

## Do We Have a National Reading Crisis?

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Well, that's the story.

A national reading crisis is a central part of now-familiar Science of Reading narrative. In short, our public schools have failed to adhere to scientific findings about reading acquisition—most notably the importance of phonics instruction—leading to children failing to establish the foundational skills for reading.

The key evidence for this crisis comes from the 2022 National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) which found that only 33% of 4<sup>th</sup> grade students tested Proficient or Advanced. The overall performance in 2022 was equivalent to 1992 with the small gains over that period disappearing. This result led to alarming (but misleading) headlines about the majority of students struggling to read—a real crisis.

But we need to pause, take a deep breath, and reflect on these results. To be sure, the lack of improvement is disappointing to educators who have put so much emphasis on supporting struggling readers. There is clearly work to be done—and no reason to be complacent.

We could also conclude, more positively, that students taking the test in 2022 are reading as well as their parents when they were in school. In fact, the results of this and other tests, like the widely-respected PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) tests, show essentially a flat line.

The cut-off points for any assessments are, to a considerable degree, arbitrary. Those for NAEP are particularly stringent, virtually guaranteed to assign the majority of students to below proficient. The levels produce what David Reinking, Georgy Hruby, and Victoria Risko have called a "ready-made crisis."

To make sense of these results, we need to place them in an international context. If U.S. students are broadly failing because of flawed teaching methods, we would expect to find them well behind students in other economically advanced countries. But that is not the case.

In the PISA 2018 assessment of high school reading, the United States placed ninth among the 38 economically advanced countries, about level with Sweden, the United Kingdom, Japan, and Australia-- and well above the international average.

We get similar results if we turn to the international performance of younger students. In the 2016 PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Study) the US was ranked 15 out of 50 countries, behind Finland, Sweden, and Hungary, but ahead of Denmark, the Netherlands, and Australia. The PIRLS ranking in 2021 was even higher, though we should be cautious about comparisons because of the pandemic.

Again, there is no evidence, in these respected studies, of a national reading crisis—though the assessments confirm troubling socio-economic gaps in the United States. In fact, the reading "penalty" for being poor in the United States is greater than in most of the countries tested. A U.S. student in the lowest quartile economically is far less likely to break into the top reading levels than similar students in other advanced countries. And this gap has widened during the pandemic.

So why does all this matter?

A crisis mentality leads to abrupt, disruptive, top-down changes that force teachers to abandon approaches that have worked for their students. The pendulum swings. While advocates of the Science of Reading stress that phonics instruction is only one of many validated practices, the blunt message to schools is that it is the game-changer, the silver bullet—phonics

programs are proliferating with huge blocks of whole-class instruction devoted them, often for years.

Yet the research itself suggests that phonics instruction has only a moderate effect size and the evidence is weak that there is a significant benefit after K-1. But it can have a negative effect if it crowds out other powerful tools like teaching comprehension strategies and building vocabulary and prior knowledge. Or writing. Or simply the chance to read books. That's the conclusion of the oft-cited National Reading Panel report, published in 2000, which warned: "Phonics should not become the dominant component in a reading program, neither in the amount of time devoted to it nor in the significance attached."

H. L. Mencken reportedly commented that "for every problem there is a solution that is simple, neat—and wrong." We naturally prefer a story in which right and wrong, good and bad, are neatly confronting each other. We long for the single cause. But not all children learn the same way, and children have learned to read in diverse countries, diverse eras, with diverse approaches. Science can identify trends and "effect sizes," but it cannot dictate the right action in any situation. That takes teacher judgment. It can't be legislated.

It's messy that way—and human.