycle is often ignored while society instead congratulates those few who escape it as examples of hard work and determination. I’m not here to say otherwise, only to point out that sometimes you also need just plain luck to help you escape the systems that trap you. My story is a testament to that.

## Teacher Diversity

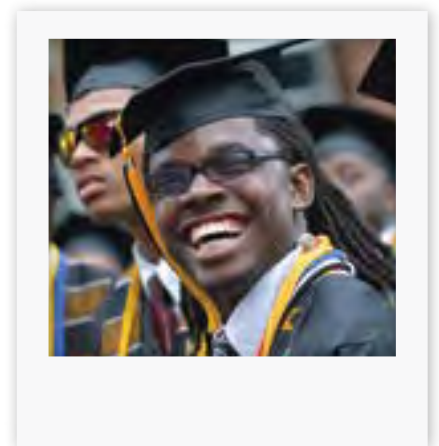
One way I got lucky was having about 90 percent Black teachers in K–12. Sadly, that was just luck because the teaching force has long been primarily white. These days, the numbers are a little better, but they are still not where they need to be: the teaching profession is 79 percent white, with Black teachers making up only 7 percent of the force. In contrast, just 47 percent of K–12 students are white, and 15 percent are Black.<sup>19</sup>

Recruiting and retaining more Black teachers is critical because research repeatedly shows that Black students benefit greatly when they see and are seen by Black teachers. One study says that Black students who have at least one Black teacher by the third grade are 13 percent more likely to go to college. That number jumps to 32 percent if they have two Black teachers. And for Black boys like me, from low-income families, on-time high school graduation rates jump nearly 40 percent with just two Black teachers in their lives.<sup>20</sup>

The simple truth is that representation is a powerful tool for self-actualization, especially for people who are *routinely left out* of centers of power and influence. Networks like BET, magazines like *Ebony*, or movies like *Black Panther* are not just there to serve a niche commercial demographic; they are there to feed the souls of those who don’t see themselves reflected, let alone lauded, in a proportionate way. It may be hard to truly grasp if you’re from a group that is often the default, but seeing a Black woman on the Supreme Court makes the dreams of little girls real. Seeing a Black family in the White House makes the United States feel more like home.

But these avatars for hope start much closer to home by way of teachers, the mentors our children look to in order to learn about the larger world outside their windows and their place in it. And when Black children don’t see Black educators holding classes on the intricacies of gravity or how photosynthesis works, it signals a long, lonely road toiling as an “only” in their future STEM classes and professions.

Thankfully, we know Black teachers have an impact on taking advanced courses, such as AP, honors courses, and International Baccalaureate. Not only are Black students more likely to enroll, students of all races and ethnicities are too.<sup>21</sup> As a student who benefited from seeing and being seen by Black teachers, I can’t emphasize this research enough. As a father, I know seeing and being seen had a huge impact on my daughter too. And as a union leader, I’m committed to increasing teacher diversity—especially in STEM courses.



In July 2022, our Teacher and School Staff Shortage Task Force released its report *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow?*; it found, among other things, that retaining and expanding the number of Black teachers will require treating them like professionals, showing them the respect they deserve, and, yes, offering better compensation.\*

When you consider that HBCUs deliver half of all Black teachers,<sup>22</sup> it only makes sense to empower and engage HBCUs when looking for the next generation of educators. Sadly, not enough attention or funding has been paid to these crucial institutions.

The United Negro College Fund released a study showing that the federal funding gap between HBCUs and PWIs quadrupled between 2003 and 2015, from \$400 to \$1,600 per student.<sup>23</sup> And that gap is targeted: during that window, federal funding for HBCUs decreased much more dramatically than for PWIs, with the most significant declines for private HBCUs (about half of all HBCUs).<sup>24</sup> But the problem is much worse than that. About 20 percent of HBCUs are land-grant schools, which are supposed to get annual funding from federal and state governments—but many states have refused to fund their share, to the tune of \$12.8 billion between 1987 and 2020.<sup>25</sup> And many non-land-grant public HBCUs have had to sue the states to get the funding they have been owed for decades.<sup>26</sup>

\*To read the task force’s report, visit [go.aft.org/rfq](http://go.aft.org/rfq).

Among other problems with facilities, faculty pay, and more, this chronic underfunding puts HBCU STEM programs at a serious disadvantage. For students pursuing PhDs in STEM, the ultimate goal is to end up at an R1 (top-tier research) university. Researchers at R1 schools are significantly more likely to be awarded the grant funding they need to complete their research and advance in their careers—including in ways that reflect well on the university and make it more likely to attract funding, faculty, and the most promising students in the next generation of researchers. While many HBCUs have sought R1 status, none have received it to date.<sup>27</sup> The impacts of generations of underfunding ripple out in a thousand ways like this, creating still more challenges that HBCU STEM programs, faculty, and students have to overcome.

While we know Black folks have always had to make dimes out of nickels, there's no excuse for this targeted inequity. By deeming HBCUs unimportant to our nation's overall education, this country has starved crucial institutions of crucial funding. This is

rized the Department of Education to cancel nearly \$1.6 billion in HBCU loans issued for capital improvements, the result of a bill sponsored by North Carolina Rep. Alma Adams.<sup>29</sup> These are welcome signs from a government that seems to understand the value of Black education. But elections change things. Who is to say what will happen to HBCU funding if a politician who works overtime to erase our history from libraries and lauds the criminals who take our lives as “heroes” gets into the White House?

I am not here to say that every Black child must attend a Bethune-Cookman, a Hampton, or a Howard—or that no Black student should attend a predominantly white institution. But I do feel that a foundational pride and encouragement to excellence is a unique gift given only in the halls and campuses of HBCUs. So I'm glad to see interest in HBCUs surging. The *New York Times* reported in summer 2022 that applications to HBCUs rose 30 percent between 2018 and 2021.<sup>30</sup>

It is my opinion that young Black people watched the spread of President Trump's naked bigotry, plus the constant deluge of Black people turned into hashtags thanks to often unpunished police officers, and looked to HBCUs as a welcome respite. I remember reading of four young women, all excellent students with acceptance letters to our country's most prestigious Ivy League schools, saying they chose schools like Hampton and Spelman because “College is the time when you're trying to figure out who you are.... It's impossible to figure that out in a space where you not only feel like you have to assimilate to fit into that space, when they didn't invite you there or they tolerate you there, but you have to prove that your existence has value.”<sup>31</sup> HBCUs not only offer a respite for young adults but act as an incubator for people determined to make the world more equitable.

That feeling of belonging is crucial. If we want to maintain or increase the number of Black doctors, nurses, engineers, and scientists graduating from HBCUs, we have to nurture that same feeling of belonging in their K-12 education when it comes to STEM courses.

Education has proven to be one of the most reliable tools in Black America's quest for equality in this country. As a leader, a teacher, and a father, I'll close by speaking directly to Black youth: I ask you to consider joining the legacy of those like Vice President Harris, Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, public intellectual W. E. B. Du Bois, author Toni Morrison, and countless others. I ask you to join the ever-expanding

not accidental. Everyone knows that the path to economic equity often goes through a school building, and if the past is prologue, then it's not surprising that Black economic freedom—a major target of racist laws and intentions—is hobbled through the starving of Black centers of education.

But all the news isn't bad.

Educators and students were elated to see the Biden-Harris administration recognize the vital role of HBCUs with several billion dollars in federal funding starting in 2021, including \$3.7 billion in COVID-19 relief funding and \$500 million in grant funding.<sup>28</sup> In addition, the FY21 Omnibus Appropriations Act autho-

ranks of Black excellence who have left an indelible mark on American history. □

For the endnotes, see [aft.org/ae/fall2023/ingram](http://aft.org/ae/fall2023/ingram).

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# Collaborative Community Schools

## From Wraparound Services to Co-Leadership



By Emily Lubin Woods

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PHOTOS BY THE AFT

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## Get involved!

The AFT has voted to endorse **Joe Biden** for president and **Kamala Harris** for vice president in the 2024 Democratic presidential primary. Following an extensive endorsement process, including member engagement, the AFT's executive council voted unanimously for a resolution to endorse Biden and Harris, in concert with the AFL-CIO, because of their record, their profound understanding of the issues facing working families and their impassioned commitment to using government to help make people's lives better.

This will be a vital election with so many key issues at stake—from book bans, to school funding, to safe staffing, to the very foundations of our democracy.



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