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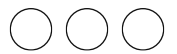


OPINION // OPEN FORUM

California's dyslexic governor needs to step up to solve our childhood reading crisis

Anna Nordberg

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California schools teach reading using the whole language approach — the idea that children should learn to recognize words and phrases through context, guessing and memorization.
 Stephen Lam/The Chronicle 2021

Last December, Gov. Gavin Newsom published a [children's book](#) about his struggle with dyslexia. As I read it to my 9-year-old son, my voice shook.

Newsom is honest about how agonizing it felt as a child not to be able to read until he got the support he needed. The book is also a story of resilience, and as the parent of a dyslexic child, it rang true.

But as someone who has had to learn more about the science of reading than I ever expected, I hope the governor will take a hard look at how we are teaching *all* kids to read in California. Because we are failing them.

California's reading scores are dismal, with 68% of fourth-graders reading below grade level. This is the result of the disastrous decision in the 1980s for the state to embrace whole language, the idea that children should learn to recognize words and phrases through context, guessing and memorization. But evidence shows the whole language approach has left millions of kids behind. What children actually need is to be taught how to decode, or sound out, words — a phonics-based approach called structured literacy that requires explicit instruction and works with *all* students, including those with learning disabilities and second language learners.

The debate over whether children should be taught to read through whole language (rebranded as balanced literacy in the '90s) or phonics became known as the Reading Wars, turning a complex issue into a catchy cultural meme. Which is depressing, because how we teach kids to read really matters. It can be the difference between an intact, confident child and one who thinks they can't succeed in school.

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“We know the brain science; we know how kids learn to read. For us not to do it is derelict at best,” says Kareem Weaver, a member of the California NAACP Education Committee who co-founded [Fulcrum](#), a nonprofit that advocates for structured literacy curricula in schools. “Science, math, technology, those are all reading classes,” says Weaver, noting that if you can’t read a word problem or instructions, it doesn’t matter how good you are with numbers. “If you want to fix California’s education system, you have to teach reading the right way.”

Newsom appears to recognize this. A recently passed bill, [SB488](#), requires education programs to train teachers in the science of reading by 2025. Another bill, [SB237](#), would require universal screening for risk of dyslexia from kindergarten through second grade, but it’s stalled in committee and opposed by the California Teachers Association, in part over concerns about screening reducing classroom time. But new laws are only a first step.

One of the biggest challenges, explains Kymyona Burk, a senior policy fellow at [ExcelinEd](#) and the former state literacy director at the Department of Education in Mississippi, is changing the mindset of a state’s education system. “California has long been a whole language state,” she says, and that’s influenced an entire generation of teachers and administrators.

The first step is teacher knowledge. “All the new curricula in the world doesn’t matter if teachers don’t have the training to pivot during instruction,” says Burk, who oversaw the implementation of Mississippi’s Literacy-based Promotion Act from 2013-2019, which dramatically increased the state’s reading scores. “When a child says, ‘I don’t understand,’ does the teacher have the knowledge to fill the gap?” In Mississippi, Burk ensured that teachers had access to [high-quality](#)

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[professional development](#), and put literacy coaches into the highest need schools.

After the agonies of Zoom school, parents are also realizing something has gone horribly awry in how we teach kids to read. One Piedmont mother, a behavioral scientist, made the [Purple Challenge](#) video to show why the guessing approach is so problematic. ([Avoid a Lemon](#) is another good one). Emily Hanford's excellent [Hard Words](#) podcast from 2018 on this topic is also being rediscovered by parents.

But whole language has its die-hard defenders in California — including, according to several sources I spoke to, a cottage industry of textbook publishers and curriculum developers who sell school districts on these ideas. The program perhaps most associated with whole language, Lucy Calkins Readers Workshop, has an almost cult-like status in the Bay Area, where it was trumpeted at every single kindergarten tour, public or private, I went on. There are wonderful things about it, including an emphasis on representation and getting children to fall in love with stories. But it should not be used as reading instruction.

“Lucy Calkins and the love of literature and all that’s fabulous, but it doesn’t teach kids how to read,” says Judy Kranzler, a reading specialist and the founder of [The Active Reading Center](#) in Walnut Creek. It creates the *appearance* of reading because children are encouraged to guess at words, but for most kids, this approach falls apart by second or third grade. “Decoding works best for *all* kids learning to read and spell,” says Kranzler. “How did this become controversial?” She also pushes back against the assumption that teaching phonics is dry and has developed a curriculum that uses movement and games to engage all kids, available at [openreading.com](#).

For any of this to work, it needs teacher support. “Most teachers didn’t get this training in their credentials programs, so if we’re asking them to do additional professional development now, they should be compensated for their time,” says Weaver. We also need to support teachers in coaching others.

Here’s what Newsom can do immediately. He can speak, day and night, about the importance of changing the way we teach kids to read, using his powerful personal story. He can put guardrails on funding to ensure that we are *actually* training teachers in the science of reading, by requiring education schools and districts to choose curricula and professional development from a vetted list of vendors. He can discuss how we support

teachers in this pivot. He can push for passage of the dyslexia screening bill, and if it remains stalled, he can put the money for screening directly into the budget, sidestepping the need for legislation. As Lori DePole and Megan Potente, the co-state directors of [Decoding Dyslexia CA](#), explain, over 30 states already require early universal screening for risk of dyslexia. Without this, California defaults to a wait-to-fail model.

It takes courage and humility to admit a hard truth — California’s pivot to whole language failed a generation of kids. The decision was made with the best of intentions because it had the noble aim of turning kids into lifelong readers. But here’s another hard truth: You cannot love reading if you don’t know how to read.

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