

Written Testimony of Anne Wicks

Don Evans Family Managing Director of Opportunity and Democracy
at the George W. Bush Institute

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Chairman Tuberville, Ranking Member Blunt Rochester, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. As the Don Evans Family Managing Director of Opportunity and Democracy at the [George W. Bush Institute](#), I lead the Institute's policy and research team focused on education, immigration, economic growth, and democracy. I have particular experience and expertise in K-12 education and also serve as a board member of [Instruction Partners](#), the [Commit Partnership](#), and [United to Learn](#), organizations that, in part, focus on research-based reading instruction in schools. I am the parent of a public-school student, and I successfully advocated, along with a group of fellow parents, for the use of research-based reading instruction in our local school district.

Background

The George W. Bush Institute focuses on policy solutions and public engagement to ensure opportunity for all, strengthen democracy, and advance free societies. It is part of the [George W. Bush Presidential Center](#) in Dallas, Texas, a nonpartisan institution advancing the timeless values of freedom, opportunity, accountability, and compassion. The Bush Institute believes that every child can learn and deserves every opportunity to access a quality education.

Today, I will focus my remarks on my experience as a parent advocate, the essential elements of the science of reading and strong state policy, and how the federal government can best support strong state actions.

Like many of you, we at the Bush Institute firmly believe that a healthy democracy and a robust economy require that America's young people are on track in reading. Children who learn to read in the early grades become students who can engage in science, social

studies, critical thinking and more. They can express themselves effectively in their own writing and speaking. They can research and analyze topics that may lead to new ideas, continuing the grand American tradition of innovation. They can navigate rapidly changing technology, like writing effective AI prompts and discerning the system's responses. They become adults who can access well-paying jobs and voters who can research issues and candidates.

American parents want schools that meet the high expectations and hopes they have for their children. They want research-based, practical solutions available to our teachers. And they want to know if their children are on track. The right kinds of policy can help to deliver on those desires.

Current State of Reading in the United States

According to the [2024 National Assessment of Education Progress \(NAEP\) results](#), only 31% of fourth-graders are considered on track in reading. Sadly, 40% of fourth-graders score below-basic, which means that they are significantly behind grade level. We see similar alarming numbers for eighth-grade students, with only 30% considered proficient in reading. Our nation's lowest performing students across both grades are falling farther behind, with more students scoring at very low levels. The gap between the high and low performers is widening.

Unfortunately, instruction in many classrooms across the country does not reflect the research-based strategies that we know work (commonly referred to as the science of reading). While many states are newly focused on reading thanks to increased attention in recent years, progress is uneven due to implementation issues and disconnections between higher education and K-12 education. It is [still far too common](#) to see schools using balanced literacy curriculum and instruction in classrooms, which teaches children to look for clues and make guesses (three-cueing) as they read, instead of teaching them how the English language works.

We also know that 40 states, plus the District of Columbia, now have some kind of reading law on the books designed to improve instruction and student outcomes. While this is encouraging to see, and promising examples of progress are emerging, success will require strong, consistent implementation over time. This is an opportunity for state leaders to champion comprehensive laws and then to closely monitor implementation and outcome data. We need to ensure that the new policies are brought to life in ways that make a meaningful difference for children.

The Science of Reading

The science of reading, or structured literacy, is based on an [extensive body of research](#) about how our brains learn to read. It is not a curriculum, but rather a set of research-informed principles. While it is sometimes misunderstood as just phonics, there are five interrelated elements of the science of reading:

1. Phonemic awareness — understanding the relationship between letters and their sounds;
2. Phonics — sounding out whole words;
3. Fluency — reading with expression and accuracy;
4. Vocabulary — words a student knows and understands; and
5. Comprehension — understanding of texts.

Parent Advocacy

Five years ago, my son came home from his kindergarten class with a worksheet from a popular but problematic balanced literacy curriculum. I called his principal to learn more about her philosophy on reading instruction and the instructional materials in use in the school. She was kind, but defended the approach, and said “Anne, most parents don’t even know what phonics is.”

I then joined forces with a group of parents in our district who had been working to get better reading support for their children in the district, largely without success. Many of their children have reading issues like dyslexia, the kinds of students who will particularly struggle to read in a balanced literacy environment.

We organized and advocated for a change in our district’s approach for over a year. We worked to raise awareness of the science of reading with parents, teachers, district administrators, and the school board. We talked about the outcome data, the research, and the changes happening in other districts. We detailed what had been lost for our children in the switch to balanced literacy. We spoke about the number of families accessing outside tutoring and support – or those who left the district altogether – to get the help their children needed.

While the district was initially resistant, thanks to the leadership of several school board members, along with the engagement of an increasing number of parents, the district finally agreed to make a change. To be clear, the district and campus leaders were not acting in bad faith. They, like most teachers, wanted to help students to succeed and thought they were doing the right thing. But they had not been trained in research-based reading instruction. They were not digging deeply into the student outcome data available

thanks to Texas' annual assessment, which showed that reading progress had stalled, and in some places regressed, in our district. They were relying on a vendor for insights rather than using high-quality research.

Achieving change in our district required substantial effort, including bringing in outside experts to help the campuses adopt and implement a new research-based instructional approach, including on-going coaching for teachers. That investment of money, people, and time has paid off. In 2019, before the pandemic, 77% of HPISD third-graders were on grade level according to the STAAR, Texas's annual state assessment. In 2025, 92% of third-graders are now on grade level, a 15-point jump.

Many parents around this country do not have the time, knowledge, or social capital to advocate at a similar level. And while parent voice is always important, we can't rely only on that group to raise the alarm when something is not working. We need educators who know, understand, and implement research-aligned reading instruction. We need principals who track outcome data, looking for patterns that indicate intervention is needed. We need district leaders who use research to guide decision-making.

Strong state policy - along with the right federal checks on the system – can help make that happen so that all children in the United States have access to the best reading instruction.

Recommendations for Strong State Reading Policy

Many states are passing and implementing reading policies designed to improve student outcomes. Governors can bring attention and resources to this issue by using their powerful bully pulpits, convening power, and ability to direct resources and funding. Importantly, governors can help draw attention to the critical role that implementation plays in translating new policies into real improvements in student outcomes. Instructional changes at the classroom level are challenging, but not impossible. Success will require comprehensive policy, capacity building, and accountability.

We recommend that state leaders include these five elements when designing and implementing reading policies:

- Prepare aspiring teachers correctly
 - Teacher preparation programs have a special responsibility to ensure that aspiring teachers are introduced to the science of reading and understand how to use it in their classrooms. Unfortunately, according to the [2023 Teacher Prep Review: Reading Foundations report from the National Center on Teacher Quality](#), only 25% of teacher preparation programs teach all five elements of the science of reading noted above. In addition, 40% of teacher

prep programs still teach two or more practices that are incompatible (like three-cueing or guessing) with scientifically based reading instruction. States can ensure that the prep programs training their state's newest teachers align with science of reading.

- Support current teachers with professional development and coaching
 - There are many sitting teachers and principals around the country who were not trained in the science of reading in their preparation program or as part of their ongoing training. Robust professional development aligned to the science of reading and ongoing coaching on campuses [are highly effective tools](#) to help our nation's current educators improve their instructional practice.
- Ensure that schools have access to – and use – high quality instructional materials
 - Given local control, school districts have significant autonomy when selecting instructional materials used in classrooms. To help ensure that they select research-aligned curriculum and materials, states can help by identifying high quality options and approving a list of options for districts, or guiding districts, on what to look for to ensure that high quality materials are selected for use.
- Screen and intervene to identify children who need extra support early
 - It is important to quickly identify students who may have reading issues like dyslexia that will require extra supports and interventions (like specific tools, tutoring, and extra time). Students benefit from this early screening and intervention which, when done well, helps them to get and stay on track. States can take actions like requiring the use of a research-aligned screener and requiring that individual reading plans are created for struggling students.
- Measure and monitor to know what is making a difference
 - It is important for states to measure student outcomes so that leaders understand what is working, which students are on track, and which students are falling behind. Annual state assessments provide this critical information, which should be shared transparently with parents and decision-makers, and disaggregated by district, campus, and student sub-group. Districts should also use high quality formative assessments to measure short term progress and help to inform daily instruction.

Recommendations for the Federal Role

I would like to thank the administration and Secretary McMahon for the inclusion of evidence-based literacy as a competitive priority for the Department of Education's discretionary grants.

This federal action recognizes that states should drive strong reading policy to best serve the needs of their citizens. However, there are two important federal roles that should remain in place to best support state leadership.

First, the federal requirement that all states administer an [annual assessment](#) and have an [accountability system](#) in place is essential. These are two policies that help all of us combat, as President George W. Bush memorably said, "[the soft bigotry of low expectations.](#)" This federal requirement that all states administer annual, summative, criterion-referenced assessments that measure learning for every student in third to eighth grades and once in high school helps ensure that we know what is working and for which students. Additionally, the federal requirement for each state to have an accountability system in place remains an important check on state action (or lack thereof).

State summative assessments, built from the standards that each state sets for what students should know and be able to do in each grade, provide valid and reliable information about the progress of each student in a state. It allows parents to see if their child is on track, information that is essential for enabling families to make informed decisions about what's best for their children. Without these assessments, we can only rely on averages, observations, and anecdotes, which are subjective and can hide many students.

Well-designed accountability policy measures the academic progress of all students by campus and district, anchored on state summative assessments. These systems identify gaps between different groups of students (e.g., race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, special education, or English-language learners) to ensure that all children are seen. Finally, it assigns consequences and provides supports to campuses and districts for failing to meet goals around student progress.

Second, it is important for the federal government to continue to fund research about teaching and learning. We know about the science of reading, thanks in part to research funded by the federal government, including the [National Reading Panel \(2000\)](#) and the [What Works Clearinghouse](#). Research-based practices are critical to educate all of America's children well, and federal leadership here is critical.

Conclusion

I thank the Subcommittee for giving me the opportunity to testify on reading instruction and America's schools. The importance of reading is of great interest to both President and Mrs. Bush. Mrs. Bush, a former teacher and librarian, continues her lifelong advocacy for reading through the [Laura Bush Foundation for America's Libraries](#), which has granted more than \$23 million to over 4,000 schools to help update and expand their school library collections.

In a 1999 campaign speech while running for the presidency, President Bush said, "Every child must have a quality education – not just in islands of excellence. Because we are a single nation with a shared future. Because, as Lincoln said, we are 'brothers of a common country.'" We believe this still rings true today.

Mr. Chairman and Members of this Subcommittee, on behalf of the Bush Institute, I am grateful for your attention and interest in this topic. I look forward to answering your questions.