

READING & LITERACY

Advocates for Science-Based Reading Instruction Worry California Plan Sends the Wrong Message



By Sarah Schwartz — January 30, 2020 | Corrected: January 31, 2020 ⌚ 8 min read



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*Corrected: A previous version of the article misstated Kareem J. Weaver’s position on the Oakland NAACP’s education committee. He is a member.*

Early-reading advocates in California have raised concerns about a forthcoming state literacy plan, arguing that some of the instructional approaches to be included aren’t sufficiently aligned to research and won’t lead to success for many students.

California was one of 13 states recently awarded a federal grant to develop a comprehensive literacy program for children from birth through 12th grade. As part of the grant, the state is creating a literacy plan with guidance and recommendations for school districts.

For now, the plan is still in development. But some groups in the state have taken issue with two instruction and

intervention approaches California called out in its application for the grant: Reading Recovery and reading and writing workshop.

In the reading “workshop” model, teachers demonstrate a skill that students then try out on their own, through guided practice and with books of their choice. Reading Recovery is a one-on-one intervention for struggling 1st grade readers that targets word-level reading difficulties, fluency, and comprehension. Reading researchers have critiqued both of these approaches, saying that they don’t provide enough explicit, systematic instruction in foundational skills, and that they teach reading strategies that can confuse students who are just learning to read words.

At the same time, other states that have received this same grant money have taken a different approach, focusing on explicit teaching of foundational skills. Arkansas, for example, outlined plans in its grant application to fund teacher training in evidence-based practice and teacher coaching around phonological awareness and oral-language acquisition.

“There’s a real concern that there’s a drift away from systematic, explicit teaching of foundational skills [in California],” said Bill Lucia, the president of EdVoice, a nonprofit that advocates for accountability and school choice. “It feels almost like Groundhog Day in going back to these reading wars.”

Listing Reading Recovery and reading and writing workshop in the grant application gives these programs tacit approval, and sends the wrong message, said Kareem J. Weaver, a member of the Oakland NAACP’s education committee.

“Goals and parameters at the state level guide the local level,” Weaver said. “People want the money. They’re going to do what they need to do.”

*See Also: [Getting Reading Right: An Education Week Project](#)*

Barbara Murchison, the director of the educator excellence and equity division at the California department of education, said that the state doesn’t want to prescribe a “single approach.”

While Reading Recovery and reading workshop will be included in the state’s literacy plan as examples of best practices, they won’t be the only recommendations, she said.

Murchison also disagreed with critics who say that Reading Recovery and reading workshop models aren’t evidence-based.

“I think there are a lot of ways that you can support those foundational skills,” Murchison said. “When I was teaching 1st grade for about 10 years, ... I had a variety of different approaches, but one of those was very much shared writing, shared reading, writer’s workshop, reader’s workshop.”

‘Who Are We Tailoring Things for?’

California is home to one of the largest student populations in the nation. It’s also historically been a literacy trendsetter, though the state has a [checkered history when it comes to evidence-based reading instruction](#).

In the 1980s and early ’90s, California was one of the first states to champion whole language, an approach that assumes reading is a natural process that students will learn through exposure to authentic texts. California incorporated whole language into its English/language arts framework in 1987.

But after scores from the 1994 National Assessment of Educational Progress and state tests showed lagging 4th grade achievement, state lawmakers pushed for a change in course. The legislature passed a series of bills that required schools to use materials that taught phonics, created new English/language arts standards, and provided funding to

train teachers in phonics instruction.

These changes created one of the first iterations of balanced literacy—an approach that attempted to balance explicit instruction in foundational skills with guided practice and exposure to text.

Reading Recovery and reading workshop are aligned with the current state literacy framework, Murchison said, which is one reason why were included in the list of evidence-based programs.

Reading workshop includes many of the literacy skills required in K-3, like explicit teaching of comprehension strategies, high-quality discussion of text meaning, and identification of text structure, she said.

While California doesn't mandate one approach to reading instruction, there are schools across the state using the Units of Study for Teaching Reading—the most well-known reading workshop program, developed by Lucy Calkins, a professor at Teachers College, Columbia University. Across the country, the materials are popular with many teachers, who appreciate that the program encourages student choice and developing a lifelong love of reading.

But some parents, teachers, and advocates in California have said that reading instruction is still failing students two decades later—especially students of color, students from low-income families, students with disabilities, and English-language learners. Meeting the needs of these students, specifically, is a special focus of the grant that California received.

Advocates have raised concerns that Reading Recovery and reading workshop won't achieve that goal.

“The programs referenced have been used for years in California, are not supported by the science of reading, and have contributed to the continued reading crisis in California,” said Lori DePole, the strategic partner liason at Decoding Dyslexia California, in an emailed statement to Education Week.

They don't follow the standards set out in the California Dyslexia Guidelines, she said, which call for direct, explicit, and structured instruction.

These programs may work for some students, but they won't work for all students, said Weaver of the Oakland NAACP. “From the state perspective, who are we tailoring things for?” he asked.

## Effective for All?

Reading Recovery and reading workshop are two of the most common approaches to reading instruction and intervention in the country, according to a recent survey from the Education Week Research Center. But researchers have suggested that they are less effective for struggling students.

Calkins' Units of Study for Teaching Reading is the most popular reading workshop model in the U.S. (While Calkins is mentioned in California's grant application, the state is including the method—rather than the Units of Study specifically—as an example of best practice, Murchison said.)

Calkins' workshop model has recently come under fire from a group of reading researchers, who reviewed the materials in a report for the nonprofit Student Achievement Partners. They determined that while the program would likely keep successful readers on track, it didn't have the explicit practice in foundational skills or the opportunities to build knowledge that would support struggling readers.

This week, the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project published a rebuttal to the evaluation, arguing that the review didn't consider critical information, including student achievement results, and claiming that the researchers involved were skewed against balanced literacy.

As for Reading Recovery, [research has shown that overall, students make gains in this program](#). But other researchers have found that the lowest-performing students have been excluded from some of these analyses. Reading Recovery lessons do include phonics instruction, but they also teach that students can figure out what words say by relying on other “cues,” like clues from pictures or sentence structure.

Jeff Williams, a Reading Recovery teacher in the Solon school district in Ohio, said in an interview with Education Week last year that having students predict, rather than sound out, words in a text can be a useful tool for orienting students to how print works. “When it’s in isolation and we just say arbitrarily, ‘This shape makes this sound,’ that’s a little abstract for little kids,” Williams said.

But DePole, of Decoding Dyslexia California, worries that districts may not be aware of how these programs’ instruction could fail dyslexic students.

In developing the state literacy plan, the California department of education is conducting needs assessments with districts. The forms ask school systems to rate their own progress against literacy goals and list the approaches that they use.

“It has been our experience that many [local education agencies] are unfamiliar with the California Dyslexia Guidelines and the science-based, structured literacy approach that it recommends as best practices for, not only students with dyslexia, but all students,” said DePole in the statement.

“DDCA is concerned about the potential quality of data that will be collected from these Needs Assessments if we are asking our state’s LEAs [i.e., local education agencies] to self-rate themselves against the California Dyslexia Guidelines.”

Murchison said she hopes that the state literacy team “grapples with” the research base on reading as they build out the state literacy plan.

“That said, I think California has a really strong curricular framework that really balances the importance of foundations skills, reading comprehension, and effective expression,” Murchison said. “I think that will really be the basis for where we’re headed.”

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A version of this article appeared in the February 12, 2020 edition of Education Week as *California Literacy Plan Piques Advocate Concerns*

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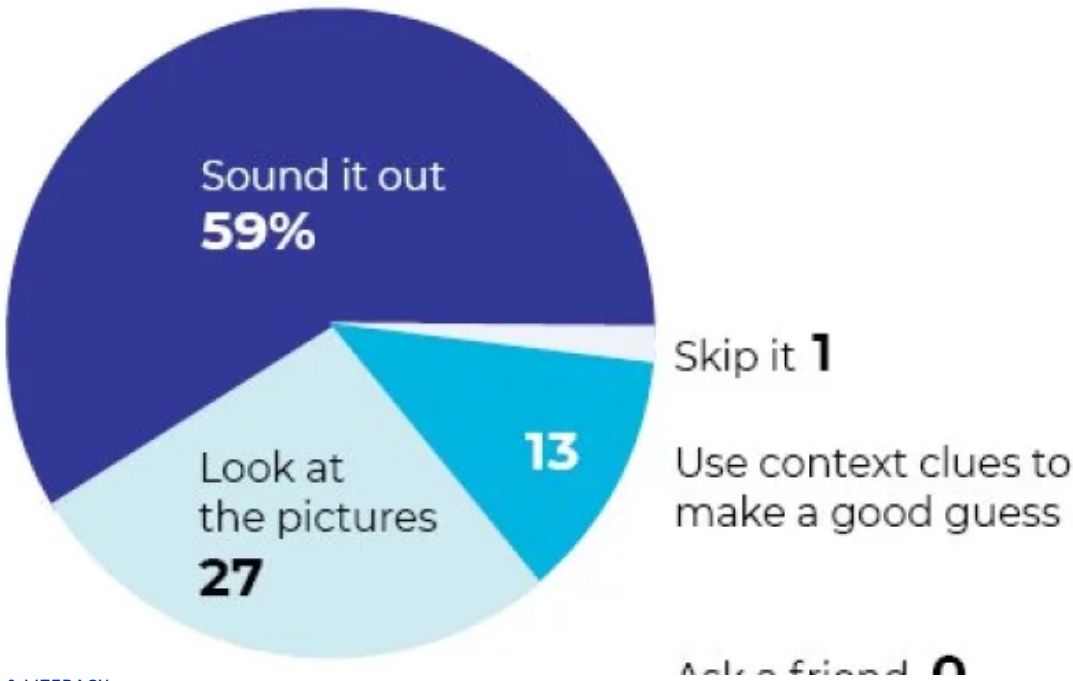
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