

OPS uses reading program despite criticism

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The Omaha Public Schools uses a reading intervention program to help struggling students that schools in Nebraska and elsewhere dropped amid questions about whether it is effective.

The Omaha district in 2022 implemented Reading Recovery, a one-on-one tutoring program for first graders, at three of its lowest-performing elementary schools, all located in North Omaha. The first year produced few achievement gains, based on OPS numbers, but officials said they hope to see improvement as the program develops and even expands to more schools.

The program has been around since the 1980s. It has come under scrutiny because researchers say it includes an instructional method that teaches children poor reading habits. At least 10 states have banned that meth-



OMAHA PUBLIC SCHOOLS VIDEO/SCREENSHOT BY NIKOS FRAZIER, THE WORLD-HERALD
In this screenshot of an Omaha Public Schools video taken from a Board of Education meeting on Oct. 18, 2021, Minne Lusa Elementary School student Alice participates in a Reading Recovery lesson with an instructor.

od's use, although not the program itself.

Besides OPS, few, if any, Nebraska districts use Reading Rec-

covery, according to the Nebraska Department of Education. In fact, some districts, including the Lincoln Public Schools, have

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 fourth story in the series.

abandoned the program because they have shifted to reading instruction that cognitive scientists believe are more effective.

Based on research into the science of reading, many states, including Nebraska, now emphasize an approach called "structured literacy." This is systemic way of teaching reading skills, explicitly based on a body of research about how humans learn to read and how reading should

Reading

From A1

be taught.

That's a shift away from an approach known as "balanced literacy," in which phonics, decoding and spelling may be taught in lessons, but the skills typically are not emphasized and rarely taught systematically. Students are sometimes encouraged to use word analogies and pictures or context to guess words.

Cognitive scientists have found that people who rely on context to identify words become poor readers, especially in later grades.

Nebraska has been focusing on the science of reading in the last few years — from incorporating it into teacher colleges, elementary curriculum and even this year's legislative session — as a way to improve the state's reading scores. State test data from the 2022-23 school year shows just 55% of fourth graders statewide met grade-level standards in English language arts.

OPS, where only 37% of fourth graders met those standards, has a basic curriculum based on structured literacy. However, two years ago, it added Reading Recovery as one of its supplemental interventions for early readers who struggle. Miki Holbeck, coordinator of early literacy for OPS, said Reading Recovery is part of improvement plans in Belvedere, Minne Lusa and Fontenelle Elementary Schools. Central Park, another OPS elementary, added the program in August.

75% who finished program made few gains

OPS is spending \$358,000 on Reading Recovery for the 2023-24 school year, according to officials.

OPS teachers in schools that use it identify struggling first graders to take part in Reading Recovery based on their year-end kindergarten assessments. Each student then meets one-on-one with a Reading Recovery teacher for 30 minutes every day for 12 to 20 weeks. Reading Recovery teachers go through specialized training to be able to teach the program.

But during the district's first year of implementation in 2022-23, students in the Reading Recovery program did not improve their reading very much.

Just four of the 32 students who completed the program reached grade-level standards while another four made gains but not enough to catch up with their class.



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The remaining 24 students — 75% of those who completed the program — made much less progress and will need ongoing intervention. Sixteen others either didn't complete the program or moved schools before they finished.

OPS officials said they expect this year's results to be better. Nationwide, roughly 72% of students who complete the program achieve grade-level standards, according to the Reading Recovery Council of North America.

"I really wasn't sure what to expect with it being the first year," said Holbeck, the Omaha district's early literacy coordinator. "(There's also) the staffing shortage in Omaha Public Schools, so some of our Reading Recovery teachers were actually covering classrooms in addition to being Reading Recovery teachers. But this is baseline data. We're excited about our journey"

Critics of Reading Recovery say they think the program itself is flawed. While it teaches phonics, they say, children don't receive enough explicit and systematic instruction in how to decode words.

Moreover, a main critique is that Reading Recovery uses the "three-cueing" method, named for the three different sources of information that teachers tell students to use: context or pictures; the way words are arranged; and letters or parts of words.

In three-cueing, when students encounter difficult words, they are often prompted with questions like "Does it look right?" "Does it sound right?" "Does it make sense?"

Such prompts "can be appropriate in other instructional contexts, such as when a student is encour-

aged to use illustrations to support deeper comprehension of stories, but they are not effective strategies or prompts for teaching students to read words on a page," according to a Louisiana Department of Education article.

Three-cueing is the reason why the Lincoln Public Schools dropped Reading Recovery in 2021, said Takako Olson, director of curriculum and instruction. The district had used the program for more than a decade before switching to an intervention within its new Amplify CKLA curriculum, which is based more on structured literacy.

"We wanted to move in the direction of not grouping students by a text level, but instead really focusing on what literacy skill they really needed, and particularly on the phonics and phonemic awareness skills," Olson said. "We did not want to do three-cueing anymore, which is part of Reading Recovery"

Some states are even banning learning material that contains three-cueing. After Ohio banned the approach last year, the Reading Recovery Council of North America filed a lawsuit against the state.

OPS's Holbeck said whenever she reads critiques of Reading Recovery, she wonders if the critics have ever observed a lesson.

"There's so much phonics and phonological awareness in every Reading Recovery lesson, and so I read sometimes these other ideas about Reading Recovery, and I think it's just not what I see," Holbeck said.

Program often helps at first, but success fades

Each Reading Recovery tutoring

READING RECOVERY

Reading Recovery was developed in the 1970s by Marie Clay, a New Zealand educator and psychologist, before it was implemented in the U.S. in the 1980s. The program is an intervention for first graders who struggle with reading.

In 2010, Reading Recovery was awarded a \$55 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education to be implemented across the nation. More than 2 million children have participated in the program.

Reading Recovery teachers provide daily 30-minute, one-on-one tutoring lessons for 12 to 20 weeks. Each lesson begins with re-reading familiar books, followed by word and letter work, story composition, assembling a cut-up sentence, and previewing and reading a new book. The program uses leveled books, meaning students will advance to more complex text as they progress.

lesson begins with re-reading familiar books, followed by word and letter work, story composition, assembling a cut-up sentence, and previewing and reading a new book, according to the Reading Recovery Council. Books are divided by level, and students advance to the next level in the program once they succeeded with their work.

In Lincoln, the district saw many students succeed with Reading Recovery, but they weren't as successful in reading in later grades, said Lisa Oltman, K-6 English language arts curriculum specialist for LPS.

"When students are reading on primary level texts, it can be pretty successful because you're also looking at the picture or meaning, you're thinking about what would sound right," Oltman said. "When you get to fourth grade, that text is much more complex and there aren't as many pictures. That's where you really have to rely on those strong decoding skills to figure out what those words are."

A national study of Reading Recovery that began in 2011 found a substantial boost in reading achievement for first graders. However, a follow-up study presented in 2022 found that Reading Recovery students subsequently fell behind again and by fourth grade were far worse readers than other low-performing students who didn't receive the tutoring.

"As we look at what the research

says, what we have decided is: 'Wow — if we stop using three-cueing and Reading Recovery and instead use a structured literacy approach, focused on phonemic awareness and phonics skills, we are positioning our students much better going into the third, fourth and fifth grades,'" Oltman said.

OPS school board members viewed an example of a Reading Recovery lesson in October 2021, before implementing the program. In the video, the three-cueing prompts are written in the teacher's notes while working with a first grader. The teacher also uses a book's illustrations to guide the student while reading, asking if certain aspects of the images make sense with the text.

Holbeck said that the 2021 video is outdated and that the district's program no longer uses some practices like the prompts that were shown.

"As our teachers were being trained, they may have been using some reading supports on students that we are shifting away from," Holbeck said.

Holbeck said Reading Recovery works perfectly with OPS's English language arts curriculum, which is based on the science of reading. She said the program doesn't teach students to guess words.

"I don't know anything about Lincoln Public Schools and their choices or what they're doing curricularly. But I do believe Reading Recovery was around before the term balanced literacy became so popular," Holbeck said, adding that the program is only a supplemental intervention. "It does not replace the explicit and systematic, whole group instruction that students are getting from their classroom teacher."

OPS's goal is to expand the program to two other elementary schools — Liberty and Castelar — but Holbeck said there currently aren't enough teachers to do so.

The Nebraska Department of Education doesn't have any concerns with OPS using the program, said spokesman David Jespersen.

"That program is used primarily as an added curriculum, and we think that's how OPS is using it too," Jespersen said. "This would be an intervention to help specific students, a supplemental program. As such it has been shown to be successful in many studies. We haven't seen anything that would call it harmful. It can be expensive and there might be other interventions that are becoming more popular and effective."