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Sunday World-Herald

SUNDAY, JANUARY 21, 2024

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Jazmin Ramirez listens during a reading lesson in her first grade classroom at Ralston's Wildewood Elementary School in November.

SCHOOLS SLOWLY UPDATE READING CURRICULUM

Research shows the best ways to teach reading, but the strategies aren't always used in Nebraska schools

LAUREN WAGNER
World-Herald Staff Writer

It was a mild November afternoon when Jill Klich's first grade class gathered in the front of the room to hear a story.

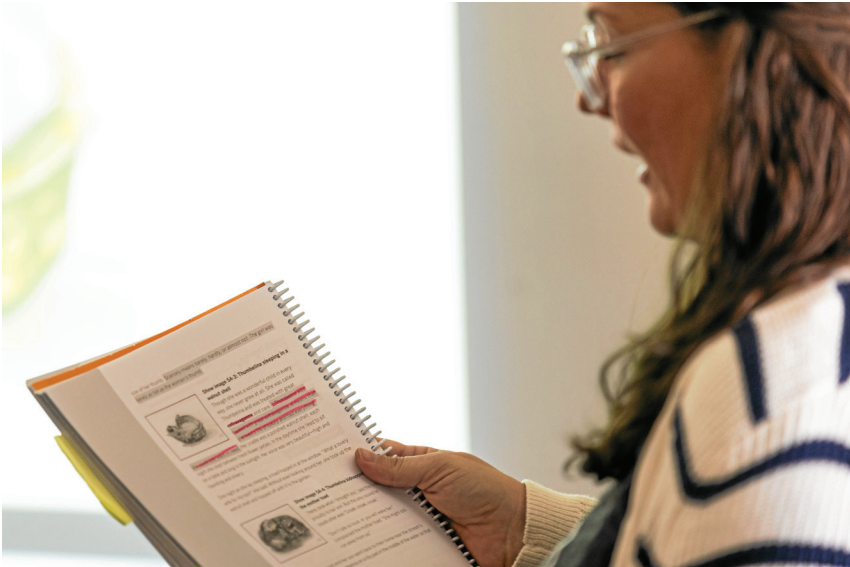
Klich began her lesson reviewing a list of vocabulary words — she would say them out loud, students would repeat it, then she would explain the definition to prepare them for when they heard the words in the story.

"Friends, look at that word! Extravagance. Say it with me," Klich said, standing in the front of the room. "It means big and bold and huge and beautiful. Yesterday in our costume parade, we had a lot of very extravagant costumes."

A hand shoots up from a student sitting cross-legged on the floor: "Is it another word to say fancy?" When Klich confirms he's right, he excitedly smiles back at her.

The lesson was just one of many in a new English language arts curriculum that's being implemented this year in the Ralston Public Schools. The district recently shifted to new materials that incorporate the science of reading, which is a body of research about how humans learn to read and how reading should be taught.

Klich, who has taught in Ralston



Jill Klich leads a reading lesson in her first grade classroom at Wildewood Elementary. The Ralston school district recently shifted to new materials that incorporate the science of reading, which is a body of research about how humans learn to read and how reading should be taught.

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. This is the second story in the series.

for 18 years, said the lesson is rooted in language comprehension, which includes things like vocabulary and background knowledge. She also

teaches lessons about word recognition, which includes phonics and decoding words.

"The science of reading shows that skilled reading comes from those interactions between the language comprehension and the word recognition," Klich said. "The main thing that our district has been talking about is having one of those without the other is really only having partial knowledge. That's not being as helpful to students becoming those fully skilled readers."

Please see CURRICULUM, Page A7

Here's what you need to know about voter ID

The window for requesting early ballots is open in Nebraska

MARTHA STODDARD
World-Herald Bureau

LINCOLN — Nebraskans have started encountering the state's new voter identification requirements now that the window for requesting early ballots is open.

Initial reports from counties show that things have been going smoothly so far, said Jackie Ourada, a spokeswoman for the Secretary of State's Office. She said local officials reported that voters have been following the new requirements when returning their early ballot requests.

Voters could start asking for early ballots last week, although the ballots themselves will not be ready to go in the mail until April 8. Voters can cast early ballots in person at county election offices starting April 15.



Evnen

A constitutional amendment passed by voters in 2022, followed by a state law in 2023, set out the requirements. They are going into effect for Nebraska's May 14 primary election.

"Every Nebraska voter should be thinking about how voter ID will impact their voting plan, whether that will be presenting an ID in the early voting process or showing up to the polls with an acceptable form of ID," said Secretary of State Bob Evnen.

In Douglas County, there have been no issues with the first few early ballot requests and relatively few questions, said Valerie Stoj, public relations coordinator for the Douglas County Election Commission.

Please see BALLOTS, Page A2

Restaurant rebound

Omaha restaurant owners hope to rebound after winter storms cause a sales slump. **Midlands**

Traffic Hot Spots

Broken water mains are disrupting Omaha roads. **Midlands**

Weather

High: 28 Low: 25
Windy, not as cold Details: A18

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ANNA REED PHOTOS, THE WORLD-HERALD

Jill Klich leads a reading lesson in her first grade classroom in November at Ralston's Wildewood Elementary.

Curriculum

From A1

The Nebraska Department of Education revised its English language arts standards in 2021 to align with evidence-based practices. This is something districts across the nation are also doing as more schools recognize that curriculum based on the science of reading is the best way to teach students how to read.

The Education Department says on its website that all districts should be fully implementing the new standards by the current 2023-24 school year. But because Nebraska is a local control state, there's no requirement for districts to do so and schools don't have to use the science of reading in their curriculum.

Many Nebraska districts have been updating their curriculum to reflect the new state standards, but some districts still depend on outdated materials. Some of the strategies being used aren't only rated ineffective, but experts say they actually are harmful to students who are learning to read.

One key shift in Nebraska's reading standards calls for teachers to provide explicit instruction in phonological awareness, phonics and fluency — skills that the science of reading has found essential. But some curriculum materials in current use are based on an approach called balanced literacy, which doesn't emphasize these skills and doesn't teach them systematically, according to the Iowa Reading Research Center.

Research and reporting, such as the investigative podcast "Sold a Story," have exposed that America's poor reading scores have been linked to schools' use of balanced literacy curriculum.

After all, roughly 60% of Nebraska fourth graders are currently not proficient readers, meaning they read at a basic or below basic level.

This is a problem that has existed since the 1990s — and researchers say updated, science-based curriculum materials, coupled with training teachers on how to effectively use them, will help improve reading scores.

Curriculum choices across Nebraska

Tabitha O'Riley knows well the struggle of how curriculum materials can affect a child's reading. She's a mother of three children in the Louisville Public Schools and her two sons, in second grade and fourth grade, had trouble with reading since they entered kindergarten.

O'Riley said both sons were diagnosed with dyslexia after years of low reading scores and failed interventions. Like around the nation, many Nebraska schools don't offer much support for students with dyslexia. Research has estimated that at least one in five students has dyslexia and will only succeed in reading with structured, evidence-based in-



First grader Bash Stander raises his hand during a November reading lesson at Wildewood.

struction, which is not offered in balanced literacy methods.

"I mean, we were reading 30 minutes every night," O'Riley said. "We were doing what they were asking us to do and any gains that we were getting were so small and it just didn't make sense."

Louisville uses Really Great Reading, a program that was found to only partially meet expectations for alignment to research-based practices, according to EdReports, an instructional materials reviewing company.

For example, in its review of Really Great Reading's first grade materials, EdReports says they contain some needed skills but are missing things like explicit instruction in the formation of letters. The materials also don't include all five components of skilled reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension.

O'Riley said her sons lost so much confidence in school they no longer wanted to go. She eventually pulled them from all reading instruction because she didn't think it worked for them.

Instead, she enrolled them in an after-school private tutoring program that cost her family \$800 to \$1,000 a month, but helped both children reach grade-level benchmarks for reading. Louisville officials didn't return multiple requests for comment.

Ralston had used curriculum materials under a program called Collaborative Literacy before switching to the Amplify CKLA reading program this year. Collaborative Literacy earned lower ratings for evidence-based practices on EdReports, while Amplify CKLA has high ratings.

The district chose to switch materials to align with new state standards, said Sara Zabrowski-Gates, director of teaching and learning. Because Ralston was using federal COVID-19 relief aid to purchase new curriculum, they were required to choose a company that had high ratings on EdReports, she said.

The Nebraska Department of Education has partnered with other local organizations to offer EdReports reviews, along with other curriculum resources, on the website called the Nebraska Instructional Materials Collaborative.

"We've been getting a lot of positive feedback," Zabrowski-Gates said about Amplify CKLA. "At first it was 'Oh my gosh, it's rigorous, this is hard for kids.' And now we're starting to see it shift. It's rigorous, but we're seeing that it's a good thing."

Ralston officials piloted Amplify CKLA in the 2022-23 school year. The district has representatives from each grade level at every elementary school on a team to help give feedback on the program.

Anne Harley, Ralston's assistant superintendent of teaching and learning, said that while the materials may be more challenging, they contain research-based strategies and are working well for other districts.

Previous curriculum based on balanced literacy often encourages students to use word analogies and pictures or context to identify words, a method called "three-cueing." This approach has been criticized by cognitive scientists, who found that people who rely on context to identify words are poor readers.

"When we're saying just take a guess or let the picture help you or use pattern text — we've done that for years and years," Harley said. "And, you know ... know better, do better."

Reading curriculum changing in Nebraska schools

Many Nebraska districts have either switched to Amplify CKLA in the past few years or are in the process of doing so now. In the Omaha metro area, Bennington has the program while Papillion La Vista is currently piloting it. Like Ralston, the Lincoln Public Schools are also implementing Amplify CKLA this school year.

Lincoln switched from McGraw Hill's Reading Wonders, said Takako Olson, director of curriculum, instruction and assessment. She said Reading Wonders has been one of the most popular English language arts programs used in Nebraska. Some districts use updated versions that include more evidence-based strategies, but Lincoln's version was older and had a balanced literacy approach.

"We really wanted to make sure we were switching from balanced

literacy, which is a recent practice that we used, to structured literacy, or the science of reading," Olson said.

Other highly-rated curriculum includes the latest version of Reading Wonders, Into Reading and Wit & Wisdom, all used by the Millard, Omaha, Gretna and Westside districts.

The Bellevue Public Schools will be using Wit & Wisdom as part of their materials next year, but they also use Really Great Reading, the same company that Louisville uses.

Like Lincoln, the Grand Island Public Schools used an old version of Reading Wonders before switching to Amplify CKLA four years ago. Brittney Bills, the elementary English language arts curriculum coordinator at the time, helped the district with the change. Bills is now a principal in the Blair Community Schools.

Bills said she researched the company before Amplify CKLA was selected but did receive some pushback from teachers when it was implemented. She said teachers who didn't agree with the new curriculum were used to balanced literacy.

"I would say higher education is a big problem here — they are clinging to that practice, even though there is evidence that it's actually detrimental to kids," Bills said. "It's really hard to articulate how tightly some people hold on to some of these practices, and I think a lot of it is rooted in fear, that what they loved about their classrooms has to go away when they start using different materials. And that's really not the case. In my experience, it's the complete opposite."

Bills said Grand Island students began to enjoy reading more and proficiency scores even jumped in some of the district's lowest-performing schools.

Katherine Sauer helped the Lit-tichfield Public Schools, a district of about 120 students northwest of Grand Island, switch to Amplify CKLA last year as a first grade teacher.

"My group went from having a lot of kids who were not quite where the benchmark was to very few that were not there at semester," Sauer said. "And I mean, to the point that our principal was like, 'This is awesome. This is amazing. It's working.'"

Teacher training essential

Bills said a lot of schools describe the materials they use as the curriculum, but it's how teachers use the materials that makes the difference.

"I would argue that those materials themselves are not sufficient to be considered a correct curriculum," she said.

Especially for teachers who didn't receive the proper training in the science of reading during college, there's extra work needed in order to know how to teach children to read correctly.

Many schools have been starting to offer professional development to help teachers learn the "why" behind the science of reading. One training that's gain-

ing popularity is LETRS by Lexia, a nationally renowned curriculum and professional development company that specializes in the science of reading.

Megan Hammer works at Educational Service Unit No. 6 in Milford, Nebraska, helping schools with curriculum development while also being a certified LETRS trainer. She hosts training sessions with as many as 40 teachers at a time, but there are fewer than 10 trainers like her across the state.

"LETRS was the best professional learning I've had around English language arts instruction in my 25 years (in the job)," Hammer said.

One of the biggest challenges for schools wanting to use LETRS is that it's expensive and time consuming — it can cost thousands of dollars to train a group of teachers in a two-year program.

Some states have provided LETRS training with millions of dollars of funding. Nebraska offered some funded LETRS training this year, but it served only a limited number and might not continue next year.

Accountability of school districts

Roughly 30 states have passed laws that include some sort of science of reading requirement in public school systems, according to a 2023 study by FutureEd, an independent think tank at Georgetown University.

Kansas, Oklahoma, Utah, Michigan and North Dakota are among states that require schools to implement instruction based on the science of reading. Some states, including Missouri, Colorado, Indiana, Mississippi and Texas, also require or recommend the use of materials from a state-approved list.

In a few states, such as Arkansas, Louisiana and Florida, the three-cueing method is banned.

Nebraska doesn't have rules like that for its school districts, Hammer said, because of its long tradition of allowing local school control. Districts aren't required to select certain companies for their reading curriculum or choose from a state-approved list.

"There's no penalty at this point for not having a more aligned program, but there's probably going to be more pressure on schools to make sure that they're using programs that are more aligned with the science of reading," Hammer said.

For O'Riley, Nebraska's lack of a state-mandated literacy policy has prompted her family to move to Missouri. They will be packing up their things this year to move to a district she knows will use curriculum and instruction based on the science of reading.

"For my husband and I, it's so hard because we both love education so much," O'Riley said. "But it's like, why can't our kids read or why is this not paying off?"