

## **Researchers document science of reading, child potential**

A research team headed by scientists from the prestigious Yale School of Medicine recently announced an extremely important finding for children who have had difficulty learning to read. The study reported that the brain function of poor readers actually changes to resemble the brain's function of "good" readers when they have been taught to read through instruction that is direct, systematic, and focuses on the sounds and letters that make up words, the meanings of words, and helping children read accurately and quickly.

Using functional MRI scanners, researchers were able to document that effective reading instruction not only improves reading ability but actually changes the brain's functioning so children can read more efficiently. These struggling readers were taught to read using a comprehensive reading program that focused on systematically teaching phonemic awareness, phonics, reading fluency, vocabulary and spelling and, as a result, formed new and lasting neurological connections and pathways in parts of their brain that regulate reading ability.

We know that almost every child in America — whatever race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic level — can become a strong and confident reader when taught through a comprehensive approach grounded in systematic, research-based instruction. And we know that scientifically based reading instruction can be successfully implemented in all schools — whether urban, suburban, or rural.

Unfortunately, the reality today is that nearly 40 percent of fourth-grade students are unable to read at grade level. While many policymakers, educators and parents are enthusiastic about teaching children to read, not all schools and school districts are implementing instruction grounded in scientific approaches that have been proven to increase reading skills. Despite what we know works, not all schools have put in place carefully developed, comprehensive reading programs that include research-proven instructional practices. This is a travesty.

Throughout the nation, schools are starting to embrace scientifically based research and used it to teach reading, with children reading better and learning more. From a preponderance of the evidence — from the recent Yale study to the work done by the Florida Center for Reading Research at Florida State University to the range of studies analyzed by the National Research Council and the National Reading Panel — we know what needs to be done. We know that reading instruction for struggling readers must be explicit, systematic, and allow sufficient time for student learning. We also know that the reading curriculum should include the five critical components that are fundamental to learning to read — phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and reading comprehension.

The evidence is clear. Now what is needed is for every school to incorporate these elements into their curriculum. Knowing what students need is a good step forward. Understanding what to do with that information, and committing ourselves to sound practice, is how our schools can accomplish real success. Policymakers can ensure that students in their state, city or district will receive the best reading instruction by requiring schools to adhere to these seven key points.

First, each school must implement a comprehensive reading program grounded in scientifically based reading research. This means that all texts, reading materials and tests should reflect the critical components of reading.

Second, teachers who are certified and licensed to teach reading must use and understand scientifically based reading instruction techniques in the classroom.

Third, teachers should be provided with training in the application of scientific, research-based concepts of reading instruction.

Fourth, schools must make learning to read a priority, providing adequate and uninterrupted time each day for reading instruction.

Fifth, school systems must establish a system to regularly evaluate student progress throughout the school year. This system should use valid and reliable instructional assessments.

Sixth, educators should use data from classroom assessments to determine where and what kind of help is needed at the student, classroom, school, and district level.

Seventh, before determining that children require special education services for a learning disability, schools should require that mechanisms are established to ensure that the student receives appropriate reading instruction in the regular classroom.

By developing and using a scientifically based, comprehensive reading curriculum focused on the critical components of reading and reflective of these seven components, our schools can boost student achievement. Scientifically based reading works, and it works in all schools with nearly all students.

In today's environment, the stakes are just too high to use unproven methods or employ a wait-and-see approach to students who are struggling to learn to read. Strong reading skills prepare children to meet the challenges of education and work and to become productive, participating citizens. All students are entitled to the best preparation possible, and scientifically based reading instruction provides it, permanently and without reservation.

Norma Garza is the coordinator for United Way Success By 6 initiative that focuses on early childhood education and is the founder and chair of the Brownsville Reads Task Force. Garza is a member of the National Reading Panel and of President Bush's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans. She also served on the Governor's Focus on Reading Task Force, the Governor's Special Education Advisory Committee, and was a Texas panel member of Academics Goals 2000.

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