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Sunday World-Herald



Addy Huff raises her hand during a reading lesson in her first grade classroom at Wildewood Elementary School last fall. Wildewood is in the Ralston Public Schools.

Nebraska pushes ‘science of reading’

State works to require teacher colleges to implement the approach by next fall

LAUREN WAGNER
World-Herald Staff Writer

The Elkhorn elementary school teacher recalls feeling unprepared to adequately teach reading in the classroom when she graduated from the University of Nebraska at Omaha seven years ago. Because she had specialized

READING LESSONS

With low reading scores continuing across Nebraska, The World-Herald is investigating why some Nebraska students are struggling to learn to read and what can be done to improve student outcomes.

in English as a second language, she took only a couple of college classes on teaching reading. And even those classes, she felt, hadn’t given her enough instruction.

“I really, really struggled with reading,” she said. “A lot of it literally was me YouTubeing or asking older teachers on how to teach reading and that’s how I got better.”

The Elkhorn teacher, who spoke anonymously because she is restricted from publicly talking about her job, was caught in a problem that continues today in colleges across Nebraska and the nation: Some teacher colleges aren’t educating teachers correctly

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Some Boeing planes are temporarily grounded

DAVID KOENIG AND AUDREY MCAVOY
Associated Press

Boeing faces new scrutiny about the safety of its best-selling plane after federal officials announced the temporary grounding of some Boeing 737 Max planes Saturday, following a harrowing flight in which an Alaska Airlines jetliner was left with a gaping hole in its side.

The Federal Aviation Administration said it required immediate inspections of some Max 9 planes operated by U.S. airlines or flown in the United States by foreign carriers.

The FAA’s emergency order, which it said will affect about 171 planes worldwide, is the latest blow to Boeing over the Max lineup of jets, which were involved in two deadly crashes shortly after their debut. The inspections take about four to eight hours per aircraft.

On Friday night, a fuselage panel blew out on an Alaska Airlines Boeing 737 Max 9 after takeoff from Portland, Oregon, causing the rapid loss of cabin pressure. None of the 171 passengers and six members was severely injured and pilots made a safe emergency landing minutes later.

Passenger Evan Smith said a boy and his mother were sitting in the row where the panel blew out and the child’s shirt was sucked off him and out of the plane. “You heard a big loud bang to the left rear. A whooshing sound and all the oxygen masks deployed instantly and everyone got those on,” Smith told KATU-TV.

The Port of Portland, which operates the airport, told KPTV

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■ **More Coverage:** *Boeing wants an exemption from federal safety rules for an anti-icing system on its new, smaller version of the 737 Max airliner.* **Money, Page D11**

Traffic deaths

Nebraska’s traffic fatalities fell in 2023 in almost every category – except for bicyclists. **Midlands**

Alzheimer’s research

UNMC researchers reduce signs and symptoms of Alzheimer’s disease in mice. **Midlands**

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Former gambler lived ‘double life’

JOE DEJKA
World-Herald Staff Writer

Mike Sciandra tried — and failed — to quit gambling cold turkey. The 45-year-old Lincoln man said he was caught in a cycle common to problem gamblers.

“I would go to the casino, be on this intense high, and then once you lose, that drive home from Council Bluffs to Lincoln was absolutely the most sickening thing,” he said.

Sciandra said the situation gave him a “horrible pit in your stomach” thinking about the money he lost, how he would win it back, how to explain it to family and debt collectors.

Even so, he said, “the true insane thing about that” is that the bad feeling didn’t last long. “Because then you start thinking about your next bet and how

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ANNA REED, THE WORLD-HERALD

Mike Sciandra is recovering from a gambling disorder himself and is an education and outreach coordinator for Choices Treatment Center in Lincoln.

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Reading

From A1

in reading instruction, contributing to lower reading proficiency for students.

The “correct” way to teach reading has been debated for centuries, but recently there has been an overwhelming shift to incorporate what’s described as the “science of reading” in instruction across the U.S. The science of reading is a body of research about how humans learn to read and how reading should be taught, according to the International Literacy Association.

Nebraska has recently made moves to enhance its reading instruction in its teacher preparation programs. Earlier this year, the Nebraska Department of Education initiated a rule change to require teacher colleges to implement the science of reading in their instruction.

But the current revision draft is also missing some key parts: There are no benchmarks, directions or additional resources in Rule 20 to help teacher colleges implement the science of reading. Asked how colleges will know if they are implementing the science of reading correctly, the Education Department said: “This is still in progress.”

The science behind reading

Cognitive scientists have found that most children will become better readers with structured, systematic phonemic awareness and phonics instruction, according to the National Reading Panel, which issued an influential report in 2000.

The primary focus of phonics instruction is to help beginning readers understand how to use letter-sound relations to read or spell words. The panel’s analysis concluded that systemic instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics, paired with fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension, was the most effective way to teach children how to read. The five parts are often referred to as the five components or pillars of reading.

One Omaha teacher, who graduated from the University of Nebraska at Lincoln 10 years ago, said her college program lacked instruction about the science of reading. She went on to become a reading specialist and had to go back for a master’s degree to learn more.

“We really didn’t talk about how to teach students to read at all,” she said. “It was, like, theory, pedagogy, and then how to write lesson plans.”

While receiving a master’s degree in 2020, she learned that other Nebraska teachers she talked to — some newly graduated, others in the field for decades — also didn’t know the correct way to teach reading to students.

“None of them could identify what the five big essential components of reading were by just me asking,” she said. “Over half of them had a master’s degree, and still struggled to answer the questions I was asking.”

Reading has been, and continues to be, under scrutiny because of the nation’s dismal rates of student reading proficiency — students who are either on track or advanced in reading. Nebraska isn’t untouched by this struggle — roughly 60% of Nebraska fourth graders are not proficient readers, according to data on a national test released last year.

In fact, reading scores in 2022 were roughly the same as they were in 1994 in Nebraska, erasing nearly 30 years of slight improvements.

Research shows the impact of low reading achievement can be felt for the rest of a struggling reader’s life. Children who can’t read by third grade are more likely to drop out of school and more likely to become involved with the criminal justice system.

“I think people blame the school districts, but really, we should be putting accountability on the universities and the teacher preparation programs, because they are the ones not preparing teachers,” said the Omaha teacher. “Teachers are graduating, not prepared to teach reading, and then they’re hired by districts who expect them to have (those) skills.”

Many school districts aren’t even using practices that align with the science of reading, according to a variety of studies, including a 2019 survey from the EdWeek Research Center. Instead, they are using techniques that aren’t backed by science, making it more difficult for children to learn to read proficiently.



ANNA REED, THE WORLD-HERALD

Colored pencils and markers on a desk in a first grade classroom at Wildewood Elementary School in the Ralston school district. The “correct” way to teach reading has been debated for centuries, but recently there has been an overwhelming shift to incorporate what’s described as the “science of reading” in instruction across the U.S.

Teresa Franks, vice president of the Nebraska Dyslexia Association, said the problem continues to happen in Nebraska classrooms.



Franks

In some cases, she said, it’s because schools use faulty or outdated curriculum. But Franks said it also is because some teachers don’t receive the proper training in college.

“More people are now hearing what we’ve been saying: that what is taught in the teacher education programs is not what the scientific consensus is around — how reading happens and how it should be taught,” Franks said.

How reading has changed

Scientists discovered decades ago that unlike listening and speaking, reading doesn’t come naturally to humans. For children, what’s hard about learning to read is understanding that marks on a page represent units of language, wrote Rebecca Treiman, a psychologist with Washington University in St. Louis, in a 2018 report.

“It is particularly unnatural when the marks represent individual speech sounds, as in alphabetic writing systems,” Treiman wrote. “Adults who know how to read and write an alphabet find it obvious that spoken words are composed of sounds. We can easily judge that *bean* begins with the same sound as *bat* and that *went* includes the same “n” unit that *name* does. But these things are not obvious to preliterate children.”

Back in the 1980s and 1990s, teachers were taught the practices of an approach called “whole language” when teaching reading, which focused on children learning to recognize and understand entire words instead of sounding out words letter by letter, which is usually found in more phonics-based education.

Even after the National Reading Panel issued its report in 2000 calling for more focus on phonics, few teachers and colleges got fully on board, so the reading approach shifted more to something called “balanced literacy.”

In balanced literacy, phonics, decoding and spelling may be taught in lessons, but the skills typically are not emphasized and rarely taught systematically, according to the Iowa Reading Research Center. Students are encouraged to use word analogies and pictures or context to identify words.

In schools, this can look like a teacher offering lessons on topics like how to find a text’s main idea. Students are encouraged to read independently or in groups. If a student needs help understanding the text, teachers often encourage the use of accompanying pictures to guess at its meaning. The use of pictures and guessing as strategies has since been debunked by scientists, who found that people who rely on context to identify words are poor readers.

Teaching children to use context and prediction as strategies for word recognition resulted in greater numbers of reading disabilities than phonics instruction, according to research conducted by the National Institute

of Child Health and Human Development.

Balanced literacy helps some students who naturally excel at reading, but it lacks structured, explicit instruction needed for struggling readers.

Franks said the students who suffer the most are children with dyslexia. Structured literacy, based on the science of reading is the best way for dyslexic students to learn.

But balanced literacy techniques are still being used, Franks said.

“Balanced literacy techniques have persisted even though the science of reading has been around for more than 100 years and has been well established in the last 50 years,” Franks said. “So there’s plenty of evidence, but our teachers aren’t taught that, so they come out of school and they have been taught these techniques that don’t work.”

Progress across the nation

More than half of U.S. states — 32 of them — have passed laws or implemented policies over the past decade to bring teacher materials, interventions or preparation programs in line with approaches based in the science of reading, according to a 2023 survey conducted by EdWeek.

Mississippi, the first state that passed such a law in 2013, has become a focus after reading scores of fourth-graders climbed in the following years.

Franks, who used to teach in Mississippi, said the state worked for years to advance teacher training, focus on dyslexia, introduce new literacy laws and more.

“Once your teachers know how to teach reading, things improve dramatically,” she said.

Nebraska has been slow to adapt, though action has been ramping up in the last few years, from the state’s Reading Improvement Act that was implemented in 2019 to updated state standards for English language arts in 2021.

The most recent action requiring teacher preparation programs to incorporate the science of reading was crafted by the Nebraska Department of Education, said Elizabeth Tegtmeier, a member of the State Board of Education.

This summer, the state board approved a revision of Rule 20, which sets parameters for the state’s teacher colleges. The rule revision is currently under approval by the Attorney General’s Office and will still need to be approved by Gov. Jim Pillen before it can go into effect next fall.

Tegtmeier said she knows Nebraska teachers who have been taught reading wrong in the past and are now just learning ways that are based in the science of reading.

“If that’s what I would have been taught ... I would have bought into it,” she said.

The Nebraska Department of Education said in an email statement that the inclusion of the science of reading was prompted because it’s “best practice in regard to reading instruction and we want to ensure we are preparing teachers to meet the latest requirements and expectations.”

The change on paper is quite small — if approved, teacher can-

didates will have to understand and use “a variety of instructional strategies to encourage students to develop deep understanding of content areas and their connections, build reading and writing skills through the application of the science of reading, and to apply knowledge in meaningful ways.”

The department said each teacher college annually submits an assurance statement that affirms their program complies with Rule 20.

“The NDE could audit that info at any time and frequently does check in to see if everything is correct,” the department said.

Darci Karr, chairwoman of the education department at Hastings College, was part of the workgroup of educators who helped revise Rule 20. She said representatives from institutions of all sizes helped with the revision. When asked about the wording of the rule revision, Karr said it’s more generalized on purpose.

“Yes, it’s broad, but we also don’t want it so specific that institutions can’t implement it in a way that works best with their program and their students,” Karr said.

What colleges are doing now

A report published in June from the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ), a think tank dedicated to education reform, revealed evaluations of hundreds of elementary teaching preparation programs across the U.S., with several in Nebraska.

While the study found only 25% of programs surveyed adequately taught future educators all five pillar components of reading, results from the NCTQ have been debated in the past, according to the National Education Policy Center, a research nonprofit within the University of Colorado.

A review of the June report said the study relies on flawed research methodology due to selective use of evidence. But the study has been widely circulated in the media and gave four Nebraska teacher colleges an “F” grade in elementary teaching preparation for reading instruction.

These schools were UNL’s undergraduate and graduate programs, Creighton University and the University of Nebraska at Kearney.

Union College and Wayne State College received a “C” grade, while Doane University and Concordia University received a “B” grade. The only teacher college that received an “A” grade was UNO. The rest of the state’s programs refused to participate, according to NCTQ.

Despite the controversial ratings, many Nebraska teacher colleges still offer assurances that they are currently using the science of reading in their programs and say the rule revision won’t have a huge impact on future instruction.

Jennifer Lemke, professor in

the teacher education department at UNO, said the university has always taught the five pillars of reading, but it is doing a better job of it now than it did in the past.

“There was definitely some balanced literacy that lived in our undergrad program,” Lemke said. “But I definitely think that there’s been much more intentionality, even as we look at our graduate courses — we’ve done a lot of redesign in the past three years, and that’s a conversation that we’re always having.”

Lemke said she also teaches multiple courses at UNO that are grounded in the science of reading. In “Teaching and Assessing Reading in Elementary Schools,” college students use evidence-based strategies to teach elementary students how to read in real-time through the practicum class.

UNL has its own tutoring community at the Kit and Dick Schmoker Reading Center, which has been in operation for 15 years. Director Rachel Schachter said the university has a series of courses for undergraduate students that culminates in a class with the reading center, working with students who have disabilities or are in elementary school.

“I wouldn’t say that suddenly we’re doing the science of reading, because for me, the ‘science of reading’ is the best information that we have at the moment about how children learn to read and how to teach reading,” Schachter said. “So we’ve kind of always been doing the science of reading.”

Schachter said she agrees that some school districts are still using outdated strategies when teaching reading.

“Some schools are still moving towards evidence-based practices or those aligned with the most up-to-date research,” Schachter said. “There is still room to ensure that components of literacy are being appropriately targeted in classrooms, especially with early readers.”

Jamie Martin, a professor in the Hastings College education department, said techniques gradually shift in the college as new science is introduced regarding how children learn to read. She specifically teaches a foundational reading course for future educators.

“We begin by talking about the brain and the science behind it,” Martin said. “So this is one complete class in which they’re really introduced quite deeply into the science of reading and some of the skills from birth to grade three.”

Karr said there will be no change in instruction within the education department at Hastings College if the revision is approved for next fall.

“We have amazing institutions in our state preparing amazing teachers. So when people read that and go, ‘Oh, are teachers being prepared?’ I would actually argue that the majority are, (but) I can’t speak for all my colleagues across the state,” Karr said. “I think in talking to most institutions, you will find that no one is shocked and no one is scared about it.”



Karr



Martin



Lemke