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What School Leaders Need to Know About the Science of Reading

A Guide for Principals

By Matt Renwick

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About the Author

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Introduction: Letter to a New Principal

In 2022, I was asked by a colleague to reach out to a new administrator. “She is only days into her position, and a few teachers are already requesting more resources for teaching phonics. The teachers say their requests are aligned with the science of reading. Can you clarify for her what the science of reading is, and what she needs to keep in mind?”

I agreed and wrote an email, with bullet points of my understanding of the science of reading and how it was being presented.

- Teaching reading is often presented as a linear process: decoding + language comprehension = successful readers. While these two domains of reading instruction are important, the reality of *teaching readers* is more nuanced and complex than this.
- The claim is often made that “the science is settled” when it comes to knowing what works for reading. This statement contradicts itself, as the essence of science is inquiry, and each one of us has more to learn in this field.
- There has been a movement in the science of reading that, if you don’t adhere to the movement's dogma, you can be ostracized professionally. Therefore, school leaders must understand the various "sciences" of reading. This knowledge needs to extend beyond just skills and strategies to encompass areas such as metacognition, motivation and engagement, and self-efficacy.
- Curriculum programs and professional training that state they are aligned with the science of reading often isolate reading instruction from the context of authentic, rich texts. Research shows that these varied ways of being a reader support one another. For example, students comprehend texts better when they find what they are reading interesting.
- Speaking of curriculum, many schools and teachers operate under the belief that by buying and implementing a program with fidelity, you are in alignment with the science of reading. However, good instruction is responsive and always balances the needs of the students with any scope and sequence.

I sent the email and then visited classrooms, as part of my work as a principal.

After several weeks of not getting a response, I called my colleague and asked how the new administrator was doing. “Yeah…she left her role and took another position outside of a school district.”

“Oh no!” I responded. “Were the teachers too overbearing? Did I scare her off with what I shared about the science of reading?” He laughed. “No, an opening came up that was a dream job for her, and she took it. She did appreciate your response and found it helpful in making sense of this complex issue.”

Reading instruction *is* complex, despite anyone's efforts to simplify it. If it were so easy to teach readers, we would have figured it out by now. Yet the "reading wars" continue to recur. Educators use the metaphor of a pendulum to describe the swing of competing approaches to reading instruction: meaning-based vs. code-based.

The problem with this binary view of what effective reading instruction, besides the fact that the whole purpose of reading is to construct meaning, is that it dismisses one approach in favor of another.

Where the pendulum is as of this writing: curriculum and assessment mandates at the state level require implementing a phonics-first approach to reading instruction. This has been both supported and accelerated by ideological groups and educational companies. Districts, already strapped for resources and time, often don't have the necessary bandwidth to study the science of reading movement more closely. For example, are they examining data beyond academics, such as chronic absenteeism and discipline, and then asking themselves, "What will our students gain from the inclusion of this SoR-aligned resource?" The evidence that supports the efficacy of these programs is lacking. We are in essence conducting statewide experiments to determine if the science of reading movement will fulfill its promise.

Intentions and Outcomes

The purpose of this essay is to be a "guide on the side" for school leaders like you to help navigate the science of reading. Not to position you against anything, but to be a critical consumer of what's being presented. To feel more confident and prepared when you are in a position to make decisions on behalf of your students regarding literacy curriculum, instruction, and assessment. To operate from a clear set of shared beliefs and values instead of relying on educational companies or pundits to know what is "proven" to work. To know how to build your own knowledge base and be a true instructional leader in your school.

As you read through each of the five parts, you will find a familiar structure:

- An anecdote from the K-12 context
- The problem with the situation and why it's problematic
- What the research says on the specific topic
- An invitation to try and apply a related leadership practice

The expected outcome is not to change your ELA curriculum or win an argument, but to help you have a conversation about reading instruction. Each interaction you have with a teacher influences the entire school. Staff and students learn what you stand for. They take note. You have power, which you share with everyone else when you create the permission structure for everyone to talk openly and respectfully about teaching readers.

#1 - Teaching reading is not simple.

"Leaders who put too much faith in their heroic tales of the past and project simplistic versions of the future can be alluring - and ruinous. To escape, we need to find our way out of our simple stories and back into our complex real ones."

- Jennifer Garvey Berger

I participated in a Zoom with literacy experts, discussing how to bring more books into classrooms, communities, and school libraries. So many spaces lack these essential resources.

As I listened, I began to see a pattern emerge.

- "Once we had the principal on board…"
- "We were so happy to have the principal's support…"
- "Well, first we need to talk to the school leader…"

This common thread, the belief that the school leader is the key that unlocks a school's success, was not surprising to me. As a principal with 16 years of experience, I didn't deny our importance. Yet I also lamented all the schools that didn't have a principal who was willing to step up and be a literacy leader.

What this group was conveying was a simple story: that hiring a principal who believed in a more balanced and responsive approach to literacy instruction was *the* way to achieve school excellence.

Beyond Simple Stories

There is no one solution to addressing the challenge of ensuring all students are successful, confident readers. Adding more books to classroom shelves or hiring the right principal is only one part of a multifaceted effort to improve literacy outcomes.

Yet that is what many people in the media and even in our profession want you to believe. For example, Emily Hansford's podcast series Sold a Story pointed to phonics as what was missing in our schools' curriculum and instruction.

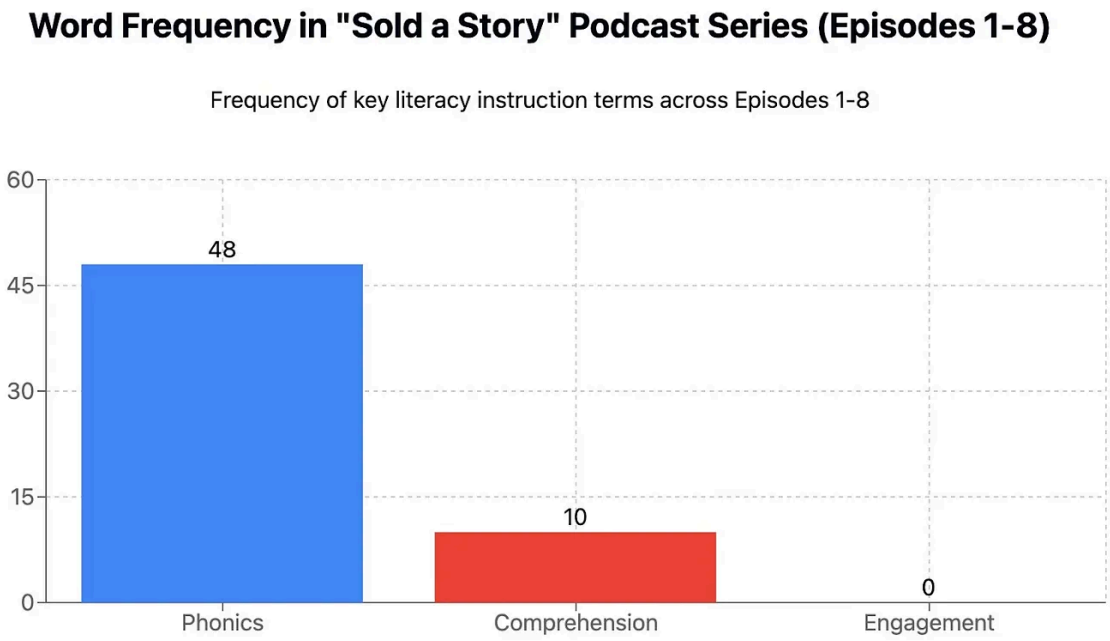


Image source: [Read by Example]

The simple story that Hanford told (powerfully, with stories from individuals who felt schools failed to teach them to read, accompanied with dramatic music) is that phonics is the key to unlocking the ability of students to become readers. Yet she leaves out many other factors, for example motivation and engagement. Furthermore, she pays much less attention to comprehension skills and strategies; the whole point of reading is understanding.

We also see this prominently with curriculum companies proclaiming to be aligned with the science of reading (or "SoR" for short). Publishers will refer to "the simple view of reading" as the supporting theory and foundation for their program. Constructed by Gough and Turner almost forty years ago, they believed that teaching reading could be approached like a math equation: students learn how to decode & recognize words combined with language comprehension.

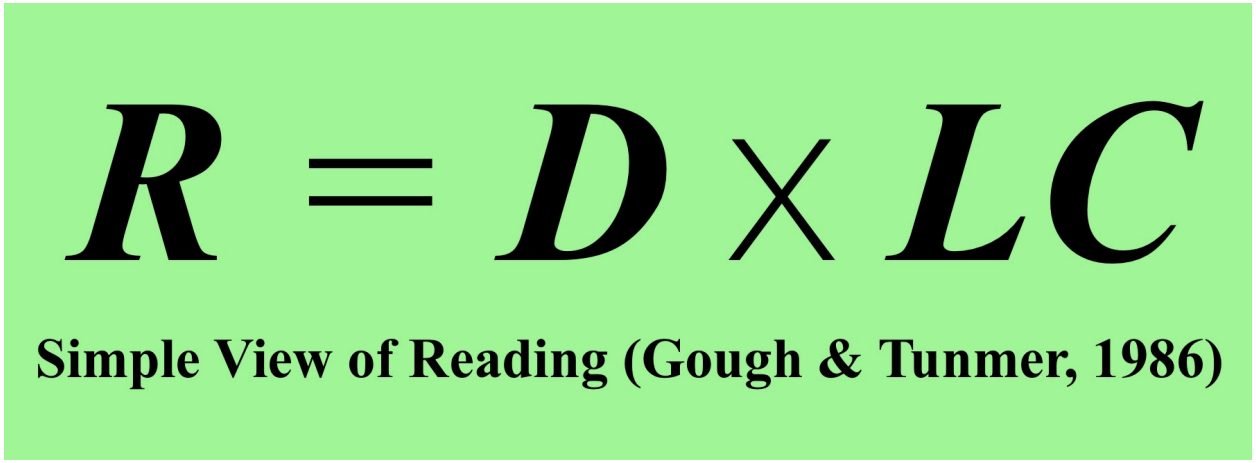


Image source: Wikimedia Commons

Simple is good, right? Easy to understand and implement. There is evidence supporting the need to build competent readers through explicit instruction, and not simply relying on surrounding students with books they want to read (Bittman, 2025; Yi et al, 2019).

So, the problem isn't that a simple view of reading is necessarily wrong. The problem is that it's incomplete.

The Active View of Reading

Mark Seidenberg and other academics have observed that, "theories of reading have become more complex and less intuitive as the field has progressed... the field now needs to pay greater attention to how to communicate and translate the science of reading in ways that support practitioners and the students with whom they work" (2020, as cited in Duke & Cartwright, 2021, p. S39).

Duke and Cartwright's "active view of reading" model shows this shift in what it means to become a reader. It relies on a broader research base to form a more comprehensive theory of reading instruction.

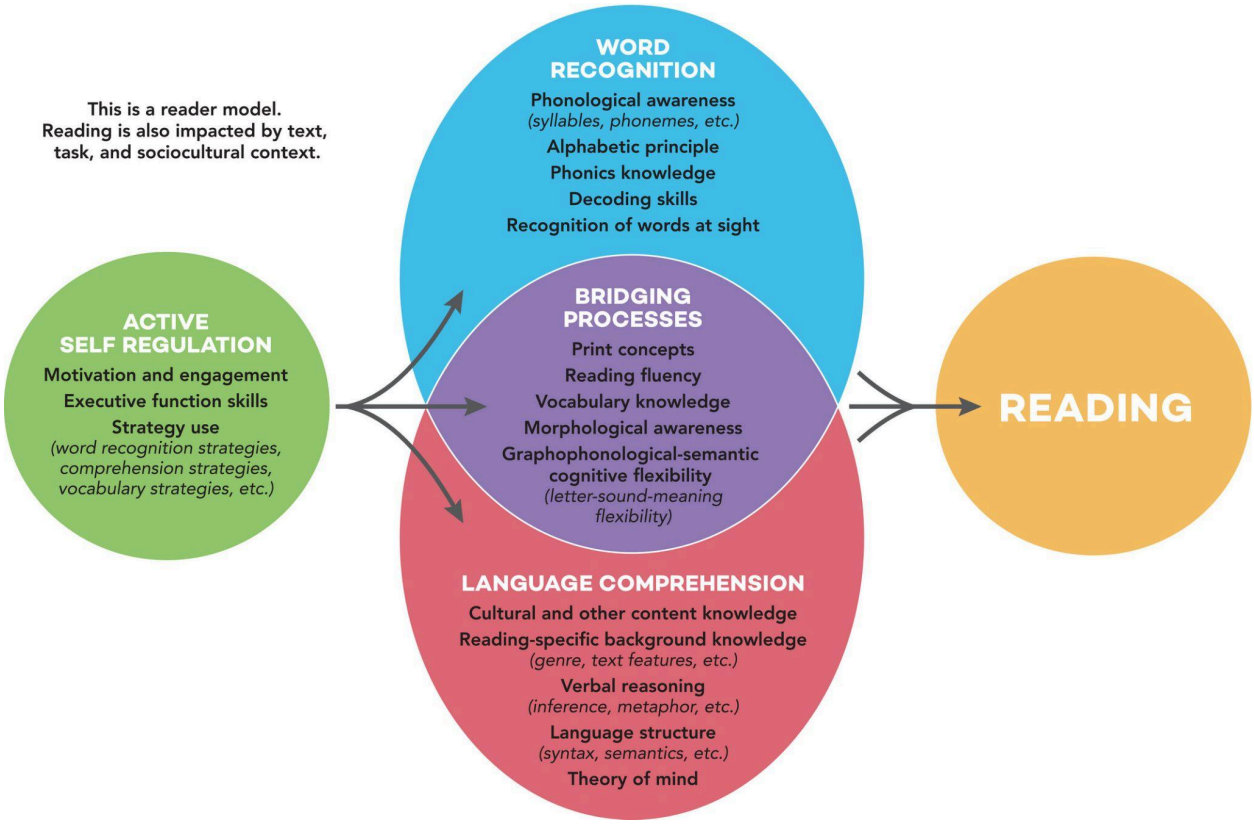


Image Source: Duke & Cartwright, 2021

Here are some of the key expansions Duke and Cartwright offer beyond the Simple View of Reading:

- Word recognition and language comprehension still sit at the core of this reader model. But they are bridged by important reading processes, such as print concepts, fluency, and vocabulary acquisition. Bridging is important: teaching phonics or language in isolation doesn't lead to students effectively transferring these skills to their independent reading (Hassenfeld & Gangi, 2025).
- Self-regulation skills such as executive functioning, motivation and engagement, and strategy use are positioned as prerequisites for becoming a successful reader.
- The authors recognized the social (relationships, institutions, status) and cultural (norms, values, traditions, beliefs, language) factors that shape a student's capacity and perceptions as they become a reader.

These factors are no less important than others. For example, Duke and Cartwright's study of the literature found that "executive functioning is so important to reading that there is reason to believe that for some students, limited EF skills are the primary cause of reading difficulty" (p. 531).

I witnessed this myself as a 5th and 6th-grade teacher. One of my first students, Kevin, came to his reading group daily. I facilitated guided reading as prescribed by our new program and expected by administration. Each day, Kevin would read his section of the leveled book with accuracy. (Yes, in my first years of teaching, I had students read aloud during guided reading. I now know better.) When I checked for understanding, Kevin gave me a blank face followed by a slight grin. "I don't know." Kevin was an excellent word caller, but a poor reader. He was later diagnosed with ADHD, inattentive type. Kevin needed more support, just not specifically for reading.

For your students who are currently in a reading intervention, how has your selection process ruled out attention as the primary cause for their reading challenges? What about your students who have experienced significant trauma? We can resist the certainty desired by the Science of Reading movement by being curious.

The reality of reading instruction is complex and situational. Students bring social, emotional, and experiential factors into the classroom that profoundly affect how they learn to read. To focus exclusively on word recognition and language comprehension is to prioritize teaching reading over teaching readers.

Try it and Apply it: Update Your Intervention Selection Process

Assigning a student to reading interventions when that is not the most appropriate placement creates two problems: 1) that student is not getting exactly what they need, and 2) another student who might benefit more from that intervention cannot access that support.

As a principal, you can help your teachers to look beyond oral reading fluency and other basic measures of a reader. For example, update your data-based decision-making process for reading interventions and include additional measures, such as:

- Attendance
- Behavior
- Current and past supports
- English proficiency
- Teacher observations in the classroom

These measures help you see the self-regulation skills, social factors, and cultural contexts that the Active View identifies as essential to reading development.

You don't have to be a literacy expert to resist the simple story that we know our students as readers only by looking at one or two measures. Build a whole child perspective when determining which students need what specific types of support. Embrace the complexity of

teaching readers while keeping the data analysis process manageable and useful. This is a first step on your school's pathway toward excellence and equity for all students.

#2 - The science is anything but settled.

"'The science of reading' is a phrase representing the accumulated knowledge about reading, reading development, and best practices for reading instruction obtained by the use of the scientific method."

- Yaacov Petscher and colleagues (2020)

I once posted commentary on social media about the close-minded approach that schools sometimes adopt when implementing a literacy curriculum program.

> "I don't know who needs to hear this...
>
> Teaching a literacy curriculum program like a script, lesson-by-lesson, to all kids without considering their current interests, abilities, and needs:
>
> - is not scientific
> - drains the joy out of learning
> - leads to inequities"

While posts like this can be well-received, speaking out publicly against a rigid approach to literacy curriculum implementation can invite critical feedback.

For example, a literacy consultant replied to a similar post that they like to "fill teachers with knowledge and give them a supportive script. They need it and enjoy it." Another comment proclaimed that "the science is settled" on how to best teach reading. There is one right way.

After resisting the impulse to respond with a summary of research studies that countered their positions, I paused and wondered: Why might they hold these beliefs? Do they not trust teachers to support students in reading and as readers? Are they not aware of the lack of evidence to support a scripted approach to reading instruction? I even considered what it would take to persuade them to reconsider their positions.

I was grateful for my restraint, as I eventually realized I wasn't wondering anything at all. I was making a judgment about someone that I didn't know very well, from a desire to be right.

Cherrypicking the Research

As noted in the introduction, a problem with the Science of Reading movement is its exclusive nature. In some online groups and educator networks, only certain domains within the reading literature count as “scientific”, including:

- Phonological awareness
- Phonics and word recognition
- Fluency
- Vocabulary and oral language comprehension
- Text comprehension

The Science of Reading movement regularly ignores a rich body of research on classroom practices that positively influence the development of reading:

- Motivation and engagement, e.g., offering voice and choice in what to read
- Self-efficacy, fostered through goal-setting and recognizing students' accomplishments
- Metacognition and mindfulness, developed through thinking routines that support transfer and independence
- Reader identity, built by emphasizing positive attributions and a growth mindset
- Critical literacy, cultivated through conversations around relevant and meaningful texts (Afflerbach, 2022)

Why are the former practices deemed more scientific than the latter? Peter Afflerbach notes that when expert readers are asked to think aloud about their reading process, the affective dimensions of reading consistently emerge—even when not specifically requested.

“Positive or negative emotion, a willingness to continue, giving effort, pulling back on this effort, bringing a "can-do" attitude (and then having that attitude change), monitoring performance, and "throwing in the towel" are part and parcel of particular acts of reading. That accomplished readers report these "other" aspects of reading - when not asked to do so - affirms their presence and hints at their power. Unfortunately, these influences, which are necessary for reading growth and reading achievement, are not always given appropriate attention in school reading programs” (2022, pg. 17).

One factor for this omission is how seemingly easier it is to assess a student’s ability to decode or read fluently, compared to measuring their level of motivation and engagement with reading. What gets measured is what matters. This can lead to confirmation bias, in which the supporters of a specific approach to teaching reading cherry-pick the research that aligns with their beliefs. This runs counter to the nature of science.

Moving to a New Paradigm

In 1962, Thomas Kuhn published *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. It was a landmark book that challenged the long-standing notion of scientific progress as a linear one. Kuhn popularized the term "paradigm", defined as the standard or model for representing a field. A paradigm is the accepted way of thinking and doing within an area of study. It's a commitment to conducting oneself within a paradigm that makes one part of a learning community. For example, humans once thought the sun and other celestial objects orbited around the Earth. Science as a field accepted this as a shared belief.

When problems arise within that field that don't follow the structure and order of the current paradigm, a healthy scientific community will investigate. When they discover a large enough body of evidence that contradicts the current paradigm, it eventually leads to a paradigm shift, in which a new model for thinking about and engaging with a set of ideas within a field is needed to move forward as a community. When Copernicus proposed that the Earth in fact orbited around the Sun, the scientific community (and people in general) eventually had to rethink its entire conception of the world.

Kuhn observed that a key indicator of this shift is "when a paradigm is in crisis, the community itself is in disarray" (2012, p. xxv). People feel like things are falling apart. Beliefs held for decades are suddenly in question.

This may be what is happening with the Science of Reading movement. Educators have intertwined their beliefs and practices with their identities; a paradigm shift is threatening their very sense of self.

- They have co-created a paradigm, that high-quality reading instruction is phonics-first.
- They have committed to this paradigm 100% to be members of this community.
- When confronted with evidence that contradicts what is believed, instead of considering it with curiosity, people resist it because the paradigm no longer holds together.

This mindset is evident not only in their actions but also in their words. For example, it is known as "the" Science of Reading movement. The "the" at the beginning conveys exclusivity, similar to "the" Ohio State University. Subsequently, any type of thinking outside of what the SoR movement believes is not considered scientific, bordering on heresy.

Try it and Apply it: Facilitate a Professional Conversation

If you broadened your assessment practices from the first Try it and Apply it, you likely encountered some form of resistance. Asking teachers who are committed to the Science of Reading movement to expand their notion of what it means to be a reader will likely raise concerns. This is good! We are not creating conflict; it was already there. Beneath the surface of

your typical interactions in the school, teachers hold different philosophies and theories about teaching readers, but do not yet feel safe enough to talk about them openly.

As a school leader, we have to pay attention to both people's behaviors and beliefs. We need to shepherd the change at both levels. We can create that safe space through an article study. Consider using Rachael Gabriel's *Educational Leadership* article The Sciences of Reading Instruction (https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/the-sciences-of-reading-instruction). Next are the steps you can take to set up this professional conversation at a staff meeting or during a professional development day.

- Communicate the goal: to create an open and brave space to discuss reading instruction and our theories. Share the article ahead of time so they have time to preview it.
- At the meeting, review your group norms and collective commitments to ensure everyone is clear on what professional dialogue looks and sounds like.
- Assign a process checker whom you can refer to during the meeting for accountability purposes. They share with the group what's going well and what needs improvement.
- Provide a guide for reading the text with a critical eye, such as the Four As Protocol (https://www.nsrfharmony.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/FourAsTextProtocol-N.pdf). Give teachers time to read and take notes in the margins.
- Set up heterogeneous groups, for example 4K-5 vertical teams. Get faculty members out of their typical circles so they can hear new perspectives. Continue using the Four A's Protocol as a structure for supporting professional conversation.
- At the end, unpack the conversations as a whole group. Ask teachers to share what their takeaways were from the article and conversation. You can organize these notes on three sheets of chart paper, each with a heading: 1) What was affirming? 2) What was interesting? 3) What was disturbing? (Or choose different questions to summarize.)
- Invite faculty to continue thinking after the meeting about the process. You can send out the following questions in a digital form, or simply invite them to reflect privately.
    - How have you broadened your understanding of reading instruction?
    - What about this process allowed you to remain open-minded to new information?
    - What do you want to take with you for your future interactions with students and colleagues?
    - What might you want to leave behind?

Depending on your school's culture, you may need to facilitate multiple article studies or even engage in a book study. The goal is not to pick a side, but to begin creating the conditions for true inquiry in your school and embrace the belief that the science of reading is not settled.

#3 - Good intentions can lead to inequitable outcomes.

"We must not forget amidst the noise of standards, high stakes testing, and the push for the 'science of reading,' that reading for enjoyment, choosing texts that are relevant to us, gaining new knowledge on topics of interest, and taking pleasure in all of it as a whole—not in bits and pieces and isolated skills—is a human right."

— Regie Routman, *The Heart-Centered Teacher*

As a principal, I helped teachers collect data around their professional learning plans. One teacher I partnered with wanted to replicate aspects of the research conducted by Gay Ivey and Peter Johnston. They found that students can excel as readers in school under the following conditions:

- No book quizzes or book reports
- Access for students to read books of their choice, with ample time and support
- Opportunities for students to talk to peers about their reading (Ivey & Johnston, 2015)

In this classroom, I talked with students to capture information about their levels of motivation and engagement. I would take observational notes and co-analyze the data with the teacher.

What we learned is that motivation and engagement can be an up-and-down experience for kids, particularly for students from historically marginalized communities: students of color, students with disabilities, and students who have experienced financial hardship.

One student, David, who fell into multiple demographics just listed, was a "Jekyll-and-Hyde" reader. One week, he was ecstatic about reading because he found a book he loved (and seemed annoyed when I disrupted his reading for the interview). A week later, David stated that he "hated reading." When I asked him to "say more about that," he pursed his lips and was silent, as if he was afraid of what might come out. He didn't need to; I had heard from our school social worker that there were some domestic issues at home.

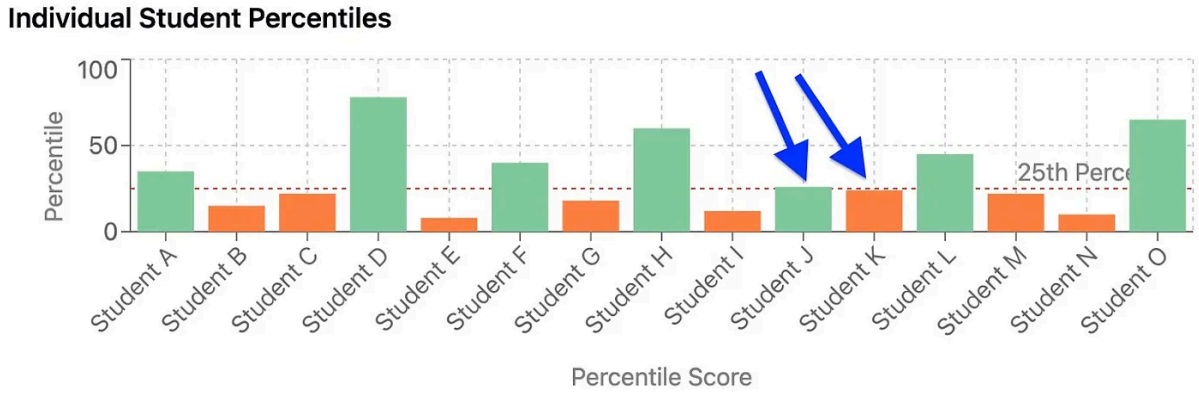
Things must have improved outside of school because the following week, David was up in front of his peers, proudly blessing a book he recently finished. You wouldn't know this about him as a reader from his traditional assessment scores alone.

The Reader We Choose to See

I haven't met anyone who follows the Science of Reading movement and doesn't have good intentions. They view a phonics-first, scripted literacy curriculum as a way to guarantee that each student has access to effective instruction.

What this view does, however, is create blinders. The screeners, diagnostics, and tests used for assessing reading also shape our perception of our students as readers. If they don't show a certain level of proficiency in oral reading fluency, students are deemed in need of a personal reading plan. Simple scores lead to simple stories.

All stories about readers are constructed. People determine which programs to use, which assessments to administer, and where the cut score lies.



For example, in Wisconsin, where I reside, students who score below the 25th percentile on an oral reading fluency screener are flagged as potentially needing intervention. That cutoff is arbitrary—the difference between the 24th and 25th percentile might be just a few words per minute on a single-day assessment. The student who scored at the 24th percentile could have had a rough night at home and didn't get much sleep. However, because we aren't looking beyond a single assessment, we make assumptions about who our students are as readers.

The problem goes beyond identifying who struggles; it's understanding *why* they struggle. Valencia and Buly's (2004) study of 108 students who failed a state reading test found that students fail for dramatically different reasons. For instance, placing all struggling students in a phonics program would be inappropriate for 58% of students in their sample who already had adequate or strong word identification skills. Similarly, approaches that didn't address fluency would miss 70% of students who struggled in this area. When we treat all test failure as the same problem, we guarantee that the majority of students won't get what they actually need.

Conclusions based on single scores lead educators with good intentions to make decisions that can result in inequitable outcomes. These mismatches between what students need and what they receive compound existing inequalities. Students from historically marginalized communities are more likely to be negatively impacted. Their cultures and backgrounds are often undervalued compared to their white affluent peers. For example, as H. Richard Milner IV warns, "educators may set Black students up for failure when they refuse to recognize or do not have the frames to identify language and literacy assets, strengths, skills, dispositions, mind-sets, and practices that these students already possess and bring into a classroom" (2020).

Below is a sample of how these additions can lead to reductions in student access.

What gets added via the SoR movement	**What gets removed that students need**
Scripted curricula	Voice and choice, robust classroom libraries
Limits on responsive instruction	Teacher professionalism
Isolated skill practice, decontextualized texts	Authentic tasks, culturally relevant texts
Assessments that measure what is easy	Time to read and talk with peers

These outcomes disproportionately affect schools that serve students of color and students living in financial hardship. The gap widens between the Davids of the world and the students who traditionally score well on standardized tests. It leads to simple stories from some staff, attributing these outcomes to students' backgrounds. The system removes what students need—choice, culturally relevant texts, authentic reading—students disengage, and then we point to their disengagement as proof they need even more phonics drills.

Imagine if David had not had access to books that were relevant to him, or if he lacked the opportunity to talk with peers about these texts. Imagine if his daily literacy experience at school was a steady diet of isolated skill practice and reading required texts that held little personal meaning for him. How would his test scores, and more importantly, his ability to read and his affinity for reading have been impacted? Foundational reading skills are important, but not at the expense of removing the joy and relevance from students' reading lives.

Design for the Edges

Todd Rose, a Harvard professor and former classroom teacher, found that when we create educational experiences for the average student, no one truly fits. In his TED Talk, he uses the story of the Air Force from the 1950s to make his point. They had good pilots and advanced jet technology at the time, but worse results. After blaming the pilots, technology, and flight

instructors, the Air Force finally realized that the cockpits are the problem. They were designed for the average pilot. A researcher, Gilbert Daniels, showed that, after studying 4000 pilots, not one of them was “average”. The Air Force designed cockpits “for nobody”, Rose points out.

The solution: The Air Force refused to buy planes from the companies until they started designing them for the edges. After some initial resistance, including concerns that this type of change would be too costly, these companies developed novel and inexpensive solutions. Most notable of these innovations was something we take for granted today: **adjustable car seats**.

But the benefits didn’t stop there. Creating more adaptive cockpits opened up the opportunities for who could be a pilot, including women and individuals at the edge of different dimensions of body size.

What does designing for the edges look like in the ELA classroom? How can these ideas support not just students becoming better at reading, but also at becoming confident readers? We stop designing for the average reader—because that reader doesn't exist.

Try it and Apply it: Co-Organize Your Classroom Libraries with Students

Teachers may feel they have little control over mandated curriculum. What they have significant control over are their classroom libraries and how students engage with them. Organizing, stocking, and managing classroom libraries with students creates differentiated access to texts that represent their interests and identities. Teachers are shaping the reading environment through the readers’ experience. As a principal, you can create the permission structure for this work.

Here's how to support this in your building:

1. Identify interested teachers. At your next staff meeting, share the co-organizing classroom library approach: students work together to categorize, organize, and manage the texts in ways that make sense to them, creating ownership and agency. Ask: "Who would be interested in trying this as a project?" Consider offering a stipend for the students and teacher to purchase new books as an incentive.

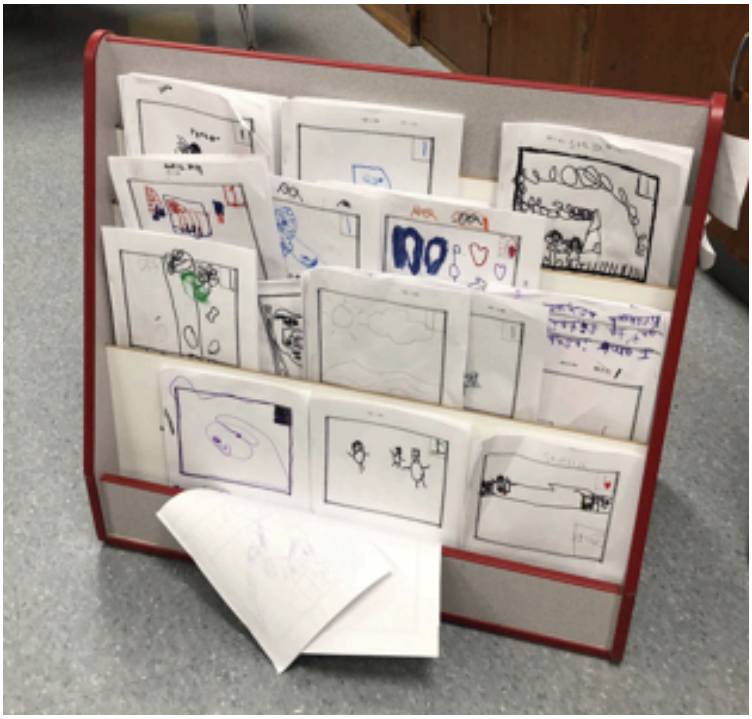
2. Provide resources and time. Support interested teachers with:

- Clear bins, labels, and markers (small budget item, big impact)
- Dedicated class time to launch the project
- Your presence as an observer or co-facilitato

3. Make the learning visible. Ask teachers to document what they notice:

- How do students organize classroom libraries differently from teachers?
- What categories emerged that revealed student interests?
- Has the usage of your classroom library by students changed?

4. Share the learning. Invite participating teachers to share their findings at a staff meeting. Ask: "What did students gain beyond just organizing books? What did you learn about student agency and reading identity?" This is also an opportunity for students and teachers to **connect reading with writing**. In my previous school, classrooms wrote letters together reflecting on the co-organizing experience and publishing their writing online. Kindergarten students even contributed their own writing to the classroom library. They became writers, not just readers.



5. Scale thoughtfully. Don't immediately mandate this practice. Instead, create conditions where teachers see colleagues having success and choose to try it themselves. Offer to visit classrooms, take photos, and highlight this work in your communications to families and the school board.

One pathway to equity is providing more choice and voice for students in the classroom. When you support teachers in returning power to students, even in something as simple as library organization, you signal that students' perspectives matter, that agency is essential to learning, and that "designing for the edges" means honoring how different readers make meaning.

David was able to become the reader he was meant to be because his teacher had the professional autonomy to respond to his needs. Your role as a principal is to create the

conditions where all teachers feel empowered to do the same: noticing how each student responds and adjusting their practices, rather than trying to fix the child.

(For more information on co-organizing classroom libraries, share this article with interested teachers: https://readbyexample.substack.com/p/classroom-libraries-who-owns-the)

#4 - One science is dependent on another.

"I search for questions that need answers."
- Marie Clay, *Change Over Time in Children's Literacy Development*

I didn't truly become a reader until my 3rd grade teacher read aloud *Tales of a 4th Grade Nothing* by Judy Blume. Years of phonics lessons and worksheets didn't stick like the world of Peter Hatcher and the antics of his younger brother, Fudge. After the read-aloud was done, I reread my own copy, which I bought from a Troll book order, until the pages began to fall apart from the spine.

While I wasn't aware of the skills I was using as I read that book over and over, I was applying more than just phonics.

- For example, after the read-aloud, I probably had a goal in my reread: I wanted to revisit the funniest parts from the story, those that made me laugh out loud without a care during class.
- Another reread likely helped me pay attention to the family dynamics and how they connected with my own experiences. I developed a deeper understanding of the messy nature of relationships with siblings, parents, and friends.
- An appreciation for Blume's writing craft led me to write my own fan fiction based on this book. (I still have the homemade text, my first book.)

What we know today about what is going on in a reader's mind goes beyond decoding. Factors besides basic skills and strategies are what make a reader and writer.

No Theory, No Action

A problem with strict adherence to a program or singular philosophy is that when instruction isn't working for students, teachers don't know what to do next. They lean on a program through thick and thin. A few of my former elementary teachers meant well, but by prioritizing the prescribed curriculum over meeting the needs of each student, some were left behind.

This topic came up during a conversation with two experienced literacy educators, Denise and Sandy. They were observing a similar troubling pattern emerging in how schools are approaching reading instruction.

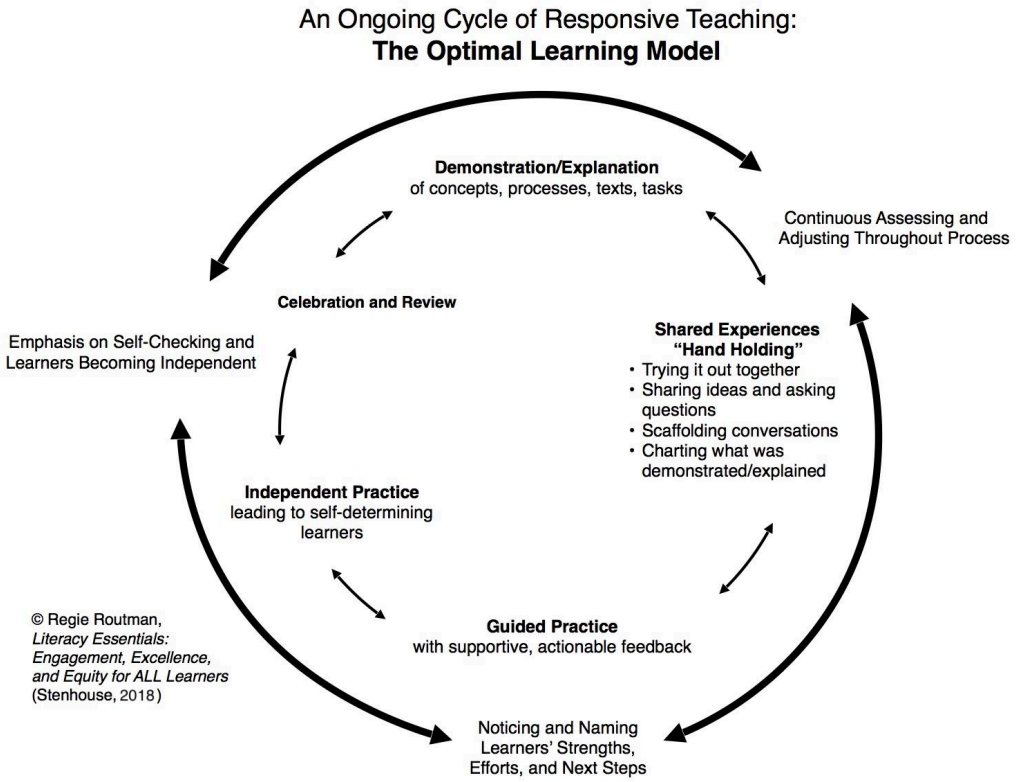
"The assessments are extremely narrow," Denise observed. "There's typically an assessment of phonemic awareness, and that's it." She contrasted this with comprehensive literacy assessment approaches that examine all aspects of reading development - including students' attitudes about reading and their motivation to read.

Sandy affirmed this gap in current scripted approaches: "The big thing that's missing is the transfer piece. How does instruction apply when students go off to be independent readers?"

She pointed to a common misconception in the science of reading movement: "They think, 'The students don't know something, so I need to teach it to them. And once I teach it to them, they'll be readers.' But becoming a reader isn't simply a matter of skill acquisition."

Sandy noted that at the root of these problems lies a lack of a theoretical framework. "Science of reading - I don't know what their theory is. They talk about 'sequential' and 'direct, explicit instruction', but that's not a theory."

Without a coherent theory of how children learn to read, educators can't make informed decisions when the plan falls apart. They lack the professional knowledge to adapt and meet individual student needs. They're left with two options: keep following the script, or start questioning. If the mandate is made by state legislation or administration to follow the script with fidelity, that questioning feels professionally risky.



Curiosity is at the heart of any strong literacy theory of action. We need to ask questions instead of casting blame when students don't respond as we had hoped to our instruction. One example is Regie Routman's Optimal Learning Model. It positions the student at the center of teaching and learning. Explicit instruction is not defined as "I taught it, and students need to learn it." Explicit instruction is found through the perspective of the students - what is their level of understanding and readiness for what I am trying to teach? What support(s) will they need to be successful? Without such frameworks to guide our decisions, the "science of reading" becomes whatever publishers are selling.

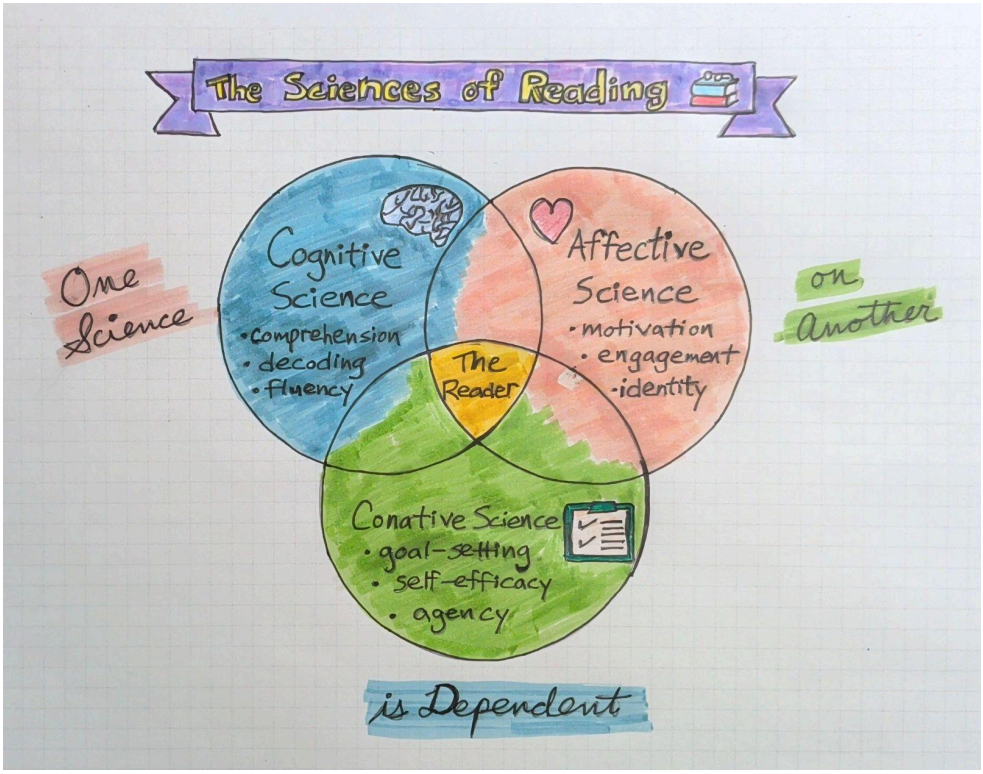
The Sciences of Reading

In his book *Teaching Readers (Not Reading),* Peter Afflerbach refers to the three different domains of reading development as "sciences". It's a refutation of the Science of Reading movement's attempt to create a sense of exclusivity of what counts as science. The plural "sciences" also creates language to recognize how each domain depends on the other two to effectively teach the whole reader, all of which he argues must be attended to together, not ranked or treated as either/or.

He offers a definition for the different sciences/domains, each supported with a robust amount of research in his book.

- **Cognitive science of reading** - Focuses on the *thinking* work of reading: strategies and skills for constructing meaning (decoding, vocabulary, comprehension strategies, metacognition, executive function). This is the part most curricula and tests emphasize, often narrowly as "strategies and skills", which he refers to as a "partial science" of reading.
- **Affective science of reading** - Focuses on *feelings* and *attitudes* about reading: motivation, interest, engagement, self-efficacy, and the positive or negative emotions students attach to reading. Readers who associate reading with enjoyment and success are more likely to continue reading, strengthening their skills over time.
- **Conative science of reading** - Focuses on *will*, *effort*, and *purposeful action*: perseverance, goal-setting, agency, autonomy, and accountability. Conation is about the reader's willingness to begin, persist, and complete reading tasks, to see effort as tied to outcomes, and to take responsibility for their own reading growth.

Afflerbach's central claim is that reading achievement emerges from the interaction of these domains—cognitive, affective, and conative—so teaching reading as only strategies and skills is fundamentally incomplete compared to teaching readers within all three sciences.



As a 3rd grader, I benefited from actions by my teacher that aligned with all three sciences working together.

1. **Affective**: I was fully engaged with the story during the read-aloud. This was evident in my laughter and in the sense of disappointment I felt when the teacher stopped reading at the end of a chapter.
2. **Conative**: I purposefully orchestrated my attention toward the text while rereading the story, paying special attention to the humorous scenes. My teacher allowed me to read the same book again, providing voice and choice along with access to relevant texts.
3. **Cognitive**: Through repeated readings, my understanding of the themes of the text deepened. I was able to apply the craft moves Judy Blume was making, such as dialogue, to my own writing that emulated *Tales of a 4th Grade Nothing*.

Yes, foundational reading skills also came into play, but were more of a backdrop to the more complex and nuanced aspects as I became a reader. You will also notice what came first: the science of motivation and engagement (affective). My initial desire for enjoyment was an entry point to more purposeful and cognitively stimulating reading experiences.

This was my personal journey to becoming a reader. It's not something you can prescribe. Students find their way to lifelong literacy through authentic experiences with texts, not scripts.

Try it and Apply it: Read Professionally Through a Critical Lens

Most commercial programs come with professional development, but it's typically designed to support implementation of that specific resource—not to broaden your understanding of reading development. To build genuine expertise, you'll need to create your own professional learning curriculum.

I recommend the following journals as a good place to begin or continue your learning.

- International Literacy Association (ILA): *The Reading Teacher, Reading Research Quarterly*
- National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE): *English Journal, Voices From the Middle, Language Arts*
- Phi Delta Kappan: *Kappan Magazine*
- ASCD: *Educational Leadership*

Subscribing to these journals gives you access to more diverse and credible perspectives than you will find in a closed online group or one consultant's blog. The articles are peer-reviewed and highly respected by the field. Nothing gets published without a thorough critique of what is written and how it is supported by a body of research.

As you read an article, highlight parts that resonate with you. Write in the margins what is affirming, interesting, or disturbing. At the end of the article, take a few minutes to reflect on what you just read. Did the author(s) offer a holistic and comprehensive viewpoint of teaching readers? If not, what "science" was missing from their position?

Synthesize your knowledge by writing a short summary of what you learned and sharing it in your next staff newsletter. You benefit from writing about what you are learning with a deeper understanding of the topic. Your teachers benefit from your newly developed knowledge. Your culture benefits from the introduction of new ideas - maintaining openness and counteracting rigidity. Everyone knows where their leader stands on these issues. Over time, you will develop or enhance your own theory of action that teachers will look to with respect and confidence.

#5 - You can’t buy the Science of Reading.

“[B]raiding allows us a metaphor to think about a different mode of teaching and learning, a lens for reflecting on the ways we are connected to one another and as a practice that teaches us something about how we can be teachers and learners in community. Although braiding is by no means a universal practice among Black or Native people, it is a place where we converge; a braid can represent the relationship between mind, body, and spirit, or can represent pride in oneself and one's community, or can be an act of radical self-care.”

- Eve Ewing, *Original Sins: The (Mis)education of Black and Native Children and the Construction of American Racism*, pg. 267.

Reading development happens in *relationship* - between teacher and student, between learners in community, between the reader and meaningful texts. It cannot be purchased, only cultivated.

Here's one example of what that looked like in practice:

The student dreaded reading intervention. The moment his teacher called his name, he'd shut down. Sometimes he would refuse to leave the classroom entirely. The reading interventionist knew something had to change.

Learning more about the student’s background and interests, the teacher decided to place a venus flytrap in her room. She invited this student to feed the plant a dead fly every time they came to work with her. In addition, the teacher integrated texts around this and related topics.

The result after several weeks:

- a small pile of dead flies next to the venus flytrap (the student started bringing his own food supply, and the teacher had to limit how much they were feeding the plant)
- a more engaged and competent reader

You won't find this approach marketed as “aligned with the Science of Reading.” Not because it lacks evidence or effectiveness, but because the student's success relied on something curriculum companies can't package: teacher ingenuity, engagement and interest, and authentic relationships.

Cool Logic, Warm Reality

I've thought about this example while noticing that almost every literacy curriculum program available to schools states it is aligned with the Science of Reading.

In my previous role as a principal, our school went through a literacy curriculum acquisition process. Every program we reviewed had the SoR stamp of credibility. And because many of these resources come from major publishers familiar to educators, the default response is trust in a commercial product and not curiosity and knowledge about how to reach and teach our actual readers.

There is a cool logic to the way these programs get marketed, as if we are buying a new refrigerator or washing machine with a 5-year warranty.

- "Aligned with the science of reading"
- "Research-based, evidence-backed"
- "Comprehensive literacy solution"

This pattern isn't new. In 1998, Oakland implemented a phonics-heavy program, with similar promises and media attention. Research on the program later showed negative effects on students' reading comprehension, particularly with complex texts. The program was eventually abandoned. Now Oakland appears to be repeating the cycle with different SoR-aligned programs (Aukerman, 2022). The problem isn't that districts lack commitment; it's that we keep expecting curriculum purchases to solve problems that require teacher expertise and relationships.

What often gets forgotten is the warm reality of actual classrooms is students and teachers enjoy most:

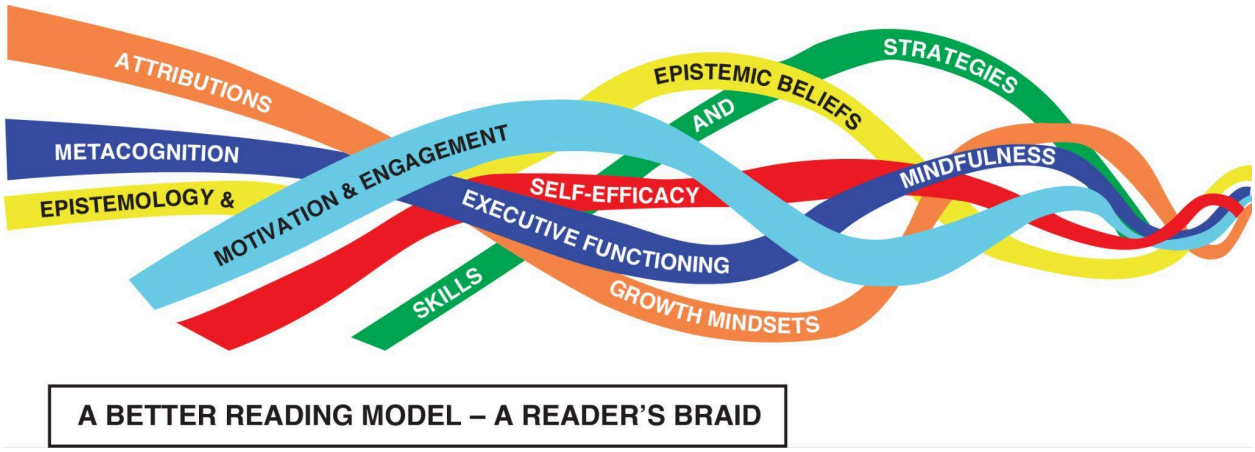
- Time for independent reading and read-aloud
- Robust classroom libraries with authentic texts
- Voice and choice in what to read and write
- Professional learning that goes beyond program implementation

I understand the latter is harder to package. Support to build relationships and respond to individual students requires a long-term investment in teachers to utilize a resource from a place of authenticity. It's easier to lead these initiatives through the lens of implementing a program with fidelity. Yet a curriculum resource separated from a school's shared beliefs, instructional framework, and students' needs only serves itself.

A Reader's Braid

In the previous section, I made the case that one science of reading is dependent on another. Peter Afflerbach breaks reading down even further, describing factors within each domain that influence students' reading development. He notes that all of these factors "demand our attention when we are teaching readers" and insists "we cannot attend to one at the expense of another, and we cannot rank order their importance" (2022, pg. 9)

Reading development requires multiple, interconnected factors. I've created a visual metaphor for how these work together: *a reader's braid*.



It's an iteration on Scarborough's reading rope, in which several skills that comprise word recognition and language comprehension (the two parts of the Simple View of Reading equation) are wound together to represent skilled reading. Like the Simple View of Reading, it's not wrong, just incomplete.

With the reader's braid, skills and strategies are one of multiple factors that support the development of *a skilled reader.* We are not tasked with simply teaching students to decode and comprehend at a proficient level. We have an obligation to show students how to:

- Activate their minds and self-monitor as one engages in reading (executive functioning, metacognition),
- Build a lifelong love for reading through motivation and engagement,
- Be a critical reader and explore diverse ways of knowing and understanding (epistemology),
- Instill a belief that being a lifelong reader leads to benefits across one's life (attributions, growth mindset), and

- Build confidence as a reader by reflecting on our efforts and how they contribute to our growth (self-efficacy).

The Reader's Braid model also conveys the interdependence of these different factors; when one breaks down, others are affected.

I saw this with our intervention student. He was flagged for more support due to a need for **skill and strategy** development. But he was likely avoiding going with the interventionist because he had a history of unsuccessful reading events (**self-efficacy**) and would rather avoid that painful experience. The benefits didn't outweigh the costs (**growth mindset**). I also suspected this student struggled with **executive functioning**; he couldn't yet self-regulate the complicated emotions he was feeling from attributing his lack of success as a reader to who he was as a person. The interventionist employed **motivation and engagement** - a Venus flytrap - to begin reshaping this student's relationship with reading. Over time, the relationship she fostered with this student became the leverage point for becoming a more skilled and strategic reader.

The teacher I am describing had decades of experience and study to support her (she was a Reading Recovery teacher leader, an expert in both literacy and pedagogy). What about us as leaders who may not have that depth and breadth in teaching readers? We can begin by building our own beliefs about high-quality reading instruction with the teachers we support.

Try it and Apply it: Develop Shared Literacy Beliefs

So far, you have been invited to:

- Expand your intervention selection process to consider measures beyond skill acquisition,
- Facilitate a professional conversation with faculty around the Science of Reading movement,
- Empower your teachers to differentiate for each and every student through co-organizing their classroom libraries, and
- Become more knowledgeable about reading instruction through professional reading.

Each of these steps sets the stage for one of the most important actions you can take as a leader: developing shared literacy beliefs with your faculty.

A belief is an expressed statement of what one knows to be true. They operate like values, only more explicit. For example, in my previous school as a principal, we used belief statements about reading from Regie Routman's book *Read, Write, Lead* (pg. 289, Appendix C). She lists over 20 statements about reading instruction that either affirm or contradict what we know today to be effective for teaching readers.

Our Beliefs About Reading for Understanding

1. Choice in what students read and how much they read influences motivation and achievement.
2. The easiest texts for English learners to understand are those in which the concepts and vocabulary are familiar.
3. Students can have good comprehension even if they do not read well orally.
4. Rereading is an excellent strategy when comprehension breaks down.
5. Students need to do lots of independent reading of self-selected texts.

Below is a sample of four statements. Test yourself by deciding if you agree or disagree, and add a rationale for your position on each statement.

1. "Reading is always about meaning making."
2. "Competition and outside rewards motivate students to read more."
3. "Most vocabulary is learned through widespread reading."
4. "Leveling books in the classroom library is a good idea."

Now check your responses with the following positions.

1. "Reading is always about meaning making." **True**. We read for meaning, whether it's basic comprehension of a text, to make sense of the world and take on another person's or character's perspective, or to better understand ourselves. Surprisingly, this can be a contentious statement; too many Science of Reading-aligned materials and practices treat meaning-making as secondary to decoding.
2. "Competition and outside rewards motivate students to read more." False. Rewards can work for a short while, but extrinsic motivators for reading can actually decrease students' motivation for reading in the long run. Kids finishing a book to get their required Accelerated Reader points may come to see reading as a chore, just another act of compliance required by school.
3. "Most vocabulary is learned through widespread reading." **True**. While explicit vocabulary instruction can be helpful, for example, understanding the etymology of root words, there needs to be opportunities to apply this knowledge to actual reading experiences. What we know about the *sciences* of reading tells us that what students read and how much agency they have in what to read matters just as much as how to read.
4. "Leveling books in the classroom library is a good idea." **False**. Using leveled books in a small, guided reading group is appropriate for emerging and early readers. But when

teachers constantly level books for students, they are taking away an opportunity for them to become more self-directed and self-monitoring readers. Students need to be able to preview books, see if they are a good fit, and even challenge themselves at times. That's how people grow. Leveled libraries place artificial limits on what students can read.

Go through this same process with your teachers at a staff meeting or a professional learning day.

1. Use Regie Routman's list of reading beliefs and have teachers select "agree" or "disagree" in a digital form.
2. Share the results with the staff once everyone has taken the survey.
3. Set up small groups, breaking up grade levels or departments, and facilitate a conversation about the results.
4. Bring the whole group back and debrief about the experience.
5. Close out the conversation by celebrating the beliefs with which you found unanimous agreement.

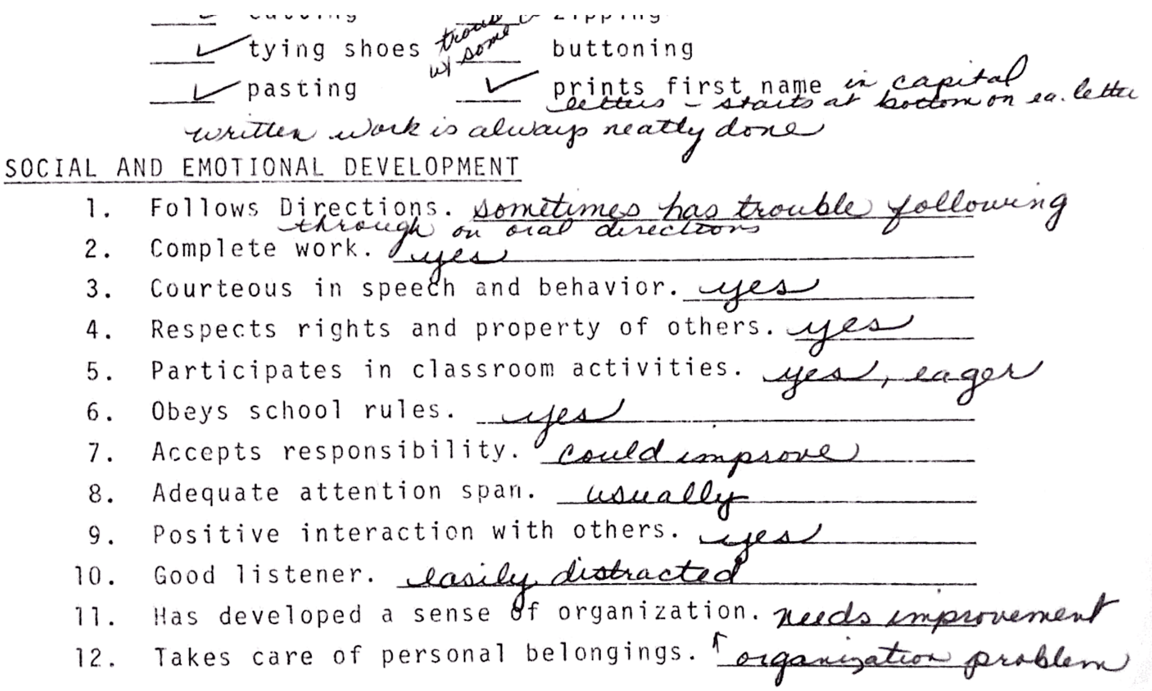
Now you have an excellent artifact of your school's literacy culture. These shared beliefs can serve several purposes.

- **Make these beliefs become the new normal.** As a principal, I had a local printer design posters and covers for notebooks that I handed out to faculty. The message was clear: we own these beliefs by embedding them in our instructional practice. I then had the confidence to provide feedback to teachers on their alignment with them.
- **Use your shared beliefs to drive professional learning**. For example, our shared belief "Easy access to books students can and want to read is crucial to readers' success" was not consistently observed in every classroom that I visited. Some teachers were still leveling books or doing all of the organizing and managing of the resources. We spent several professional learning sessions creating collective commitments to be clear about what "easy access" meant in our school.
- **Embed your shared beliefs in your school's decision-making process.** Not sure which teacher to hire during the interview process? Develop questions that will surface each candidate's beliefs about reading and check for alignment. Overwhelmed by all the Science-of-Reading curriculum materials available to purchase? Use your shared beliefs as a lens through which you decide on this important process.

Let your beliefs drive your decisions around literacy practices and resources. Otherwise, the resources and individuals that enter your school culture will shape what you believe.

Conclusion

While I fondly remember my reading “epiphany” in 3rd grade, my overall school experience was not always an enjoyable one. I struggled to pay attention to the teacher’s instruction when I did not find the topic interesting. I was “easily distracted”.


✓ tying shoes — trouble w/ some — buttoning

✓ pasting — ✓ prints first name in capital letters – starts at bottom on ea. letter

written work is always neatly done

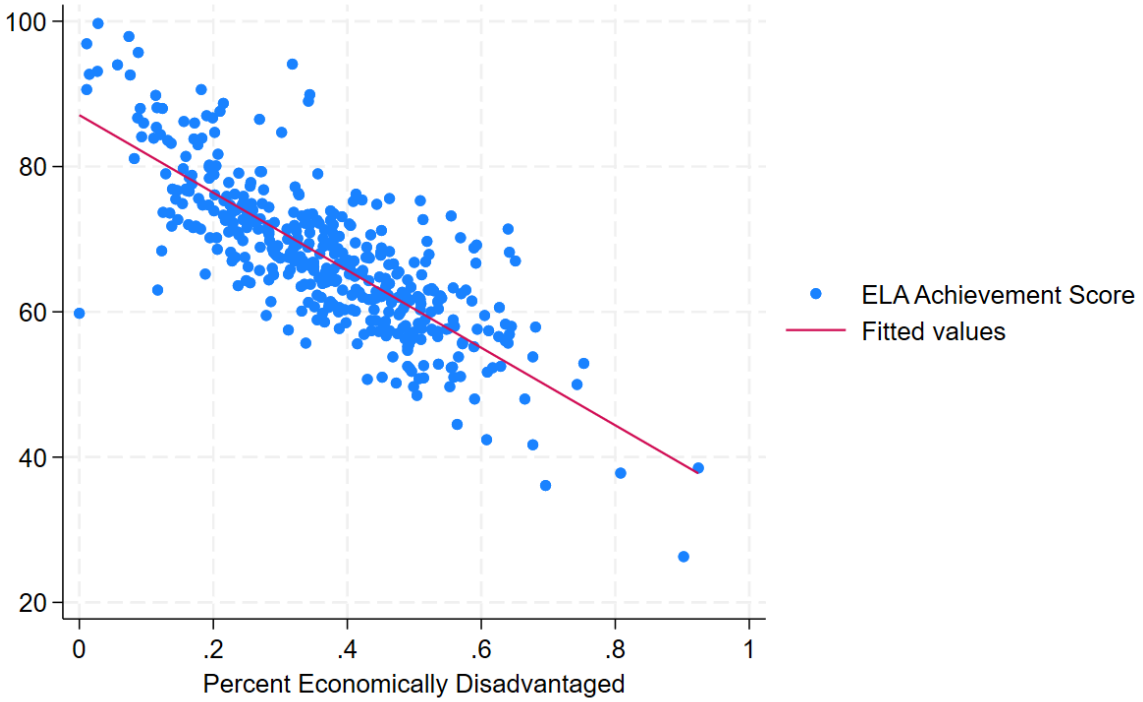
SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

1. Follows Directions. sometimes has trouble following through on oral directions
2. Complete work. yes
3. Courteous in speech and behavior. yes
4. Respects rights and property of others. yes
5. Participates in classroom activities. yes, eager
6. Obeys school rules. yes
7. Accepts responsibility. could improve
8. Adequate attention span. usually
9. Positive interaction with others. yes
10. Good listener. easily distracted
11. Has developed a sense of organization. needs improvement
12. Takes care of personal belongings. organization problem

Image: Comments on my elementary school report card

These challenges with executive functioning influenced my reading instruction. I remember being demoted to a lower reading group because I was continuously bringing my basal reader to guided reading stuffed with half-finished worksheets. Instructional decisions were being made not based on my abilities as a reader but on my ability to organize paperwork.

I share this anecdote as we consider what influences student reading outcomes. Below is a scatterplot of ELA achievement scores for all Wisconsin school districts in the 2024-2025 school year.



As you can see, there's a strong correlation between the percentage of students considered economically disadvantaged and achievement levels on state reading assessments. Economic disadvantage accounts for approximately 63% of the variance in ELA achievement across these districts.

But poverty is not destiny. What about the remaining 37% of variance that influences outcomes in schools? What would it look like for a Science of Reading policy to actually support teachers in addressing these systemic inequities?

This is a question any school leader can ask and investigate. I know, because I did. In my last year as a principal, I identified schools that had a similar demographics to our building and had high levels of ELA achievement. Then I cold-called their leaders to ask what they were doing to get such great outcomes in spite of their challenges. Here is what I learned:

- **No two schools were using the same ELA resource.** Each building had adopted a different reading program.
- While there was variance in the resources implemented across schools, what was consistent was **an expected commitment to effective practices.** In one building, a principal shared that a teacher wasn't initially willing to adhere to the school's beliefs and values. The principal mentioned to the teacher, respectfully, that working in another school was an option if they couldn’t commit to their school.

- Combined with these curriculum and instruction commitments was **holding high expectations for each and every student** in the school. The leaders in these schools communicated this consistently. I gently tested one principal, wondering if a student with autism who was noncommunicative could be held to high standards. "Doesn't matter," he stated. "Every student. What that looks like for certain students may vary a bit, but we are expect every kid is appropriately challenged and growing."
- Those expectations extended to how **intervention and special education services were delivered within the general classroom.** As much as possible, students received support through co-teaching or push-in services. Common planning time allowed classroom and special education teachers to coordinate around upcoming instruction. The degree of inclusion varied—one school used a full push-in model while another estimated about half of their interventions occurred in the classroom—but the commitment to keeping students in the least restrictive environment was consistent.
- Coupled with high expectations were **high levels of faculty support.** Professional learning was a mainstay in these schools. Leaders didn't just purchase a curriculum, provide a 1-2 day training, and then assume teachers were prepared. Investments in teachers as professionals were made: time, resources, collaboration, and coaching.

Do you notice what's not on this list? None of these principals mentioned their curriculum program as a core influence on their success. All of them listed cultural conditions as primary factors—the things that don't come in a box and are within our control as leaders. These schools offered compelling case studies to support the points made in this paper.

- High expectations paired with high levels of support help ensure teachers can and will meet students where they are at.
- No single curriculum or approach will address a school's complex needs.
- Embracing a culturally responsive and inclusive model for instruction can address systemic inequities.
- Investment in teachers' professional knowledge so they teach readers, not just reading.
- A commitment to principled practices over off-the-shelf programs.

This work is harder than buying a program. It requires ongoing inquiry, professional learning, and the courage to question mandates. It's also the work that serves students.

How do you create these conditions in your school? Not alone. Each of the "Try it and Apply it" activities throughout this guide—facilitating article studies, expanding assessment practices, co-organizing classroom libraries, developing shared beliefs—requires distributed leadership. The mechanism for building and sustaining this work is an instructional leadership team. See the next page for the five suggested leadership strategies for action, and Appendix A for a process to select and support teacher-leaders who can shepherd this paradigm shift with you.

What School Leaders Need to Know About the Science of Reading

One Pager: Five Strategies for Action

#1 - Teaching reading is not simple

Try It: Expand Your Intervention Selection Process

Go beyond oral reading fluency. Include: attendance, behavior, current/past supports, English proficiency, teacher observations.

Goal: Build a whole-child perspective that honors the complexity of reading development.

#2 - The science is anything but settled

Try It: Facilitate a Professional Conversation with an Article Study

Use Rachael Gabriel's "The Sciences of Reading Instruction" (*Educational Leadership*): (1) Share article ahead; (2) Review norms, assign process checker; (3) Use Four A's Protocol; (4) Heterogeneous groups; (5) Debrief.

Goal: Create conditions for true inquiry; embrace that the science is not settled.

#3 - Good intentions can lead to inequitable outcomes

Try It: Co-Organize Classroom Libraries with Students

Support teachers in returning agency: (1) Identify interested teachers; (2) Provide bins, labels, time; (3) Document how students organize differently; (4) Share findings at a staff meeting; (5) Scale organically.

Goal: Signal that students' perspectives matter; honor how different readers make meaning.

#4 - One science is dependent on another

Try It: Read Professionally Through a Critical Lens

Build expertise beyond programs: Subscribe to journals (*The Reading Teacher, Educational Leadership, Language Arts*). Highlight resonant parts, note what's affirming/interesting/disturbing. Reflect: What "science" was missing? Share summaries in newsletters.

Goal: Develop your own theory of action that helps you engage in professional conversations.

#5 - You can't buy the Science of Reading

Try It: Develop Shared Literacy Beliefs

Use Regie Routman's belief statements (*Read, Write, Lead*, Appendix C): (1) Teachers agree/disagree; (2) Share results; (3) Small-group conversations; (4) Whole-group debrief; (5) Celebrate agreements. Use beliefs as shared expectations, drive professional learning, and guide decisions (hiring, curriculum).

Goal: Let beliefs drive decisions rather than letting resources shape beliefs.

These strategies assume you are creating conditions where teachers feel brave enough to question, explore, and grow—not where they fear professional risk for deviating from mandated scripts.

Appendix: Building Your Instructional Leadership Team*

Each of the "Try it and Apply it" activities in this guide assumes you have teacher-leaders working alongside you. You cannot do this work alone. The mechanism for creating sustainable change is an instructional leadership team—not a committee where people sign up out of guilt or obligation, but a carefully selected group of teachers who demonstrate:

- a commitment to high expectations paired with high levels of support,
- willingness to question mandates and embrace complexity,
- ability to facilitate brave conversations about teaching readers, and
- openness to designing conditions that serve all students, not just the average.

When I called schools with similar demographics to mine that had high ELA achievement, I asked what they were doing to get such outcomes. None of them mentioned their curriculum program. What was consistent across these schools were cultural conditions:

- An expected commitment to effective practices, with principals willing to have direct conversations when teachers weren't adhering to the school's beliefs and values
- High expectations for each and every student, with leaders consistently communicating that every child would be appropriately challenged and growing
- Intervention and special education services delivered within the general classroom as much as possible, through co-teaching or push-in models
- High levels of faculty support through ongoing professional learning—not just a 1-2 day curriculum training, but sustained investments in teachers as professionals

These conditions don't emerge by accident. They are built and sustained by instructional leadership teams.

The Selection Process

I send out a role description and overall purpose to all staff. In addition, I include questions I will ask them during the interview. These questions are based on a relevant article that highlights promising practices. (A favorite article is from *Educational Leadership*, "Every Child, Every Day" by Richard Allington and Rachael Gabriel. Secondary leaders may find Chaunté Garrett's article "Relevant Curriculum is Equitable Curriculum" from the same journal helpful for this purpose.) The interview process and the article help filter those unwilling to adopt a broader perspective on behalf of the school and all students.

Teachers set up an appointment to interview with me. I do reach out to a few key teachers in the building and encourage them to apply for the team. They are individuals who have shown promise as teacher-leaders in their instruction, their positivity, and in their ability to take others' perspectives.

During the interview, I am an engaged listener, like our conversations at the end of an instructional walk. Technology is put away. While the experience resembles a formal interview, our time together usually becomes more of a conversation. Here is an example:

- Me: "What was surprising to you after reading the article?"
- Teacher: "Well, I found myself realizing that we don't have students writing every day in our classrooms, as the authors recommend."
- Me: "I have noticed that in other classrooms, too. As a potential member of our instructional leadership team, how do you think we might respond?"
- Teacher: (brief silence for her to think) "Maybe we could look at our school schedule and identify ways to better incorporate writing into the literacy block. We could also integrate writing in the content areas."
- Me: "I appreciate these ideas. They do not involve adding onto the day, but rather rethinking how we use our time. Let's make sure they become a part of a future conversation with the leadership team."

Every teacher who has ever interviewed with me has been accepted. (I let them know right after the interview is complete that they are "in".) We attract the right candidates because our intentions are made clear about the type of members we are looking for. If a candidate is not a good fit, offer to explain why when letting them know they were not accepted—an opportunity to coach. If they decline the feedback, that may be confirmation that they are not a good fit at this time.

We culminate the process with a celebration at the next staff meeting. New leadership team members are introduced to the rest of the faculty. This time is also used to remind everyone that this team is a decision-making body. While we will be visible in our work, such as sharing out agendas and opening meetings up for anyone to attend and listen, our group has the authority to determine our professional learning activities on behalf of staff, students, and the larger community. This transparency helps ensure that future decisions made will be met with less resistance.

Why This Process Matters

The process of interviewing teachers for instructional leadership team has many benefits:

- I can work smarter as a school leader. I do not have to be the source of all ideas.

- It professionalizes a sometimes-arbitrary committee and gives the team a larger and more important purpose.
- By sharing the roles and resources that would guide our work, the entire staff is aware of our schoolwide focus and the direction we would be heading in the future.

Establishing Clear Decision-Making

Once the instructional leadership team is formed, a first agenda item can be developing a decision-making matrix. Clarifying what it is the school will focus on and how it is determined forces everyone to make a commitment to what matters most right now. It also ensures that teacher-leaders understand what their role is during leadership conversations.

Regie Routman (2012) suggests breaking down the decision-making process into three areas: by consensus, by majority vote, and/or by the principal. Below is a start to the development of a decision-making matrix within each area.

Decisions Made by Consensus	**Decisions Made by Majority Vote**	**Decisions Made by the Principal**
Professional development focus, activities, and schedule	Acquisition of a new curriculum resource	Final selection for hiring a new teacher

You will notice that all these examples have an impact on schoolwide instruction. It is important to convey with faculty that the role of the instructional leadership team is focusing on teaching and learning, and how to continuously improve. Nonacademic decisions should be made outside the purview of this team, such as with a separate committee. Leadership team members appreciate the respect for their time and knowing that their insights make a positive difference on behalf of the school.

*This appendix is adapted from Chapter 4 of my book *Leading Like a C.O.A.C.H.: Five Strategies for Supporting Teaching and Learning* (Corwin, 2022).

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