

Oregon Kids Read
Oregon Senate Education Committee
Informational Hearing - May 26, 2021

Dear Oregon Senate Education Committee Members:

I am writing to ask you to support Rep. Barbara Smith Warner's budget request to fund Science of Reading training for K-5 teachers in Oregon's most struggling schools. With 50% of our 3rd graders - and 70% of our Black, Indigenous and other 3rd graders of color - not reading at grade level, our state must do all it can to make education equity investments that lead to systemic change.

That change starts with the teachers. I am currently a Reading Specialist at Irvington Elementary where my 3 children are students. Prior to this, I worked at Laurelhurst for one year as an Instructional Specialist, at Boise-Eliot/Humboldt for 12 years as a Reading Coach, Reading Interventionist, 1st grade teacher and a 2nd grade teacher. I worked in N. Clackamas as a Reading Coach for 3 years. Prior to that I worked at the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory as consultant for regional districts in the area of reading. I served on the PPS visioning and materials adoption committees for our most recent large-scale adoption. I am working on my practicum to become a certified Orton-Gillingham instructor to work with students with dyslexia and have completed the first 4 Units of the LETRS training as well as the training to be a LETRS facilitator for those units. It's safe to say that most of my career in education has centered on the teaching of reading and on working with students who struggle to read.

Before becoming a teacher, I earned my undergraduate degree from the Univ. of Kansas, my Masters in Education from Univ. of Co. at Denver and my Reading Endorsement from PSU. None of my higher ed training prepared me to teach reading. In fact, some of it discouraged and shamed me for using strategies that I was being taught on the job and through professional development I received from the University of Oregon when I was a building-based Reading First coach. Sadly, I'm not alone.

For quite some time, teachers coming out of our colleges of education have not been trained in what is widely known as the “Science of Reading”. We were not trained on the neuroscience of how the brain processes language and how we as educators can impact that processing and the learning of reading and writing with our instructional approaches and responses.

The more I learn about how we learn to read and write the more I feel a sense of urgency as I recognize that huge numbers of students are not getting this critical instruction from the beginnings of their school careers, and each year that a child fails to learn to read, it becomes harder and harder and often impossible for him/her to catch up with grade-level peers. Each year the gap widens. There aren’t enough Reading Interventionists to remediate all of the learning that’s not happening. The model has to shift to one in which we expect every single K-2 teacher and eventually K-5 teacher to be a highly trained and skilled teacher of the English language. A child’s success should not be in the hands of fate depending on which kinder, 1st and 2nd grade classroom he or she lands in Oregon.

Thanks to the dedicated drumbeat of parents and organizations such as Decoding Dyslexia and some fabulous reporting by the journalist Emily Hanford of APM (American Public Media) a broader recognition for the need to shift has begun. Legislation has been passed in Oregon and states around the country that address the need for comprehensive screening and instruction of students with potential reading difficulties.

How does that translate to the everyday classroom? The majority of our teachers in Oregon and throughout the country were not trained in the Science of Reading. Our district and districts around the country have invested in reading curricula and supplemental reading materials that are not based in the Science of Reading, and often run counter to the Science, in effect teaching and encouraging students to use strategies that poor readers rely on, rather than on utilizing an efficient structured literacy approach. So, we have teachers without the professional knowledge using tools that are encouraging them to do it wrong.

The answer to turning this around lies in high-quality, ongoing professional development with coaching on the teaching of reading. Hundreds of Portland Public School teachers are currently going through a self-paced professional development model known as LETRS (Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading) coauthored by Dr. Louisa Moats, a licensed psychologist who has become a recognized expert in the area of the teaching of reading and of dyslexia. It is essential that this professional development opportunity continue to be offered and expanded to all K-5 teachers in Oregon, especially those in our schools that struggle to meet the academic needs of kids.

Teaching reading is the most fundamental teaching we can do, and yet, it is one of the most complex undertakings, as well. We cannot open up a child's brain and watch how our instructional approaches are impacting learning. We must apply an approach and then test it and then tweak it, apply it again, test it again and tweak it again. There is a continual need for precise understanding of the English language, how our brains learn language and what instructional approaches work best when. Teachers of reading need a deep understanding of how to organize instruction so that it makes sense (the scope and sequence), how much and what type of practice different groups of students will need to acquire mastery of a skill. This is not an easy task and it is not something that can be taught to teachers through a day or two of sitting in a professional development session and leaving with a binder. This is complex and deserves to be taken seriously and funded comprehensively.

We now know that we can teach the majority of our student to read proficiently by the end of 1st grade, which would inevitably save gobs of money that we end up spending on staff and resources to remediate those students later or support some of them when they eventually drop out because they did not learn the most basic skill they needed to be successful in school and life. It is our civic duty to teach students to read well. I have said to many colleagues that this is literally a life or death situation for some of our students, and the ability to help them should rest in our hands. But, we need the professional knowledge and the tools to do it effectively and efficiently.

Dr. Louisa Moats has said, "Teaching reading to a student who does not learn easily or naturally is a complex and challenging professional enterprise that requires deep

knowledge of content, of the cognitive and language factors that shape student learning, and of pedagogical detail.” And, “Teaching reading is rocket science.”

COVID has had a disproportionate impact on our students who were already struggling academically before the pandemic - especially our Black, Indigenous and other students of color. As an educator, I can't think of a use of COVID relief or other funds that would have such a lasting, systemic impact on equity in education than Rep. Barbara Smith Warner's budget request to train all our K-5 teachers in our lowest performing schools in the Science of Reading.

Thank you for your time,

Gretchen Ganey
Reading Specialist
Irvington Elementary
Portland Public Schools