ENGAGING LEARNERS

How to Teach Reading in Grades 6–12 (fast)! Even If No One Taught You How



Dr. Jenny French

IASP

Fall Conference

engaginglearners.com/iasp26



Dr. Jenny French

ELA teacher - Literacy Coach - Curriculum Director - Assistant Superintendent - Associate Professor - Curriculum Designer - Implementation Researcher - Educational Consultant



Agenda

01. **The Problems**

02. **The Research**

03. **The Solutions**

04. **The Implementation**

80% of School Initiatives Fail

1. Conflicting priorities (61%)
2. Inadequate funding
3. Teacher shortages
4. Limited implementation capacity
5. Insufficient pace & coordination



Initiative Fatigue is Caused by...

"The history of American education includes a graveyard of good ideas, condemned by pressure for fast results."
-Stigler & Hiebert, 1999

#1

Implementing multiple initiatives simultaneously, crowds out the effectiveness of even the best programs.

#2

External factors to improve performance: politics, bureaucracy, well-intentioned leaders

#3

Underestimating the energetic resources each initiative takes.



70% of students are NOT reading on grade level

80%+

The rate of reading failure is higher for minority groups.

49%

Students off college educated parents scored below basic reading proficiency in the state of CA.

NAEP, 2024

The Science of Reading

SCARBOROUGH'S (2001)

Reading Rope

3 +

K–2

Language Comprehension

Background Knowledge
(facts, concepts, etc.)

Vocabulary
(breadth, precision, links, etc.)

Language Structure
(syntax, semantics, etc.)

Verbal Reasoning
(inference, metaphor, etc.)

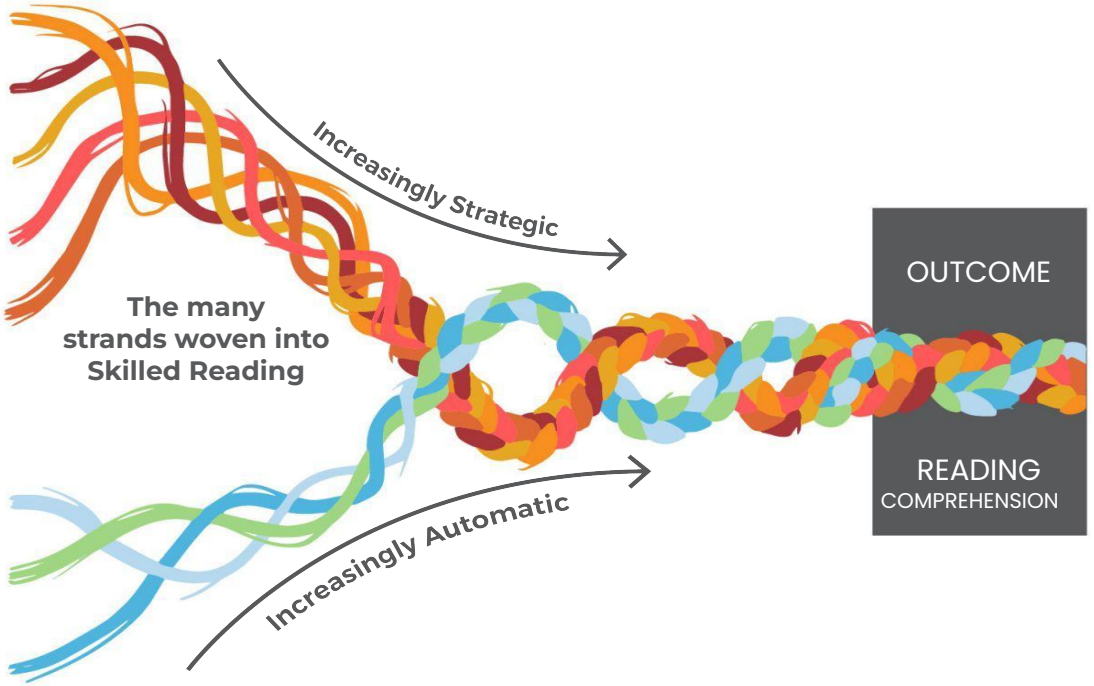
Literacy Knowledge
(print concepts, genres, etc.)

Word Recognition

Phonological Awareness
(syllables, phonemes, etc.)

Decoding
(alphabetic principle, spelling-sound correspondence)

Sight Recognition
(of familiar words)



THE SIMPLE VIEW OF READING

Gough and Tunmer, 1986

Word Recognition

Ability to transform print into spoken language.

X

Language Comprehension

Ability to understand spoken language.

=

Reading Comprehension

How do we know?

- ➔ Assessments should match the question we're asking.
- ➔ Most secondary assessments only test language comprehension skills.
- ➔ We must decouple assessments into both components.





Assessment Resources

DIBELS

1:1	**ORF (oral reading fluency)**
1:1	**NWF (nonsense word fluency)**
All	**Maze (comprehension)**
PAST 1:1	**Phonological Awareness Screening Test**

Tiered Pyramid of Instruction

Tier 3
Intensive Support
(~5%)



Tier 2
Targeted Support
(~15%)

Tier 1
Core Instruction
(~80% of students)

Intervention Can Only Support 20% of Students



SPECIAL EDUCATION

National average is 20%.

ENGLISH LEARNERS

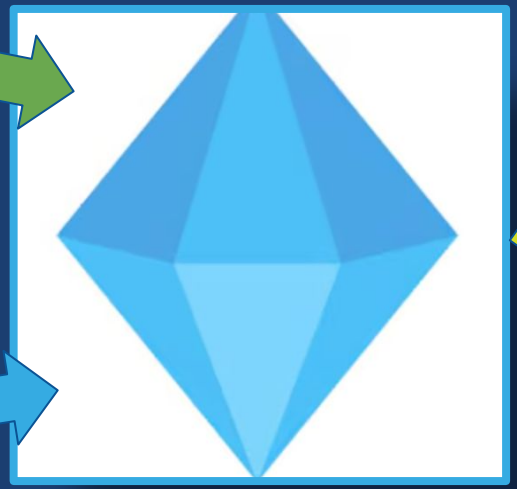
National average is 10%.

GIFTED & TALENTED

National average is 7%.

Federal data, 2025

Diamond of Instruction



Tier 3
Intensive Support
(~10%)

Tier 2
Targeted Support
(~70%)

Tier 1
Core Instruction
(~20% of students)

Reality

“We can’t intervene our way out of a Tier 1 problem.”

How are we addressing Tier 1?



Question:

How do I support my students who can't read, when I've been trained to teach content, not reading?

Question:

How can you do this in *non*-ELA courses?

How does this fit into a prescribed curriculum?

I only have 50 mins, how do I fit it all in?

3 Types of Non-Readers

Stuck in the Driveway

NON-DECODERS

Students who struggle with decoding and basic phonics.

TEACH

Explicit, systematic phonics
Phonemic awareness activities
Letter-sound practice and word building

ASSESS

DIBELS NWF, ORF
PAST
RAN

Gear Grinding

DYSFLUENT

Reading is slow, choppy, and interferes with comprehension.

TEACH

Repeated reading
Scooping
Prosody and pacing work

ASSESS

DIBELS ORF
Words Correct Per Min (WCPM)
Reading Rate, Expression

Lost on the Highway

NON-COMPREHENDERS

Fluent but do not consistently understand or retain what they read.

TEACH

Vocabulary development
Strategy instruction
Building background knowledge
Scaffolding complex texts

ASSESS

DIBELS MAZE
Retelling
Q&A

Who gets intervention?

INTERVENTION (TIER II & III)

Stuck in the Driveway

- Systematic, explicit decoding instruction by trained specialists
- Daily practice at independent level with age-respectful texts
- Your most skilled teachers with your highest-need students

TIER I CORE INSTRUCTION

Lost on the Highway and Gear Grinders

- Knowledge-rich curriculum used with fidelity
- Research-based literacy strategies in every content area
- The strategies you'll practice today

Foundational skills cannot be circumvented in the reading process.

Stuck in the Driveway
Non-decoders need . . .

Phonological Awareness

The ability to recognize and manipulate speech sounds is the foundation to learning print language.

Word Recognition

Phonological Awareness
(syllables, phonemes, etc.)

Decoding
(alphabetic principle, spelling-sound correspondence)

Sight Recognition
(of familiar words)





Age-respectful terminology:

“LINGUISTICS”

The Components of Linguistics:

WRITING
COMPREHENSION
FLUENCY
SENTENCES
WORDS
SYLLABLES
ONSET-RIME
SOUNDS



We have to train the brain to read.

Humans are hard-wired for spoken language.

If a child is surrounded by spoken language, will they learn to talk?

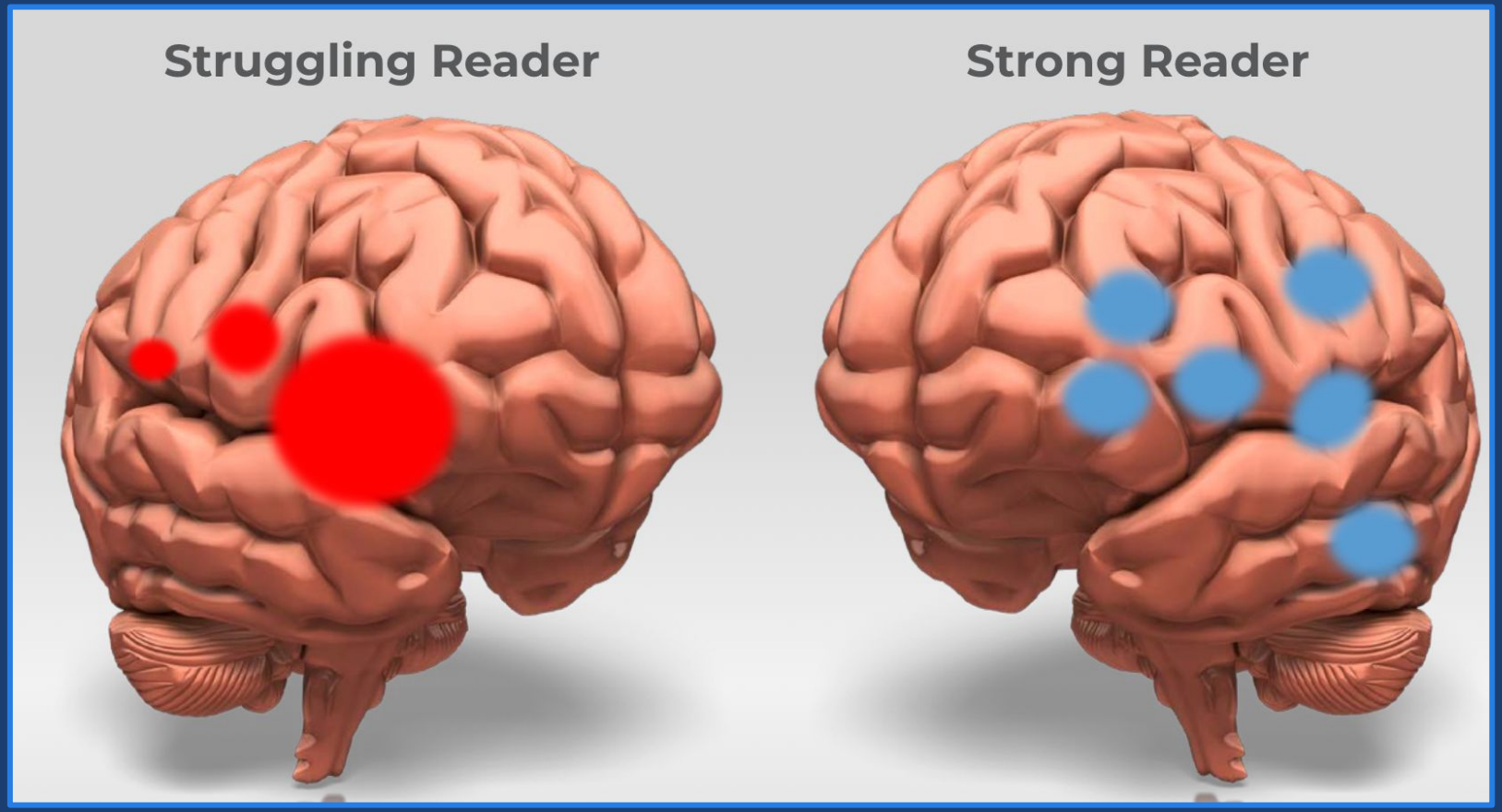


Human beings are not hard-wired for reading.

If children are surrounded by books, don't they just learn how to read?



The Reading Brain



IDENTIFY the number of phonemes (sounds):

ice

sigh

day

aid

choose

quake

IDENTIFY the number of phonemes (sounds):

pitched

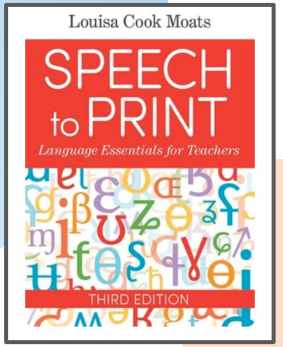
her

measure

boy

soothe

shout



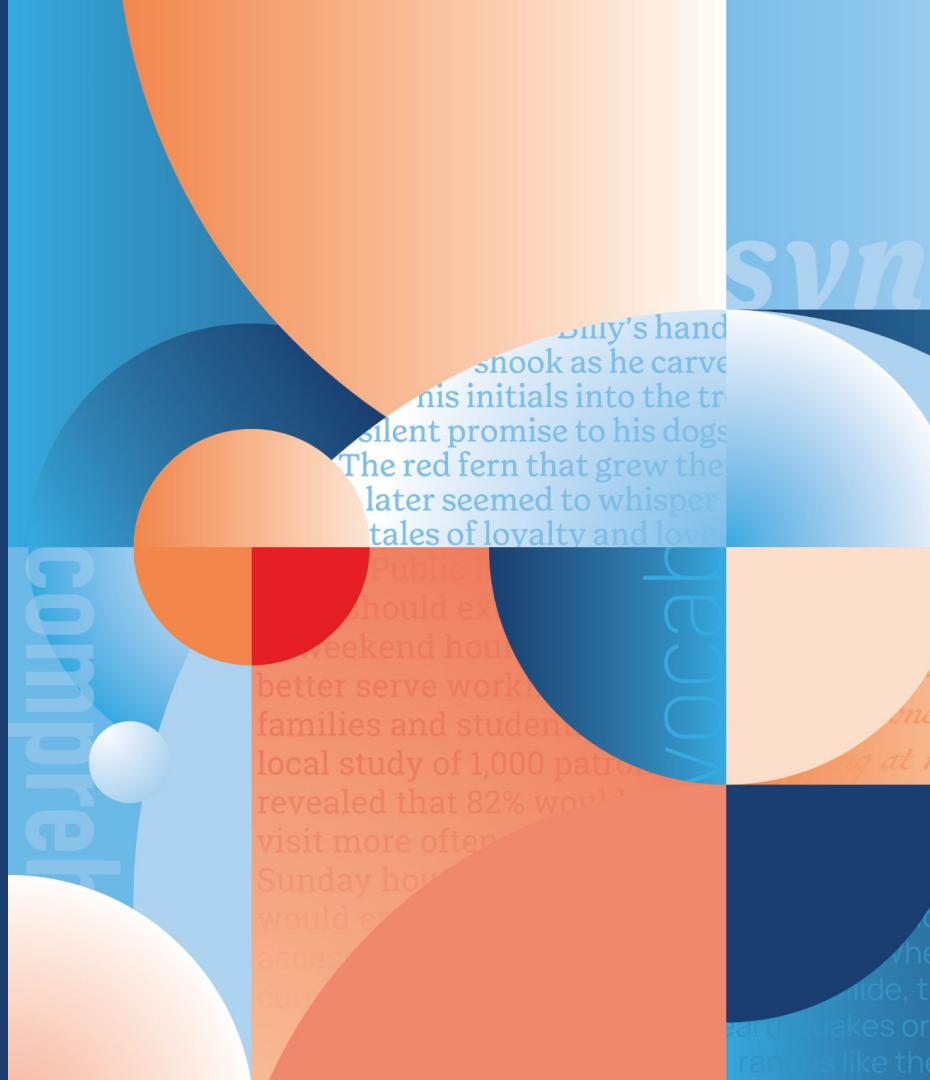
Deletion

- Most complex level of awareness
  - Say peas without the /p/
  - Say sheet without the /t/
  - Say stop without the /s/
  - Say wild without the /d/

Manipulation

teach
cuts
pitch

How could I incorporate PA activities into my classwork?



Integrate into Vocab Instruction

erosion		
e.ro.sion		
e / r / o/ zh / u/ n		
e	ro(d)	sion
out or away	to gnaw	act of
Act of gnawing away		
The process of wearing away or removing material *(like gnawing away over time)*.		

convergent

convergent		
con.ver.gent		
c/o/n/v/r/j/e/n/t		
con	verg	-ent
together	moving or bending	characteristic of
Moving or bending together.		

convergent
adjective (describes)
Coming together at one point.
merging, meeting, coming together



How do we use it?

My ideas are **convergent** with my friend's because we came to an agreement.

The two roads **converged** into one.

Something that might converge is: _____.

Decoding & Encoding

Meaning from letters - Letters to Meaning

Word Recognition

Phonological Awareness
(syllables, phonemes, etc.)

Decoding
(alphabetic principle, spelling-sound correspondence)

Sight Recognition
(of familiar words)



Complexity of language

Definitions

DECODING: translating a word from *print to speech*.

ENCODING: translating *speech to print*.

Opaque

26 letters

44 sounds

75 ways to spell them

Vocabulary

English has the largest vocabulary in the world, (one estimate is over 2 million words).

Average adult knows between 40,000 - 60,000 words.

Well-educated adult knows around 200,000 words.

A melting pot of word origins.

Teach Vowel Spellings

Long ā
ay, ai, a_e, ei
bay, bait, bake, weight

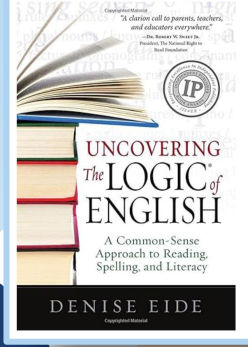
Long ī
i_e, i, y, igh, ye, ie
Ice, silent, my, night, type, pie

Long ū
u, u_e, ew, ue, oo, ou
unit, cube, few, due, food, soup

Long ē
ee, e_e, ei, ie, ea
meet, eve, protein, piece, peace

Long ō
o, o_e, oa, oe, ow, ough
go, home, boat, toe, snow, dough

Uncovering the Logic of English by Denise Eide



#1: Magic E

The vowel says its long sound bc of the e.
cape, type, bone, cute

#2: i,u,j,v

No English word ends in i, j, u, v.
Taxicab, ski, macaroni

#3: Soft C

C says /s/ when followed by an e, i, y. Otherwise it says /k/.
cycle, cereal, cyst, cake, coke, clap

#4: -ge, -dge

If a word ends in the /j/ sound, it's spelled with a -ge or a -dge. Use -dge for a short vowel sound and -ge for a short vowel sound.
judge, page

#5: Soft G

G says /j/ when followed by an e, i, y. Otherwise it says /g/.
Gym, gem, giraffe, game, globe, gear

#6: ti,si,ci

The letters ti, si, ci say /sh/.
action, musician, passion

Integrate Spelling

Rule #5:
The letters ti, si, ci make the /sh/ sound.

erosion		
e.ro.sion		
e / r / o/ zh / u/ n		
e	ro(d)	sion
out or away	to gnaw	act of
Act of gnawing away		
The process of wearing away or removing material *(like gnawing away over time)*.		
Spelling rule: The letters ti, si, ci make the /sh/ sound.		

Gear Grinding
Dysfluent readers need . . .

Automaticity + Fluency

Sight Words & Smooth Reading



Automaticity + Prosody = Fluency

AUTOMATICITY

The ability to recognize words automatically and effortlessly.

PROSODY

The rhythm, stress, intonation of speech.

FLUENCY

The ability to read smoothly.

Repetition & Learning

Spaced Practice is more effective than massed practice, because it's able to move to long-term memory.

-*Making it Stick* - Roediger, McDaniel, Brown

Accelerated

Needs 1-2 practice sessions.

On-pace

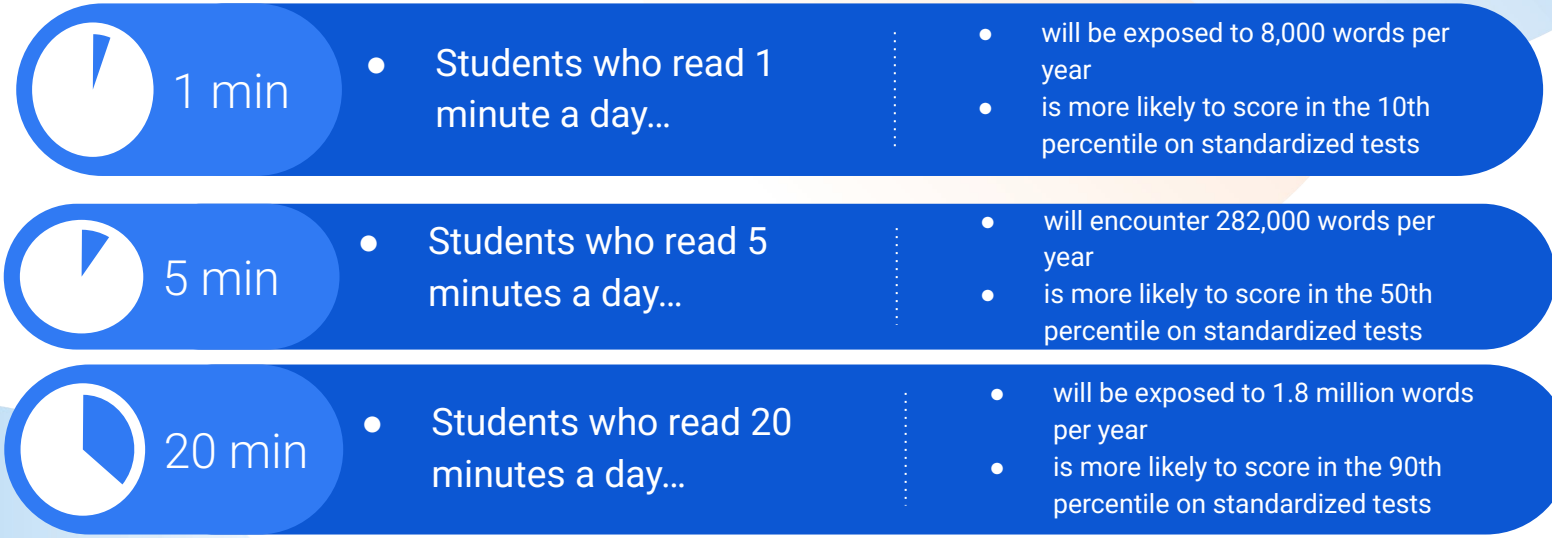
Needs 4-14 practice sessions.

Developing

Needs 20 or more.

Kathryn Howe, 2004

The Impact of Reading 20 Minutes Per Day



Nagy and Herman, 1987

Scaffolds are temporary. . .





Turn off the audio support. Let kids do the lifting.

- choral
- echo
- read & review

SCAFFOLDING

Reading Is Like Working Out



Light weights

Decodable passages and shorter texts. Repetition and quantity build technique, stamina, and confidence.



Max lift

Demanding texts develop strength through analysis, annotation, and sustained effort.

THE SIMPLE SHIFT

Stop reading **for** students!

Chorally read **with** them.

Chunk longer works with partner reading.

Students' reading muscles have atrophied because **teachers have been doing all the lifting.**

THE READING GYM
Train the Brain. Build the Reader.
A STRUCTURED LITERACY FRAMEWORK FOR SECONDARY STUDENTS

Training Phase 1: Realistic Fiction

3 Core Training Blocks

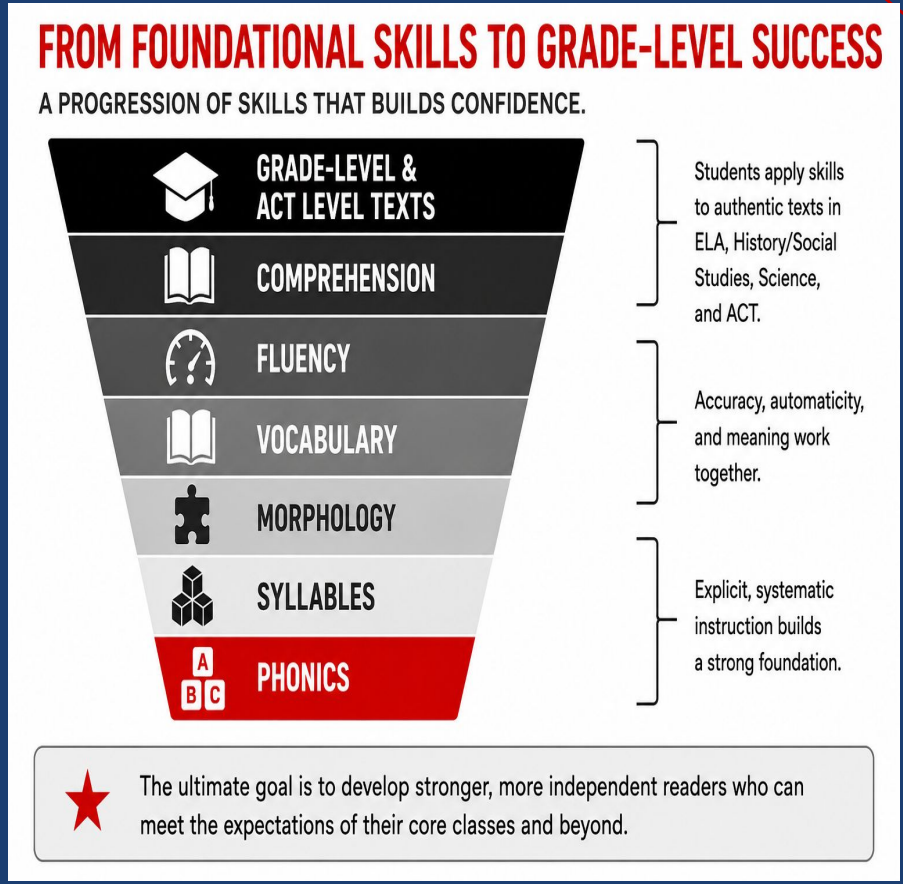
Systematic coverage of Phonics, Morphology, Academic Power Words, Grammar Focus, and Fluency.

Essential Guiding Question

"How do our hopes, choices, and values shape the decisions we make?"

Progress Monitoring & Assessment

Continuous evaluation through Unit Writing Reps, Summative Keys, and Performance Lift tasks.



THE READING GYM

STRONG SOUNDS. STRONG WORDS. STRONG READERS.

READING INTERVENTION FOR GRADES 6-12

LEARN MORE

Scan for curriculum details

and pilot information.

engaginglearners.com/thereadinggym

Choral Reading

BEFORE

Identify any multi-syllable words ahead of time and say them aloud for the class.

Ask the class to repeat words after you say them: “The word is [you say]. What’s the word? [they repeat]”

Explain definitions as needed.

DURING

Ask students to read aloud following your pace.

Read the text at a slower rate and enunciate multi-syllable words during your first cold reading.

AFTER

Correct or repeat any words where you noticed students struggling.

Discuss the meaning of the text by asking and answering questions.

Summarize the text.

A persistent misconception in secondary education holds that reading fluency is a primary-grade concern, mastered by third grade and safely set aside thereafter. Yet a substantial proportion of adolescents arrive in middle and high school classrooms with dysfluent word recognition, particularly with multisyllabic and morphologically complex vocabulary, along with limited automaticity and flat or inaccurate prosody. LaBerge and Samuels' theory of automaticity explains the consequence: when decoding consumes the reader's finite attentional resources, little cognitive capacity remains for constructing meaning.

Echo Reading

Adolescents get to choose their partner!

BEFORE

Choose a partner.

Identify who will be partner A and who will be partner B.

Open the article linked here.

DURING

Partner A reads the paragraph to B.

Partner B reads the paragraph to A.

AFTER

Partner A finds the 2-3 words in the paragraph that were most important to capture what it was about.

Partner B agrees or suggests another word/s.

Read & Review

BEFORE

Choose a partner

Identify who will be partner A and who will be partner B

Open the article linked here.

DURING

Partner A reads one paragraph to B and asks a question to partner B about the text.

Partner B answers the question.

Partner B reads the next paragraph to A.

Partner B asks a question to partner A about anything from the text

Partner A answers the question

AFTER

Partners work together to write a 2-3 sentence summary of the text.

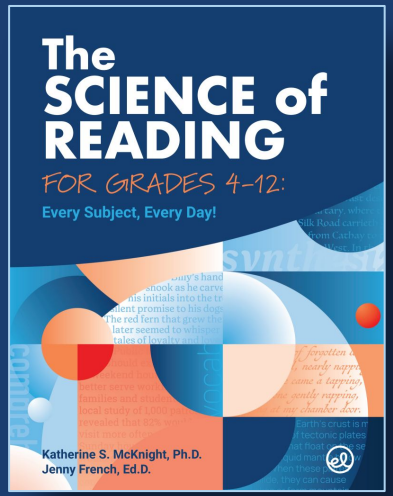
Participant Guide

Seven Moves for a Stronger Tier I

1. Use an assessment that separates word recognition from language comprehension.
2. Rebrand intervention time so students feel respected (try linguistics!).
3. Appoint your most skilled teachers as interventionists.
4. Invest in literacy PD for ELA, science, and social studies teachers.
5. Implement a quality Tier I curriculum in all core subjects, with fidelity.
6. Give non-decoders systematic, explicit reading instruction.
7. Give all readers daily practice with age-respectful texts.

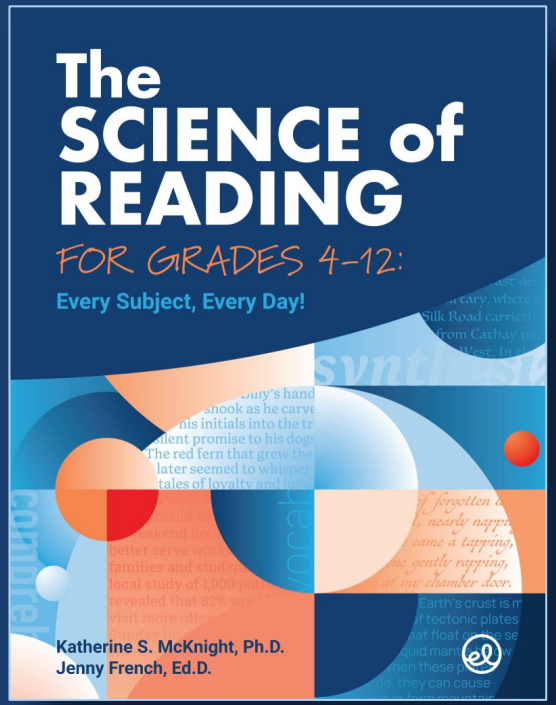
"When we know better, we do better."
– The Reading League

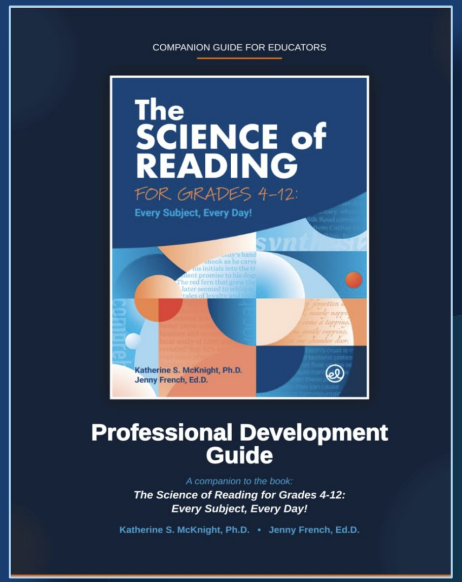
EVERY TEXT MUST HAVE...



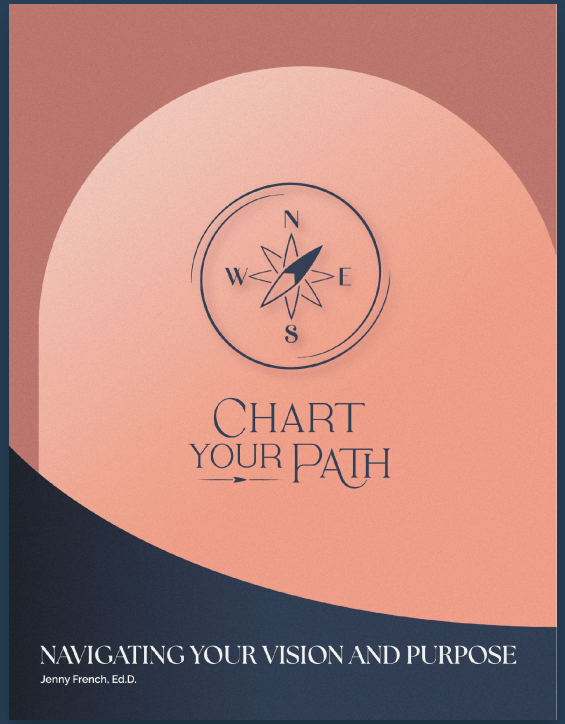
- **Before reading**
  - Background knowledge
  - Vocab preview
- **During reading**
  - Annotations
  - Breaking down text
  - Metacognition
- **After reading**
  - Thinking
  - Writing
  - Speaking

Stay Connected!





engaginglearners.com



ONE MORE THING, NOT ABOUT READING

Is what you're giving sustainable?

Chart Your Path is a guided workbook for busy people who are capable, committed, and exhausted. Four sessions take you from where you are to a written plan, with a crew beside you.

Join my zoom workshop!

Dec 30 + Jan 2 (10am-1pm)

Dr. Jenny French · @drjennyfrench