

# The four pillars of equity

How to build an elementary ELA  
classroom where every student succeeds





## Introduction

The value of literacy skills cannot be overstated. Every academic subject is essential, of course, but literacy unlocks them all. We know that early reading affects achievement throughout school and beyond—well into college and career. **That’s why it is vital to stand for—even fight for—access to high-quality classroom reading materials starting in the very early grades.** We have a responsibility to provide literacy instruction that gives every student the same opportunity to succeed, even excel.

But most literacy instruction has not met this goal. According to the National Association of Educational Progress (NAEP), U.S. student reading scores have not improved substantially since 1998—two decades without meaningful growth. Today, the reading gap between students at high-poverty and low-poverty schools remains stubbornly wide.

## Trend in fourth-grade NAEP reading average scores



\*Adapted from NAEP Report Card:  
[2022 NAEP Reading Assessment](#)

**We believe that every child is capable of becoming a skilled reader.** For us, that belief is more than just a nice idea. It's a foundation for action and an urgent call for high-quality materials that give every child the same opportunity. **And the latest reading science shows that the best instruction supports *all* students.**

We have identified the **four pillars of equity** based on that science. These key starting points offer concrete actions teachers can take to create a classroom where every student succeeds at reading—and to open numerous opportunities for every student.

# 1 Teach all kids how to crack the written code.





For many people who have learned to read well, reading feels utterly natural. But it is actually not a natural process. Humans are generally born with the ability to breathe, cry, move, and speak. Reading, however, needs to be taught and learned.

Yet many educators have struggled to discern the best way to teach reading. Despite ample research and ever-evolving curricular approaches, not all children have access to the reading instruction they require. **Reading science indicates that all children require one thing in order to read: the power to decode**—the ability to match letters to sounds and see the patterns that form syllables and words. Reading science also shows that explicit instruction in phonics and letter-sound relationships is the most effective key to that code. Training young students in decoding actually builds a new area in their brains where letter and word recognition happens—and that area functions better with practice.<sup>1</sup>

That means that children in the earliest grades need instruction in decoding. It is important for children to simply absorb and enjoy written words in a lot of different contexts, but that on its own is not *reading instruction*. Indeed, the National Reading Panel has concluded that children have a learning advantage when they receive early systematic explicit phonics instruction.<sup>2</sup> This means that phonics instruction should begin by kindergarten and that all students within a grade should have access to the same instruction. Because this systematic phonics instruction teaches all sound-spelling patterns comprehensively, it ensures that students learn to master the entire code. Systematic explicit phonics instruction not only gives every student the complete set of tools they need to read, but it also gives every student the same set of tools.

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1 Brem, S., Bach, S., Kucian, K., Kujala, J., Guttorm, T., Martin, E., et al. (2010). Brain sensitivity to print emerges when children learn letter–speech sound correspondences. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 107(17), 7939–7944.

2 <https://www.nichd.nih.gov/sites/default/files/publications/pubs/nrp/Documents/report.pdf>

2 Expose all students to knowledge and vocabulary beyond their lived experience.





Most educators have witnessed that special moment when a student connects his or her own lived experience with what's being presented in the classroom. Each student carries a valuable and unique set of experiences, and drawing on these often enriches and enhances the educational experience. Indeed, we know that background knowledge is inseparable from and critical to reading comprehension.<sup>3</sup> There is evidence that practicing reading strategies—such as identifying the main idea of a text—can help weak readers, but strategies alone cannot close the comprehension gap; readers can go only so far without background knowledge.

However, we also know that not all students arrive at school with the same background knowledge. And too many curricula assume that students enter a classroom knowing the exact same things. Therefore, while we build on and celebrate students' individual experiences, **it is also our responsibility as educators to bring the world into the classroom.**

For example, imagine that a pair of students with differing background knowledge about sailing is asked to read and analyze a passage about America's Cup. The student who has never seen a sailboat may not perform as well on this task as the student who holds knowledge of boats, the ocean, or sailing. In "Why American Students

Haven't Gotten Better at Reading in 20 Years" (*The Atlantic*), Natalie Wexler describes how closing this knowledge gap is a crucial equity issue:

"The failure to build children's knowledge in elementary school helps explain the gap between the reading scores of students from wealthier families and those of their lower-income peers—a gap that has been expanding... [W]ealthy children are far more likely to acquire knowledge outside of school. Poorer kids with less-educated parents tend to rely on school to acquire the kind of knowledge that is needed to succeed academically—and...they're less likely to acquire it there."<sup>4</sup>

Effective literacy instruction must celebrate the experiences students have but not assume each student has specific pieces of prior knowledge—rather, it must build knowledge in the classroom. **We need curricula that expose students to a diverse array of new topics**—spanning history, science, literature, culture, and the arts—all in an intentional sequence that builds a rich and common knowledge base from which all students can draw.

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3 Recht, D.R. and Leslie, L., 1988. Effect of prior knowledge on good and poor readers' memory of text. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 80(1), p.16.

4 "Why American Students Haven't Gotten Better at Reading in 20 Years," Natalie Wexler, *The Atlantic*, April 13, 2018.

3 Make sure all students are reading complex text.







It can be tempting to adjust a text’s complexity for struggling students. However, experts advise that giving struggling readers easier texts does not promote equity. Giving every student complex text does.

In the early grades, when students are just learning how to read, “complex text” generally suggests decodable language that supports explicit phonics instruction. That definition expands as students progress. Literacy expert Tim Shanahan, Ph.D., says text complexity has two components: “linguistic complexity” and “literary, symbolic, or poetic complexity.”<sup>5</sup> Complex text is valuable as a source not only of “high-frequency words and learned sound and spelling patterns,” but also of rich material that students can sink their teeth into.<sup>6</sup> **This is the type of text that every student should have access to.**

Yes, that even means struggling readers. According to Shanahan, limiting children’s “exposure to linguistic and textual features that they don’t yet know how to negotiate” doesn’t make things better for struggling readers. On the contrary, in fact; it “reduces their opportunity to learn”—and their motivation. “Students often tell me that they hate reading specifically because they always get placed in what they call the ‘stupid kid books,’” Shanahan says.<sup>7</sup>

Reading science confirms that student performance improves when students have equal access to grade-level text. Referencing a 2017 study by Lisa Trottier Brown at Utah State University,<sup>8</sup> Shanahan confirms that student performance “improved across multiple measures of reading achievement” when “weaker readers” used “texts at two, three, and four grade levels above their instructional levels with the assistance of lead readers.”<sup>9</sup>

If children can learn as much or more from grade-level texts—and they can—they should have opportunities to read the texts that match their intellectual levels and age-level interests. So instead of being grouped into different levels based on text complexity, students should all encounter the same text—with appropriate differentiation, such as varying the amount and type of scaffolding to best support students with different needs. With the proper supports and scaffolds, all students can handle grade-level decodable text. Through read-aloud texts, students can even digest above-grade-level material, gaining valuable exposure to complex text and vocabulary beyond what they are able to decode.

Providing students equitable exposure to complex texts produces more skilled readers across the board. Text complexity gives all students in the classroom the chance to challenge themselves and grow.

5 <https://shanahanonliteracy.com/blog/a-fine-mess-confusing-close-reading-and-text-complexity>

6 <https://achievethecore.org/aligned/supporting-youngest-readers-teaching-skills-reading/>

7 <https://shanahanonliteracy.com/blog/the-instructional-level-concept-revisited-teaching-with-complex-text>

8 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00220671.2017.1310711>

9 <http://www.readingrockets.org/blogs/shanahan-literacy/new-evidence-teaching-reading-frustration-levels>

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Believe all students  
can achieve.



Educators know that student mindset matters. But so does *our* mindset. **It is essential for educators to enter the classroom with high expectations for all students—and with the belief that every student is capable of meeting, even exceeding, those expectations.** This attitude can change the way we teach, and thus the way students learn.

This equity pillar provides the foundation and motivation for the other three. When we believe in every student's capacity to succeed, we make sure every student has rich content, complex texts, and powerful tools for learning. In other words, we provide high-quality instructional material based on reading science.

Reading science bears out something educators know intuitively: equity-focused literacy instruction is not just the right thing to do. It's the way all children learn best—and the way toward offering them a better future.



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