EFFECTIVE THIRD GRADE WORD READING PRACTICES

A UTAH LEADING THROUGH EFFECTIVE, ACTIONABLE, AND DYNAMIC EDUCATION

INNOVATIVE PRACTICE REPORT

ULEAD EDUCATION

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

Utah Leading through Effective, Actionable, and Dynamic (ULEAD) Education was created to find, research, and highlight proven practices in Utah schools for replication statewide. ULEAD partners with practitioners, researchers, and education organizations to develop and curate resources, foster collaboration, and drive systemic change for improved student outcomes. The ULEAD Clearinghouse is a growing repository of innovative, effective, and efficient practice resources and tools to support educators.

The ULEAD Steering Committee, composed of current Utah educators and stakeholders, meets quarterly to inform the focus priorities that ULEAD will research. ULEAD uses data to find positive outliers in each focus area and create reports, such as this one, illuminating the practices and policies that lead to positive outcomes. At the time of this report, these priorities include: Student Attendance, Educator Retention and Job Satisfaction, Academic Achievement through Strategic Engagement through Technology, Middle Grade Mathematics, Early Literacy, and Multilingual Learner Achievement.

This report addresses effective teaching strategies to support Science of Reading implementation in early grades with a specific focus on high leverage classroom practices. ULEAD collaborates with Institutes of Higher Education and education practitioners to develop Innovative Practice Reports. This report was developed in partnership with Utah State University.

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What we have learned from decades of research is that **reading is a highly complex task** that involves many **interconnected and codependent linguistic processes** that draw upon a variety of separate skills. When these various mechanics are well established, reading happens automatically and effortlessly.

(Hasbrouck & Glaser, 2018, p. 2)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Surveys and interviews were conducted with teachers across ten identified Title 1 and non-Title 1schools to illuminate third-grade classroom literacy practices and specifically higlight high-leverage practices common among outlier teachers.

Third grade teachers were identified as outliers using Acadience Oral Reading Fluency scores and comparing beginning-of-year to middle-of-year achievement to develop an effect size. Outlier teachers had classroom effect sizes at least two standard deviations from the average effect size.

In this study, some non-outliers were included for comparison. For this reason, only schools with at least one outlier teacher are identified, but names are omitted.

Bloomington Hills Elementary School

Coral Canyon Elementary School

Crimson View Elementary School

Heritage Elementary School

Legacy Elementary

Little Valley Elementary School

Majestic Fields Elementary

Sandstone Elementary School

South Mesa Elementary

Sunset Elementary School

Reading proficiently by the end of third grade is crucial for future academic success. Utah has set a goal of having 70% of third graders reading at grade level by July 2027 and has implemented changes to improve reading instruction. A large school district surveyed and interviewed its third-grade teachers to understand their reading practices. This research revealed key differences in teaching strategies between "outlier" teachers (those whose students showed high reading achievement) and other teachers.

Outlier teachers use **specific decoding and fluency practices** and **explicitly prioritize instructional tasks** including:

- **Phoneme-grapheme mapping**
- **Blending and word building**
- **Multisyllabic word reading routines**
- **Morphology instruction**
- **Reading decodable text**
- **Repeated reading**
- **Choral reading**
- **Dyad reading**
- **Practicing fluency phrases**
- **High-frequency word instruction and practice**
- **Using grade-level text**

In contrast, other teachers frequently used less effective practices, such as differentiating instruction based on text level, conducting one-minute fluency timings (not for assessment), and relying on isolated worksheet practice during center time. By identifying and replacing these low-leverage practices with more effective strategies, schools can potentially replicate the success of outlier teachers and boost student reading achievement.

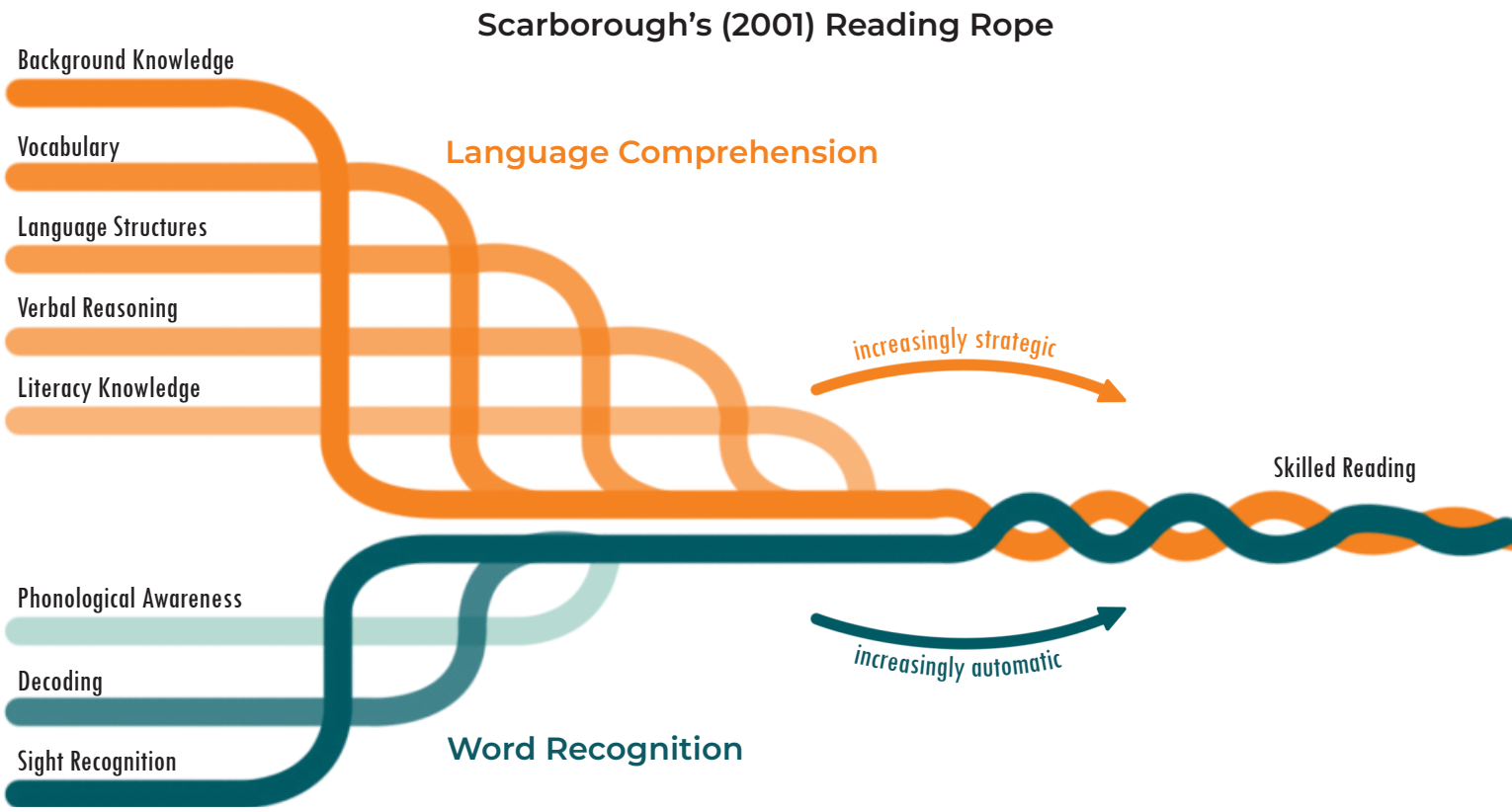
THE SCIENCE OF READING

Literacy is so deeply rooted in our culture that "we often take for granted the complex cognitive abilities that are required to read effortlessly" (Norton & Wolf, 2012, p. 428). Educators need to understand the complex science behind teaching and learning to read to help students achieve success across subject areas. The Science of Reading (SOR) is an interdisciplinary body of research, conducted over the past fifty years, which provides evidence-based methods and techniques for effective reading instruction (National Center on Improving Literacy, 2022; The Reading League, 2022). SOR-aligned approaches include instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension using evidence-based practices. The Reading League's (2022) definition of the SOR is "a vast, interdisciplinary body of scientifically based research about reading and issues related to reading and writing" (p. 6).

The Simple View of Reading, empirically validated in over 150 scientific studies, asserts that reading comprehension is the confluence of word recognition and language comprehension (Gough & Turner, 1986).

(The Reading League, 2022)

A more nuanced description of reading processes, Scarborough's Reading Rope breaks down the subcomponents within word recognition and language comprehension.



Both word recognition and language comprehension, as outlined in Scarborough's Reading Rope, benefit from evidence-based, high-leverage teaching strategies validated by rigorous research.

In recent years, 40 states and the District of Columbia passed SOR legislation with the intention of increasing reading proficiency for their students. Senate Bill 127 Early Literacy Outcomes Improvement (2022) required professional learning for K-3 general education teachers, special education teachers, coaches, principals, and local education agency leaders in the Science of Reading to ensure effective implementation of evidence-based practices in order to improve literacy instruction and student outcomes across the state (USBE, 2023b). As educators began completing their professional learning, USBE began observing classrooms across the state, looking at how that learning was implemented and what impact it had on classroom practices.

Promoting Word Reading Accuracy and Text Reading Fluency in Third Grade Readers

Two important predictors of reading comprehension are word reading accuracy and text reading fluency (National Reading Panel [NRP], 2000b; Castles et al., 2018). Accurate reading allows the reader to access the word meanings stored in their lexicon, and thus promotes understanding

(Tortorelli et al., 2024). Studies indicate that 95%-98% of words in a text must be known by the reader to understand the text (Schmitt et al., 2011). Since inaccurate reading hinders vocabulary use, it is a key consideration in early reading instruction..

Another major predictor of reading comprehension is text reading fluency. Generally understood as reading text smoothly, accurately, and with expression, reading fluently allows a reader to process text with such efficiency that sufficient cognitive resources are available for comprehension (Kuhn et al., 2011). The National Reading Panel's review of literature found fluency "represents a level of expertise beyond word recognition accuracy, and reading comprehension may be aided by fluency" (NRP, 2000a, p. 3-3). The study went on to conclude that skilled readers are rapid, efficient, and accurate which shifts the reader's cognitive load from reading to comprehension.

The Third Grade Context

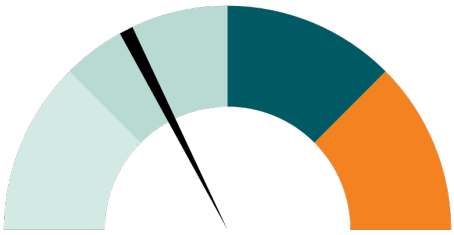
Reading on grade level by the end of third grade is an important predictor for future reading success. This is because foundational skills, such as phonemic awareness, basic letter/sound correspondence, and monosyllabic decoding, should be mastered by the time students enter third grade. Additionally, third-grade reading skill predicts achievement in eighth grade and even high school graduation (Lesnick et al., 2010). One longitudinal study of nearly 4,000 students found that third graders who are not proficient readers are four times less likely to graduate high school. That likelihood increases to six times less likely if they have not mastered basic reading skills by the end of third grade (Hernandez, 2011). In Utah, Senate Bill 127 was passed in the 2022 legislative session and established an aggressive goal of 70% of Utah's third graders reading on grade level by July 2027.

DISTRICT PROFILE

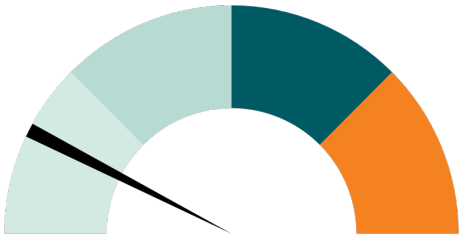
The Washington County School District (WCSD) is the sixth-largest school district in Utah, with a K-5 enrollment over15,000 students (USBE, 2024). The school district maintains 28 elementary schools in the towns of Enterprise, Hildale, Hurricane, Ivins, La Verkin, Santa Clara, Springdale, St. George, and Washington. Eleven elementary schools receive Title I funding. The student population is predominantly White (76%), with Hispanic and Latino students (17%) comprising the largest minority group. Thirty percent of the students in WCSD qualify for free or reduced lunch (n = 10,916). Each elementary school in WCSD has a principal and learning coach. Schools with Title I funding have an Assistant Principal and receive support from six district-level specialists, one assigned to each elementary grade.

In May of 2023, USBE created a rubric to determine the level of SOR implementation. Educators scoring 90% or higher were recognized with an SOR Award. Two Washington County School District employees were recognized. Amy Mitchell, the Title I Director for WCSD, and Kathy Hall, the WCSD Elementary Literacy Coordinator, were nominated by district personnel. The recipients of this award were considered key to helping Utah reach its goal of at least 70% of third grade students reading on grade level.

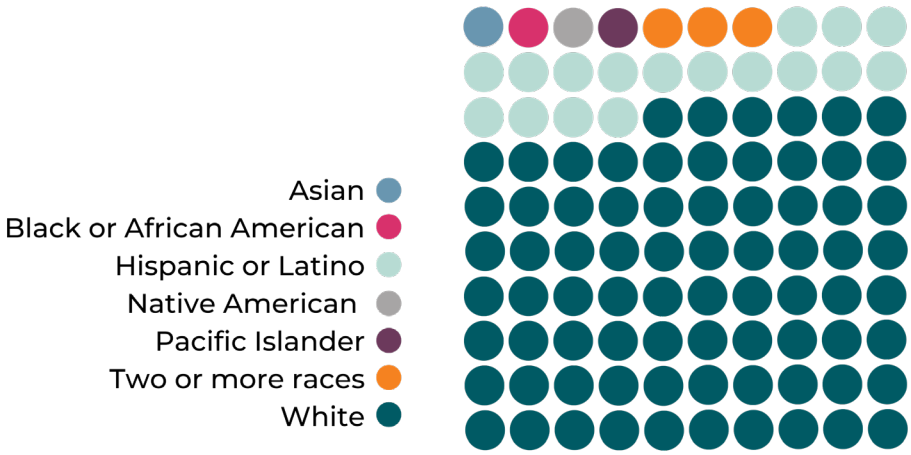
An examination of WCSD's efforts in Instructional Design Clarity for Early Literacy was highlighted in the previously released report "Supporting the Science of Reading: Instructional Design Clarity" and the related panel discussion "Early Literacy & Instructional Clarity."

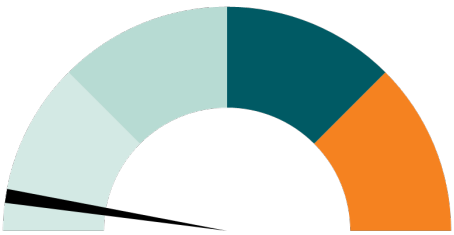


32%
Economically Disadvantaged



14%
Students with Disabilities





6%
Multilingual Learners

OUTLIER IDENTIFICATION

The Acadience Reading assessment was used to identify outliers. Acadience is a state-wide benchmark assessment administered three times yearly that measures student foundational reading proficiency. Each grade level assessment consists of multiple subtests that are calculated into a composite score.

This project used oral reading fluency (ORF) data collected at the beginning and middle of the 2023-2024 school year. ORF was selected as the primary measure for this project because it is a reliable predictor of reading comprehension and includes both accuracy and fluency. ORF is a strong predictor of reading comprehension because fluent, accurate reading allows students to dedicate cognitive resources to understanding what is read instead of focusing on the task of reading itself (Fuchs et al. 2001; Shanahan, 2016; White et al., 2021).

According to a report examining the ORF on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), "ORF has become the primary measurement technique for determining which students may be on track toward meeting state reading standards and which students would benefit from additional services and intervention" (White et al., 2021, p. 2).

Effect size is a statistical measure that indicates the magnitude of an intervention's impact or the strength of a relationship between variables. An effect size was calculated for each third-grade classroom based on the change in students' average ORF scores from beginning- to middle-of-the-year (Hedges & Olkin, 1985). Effect sizes were sorted by Title I status and ranked from highest to lowest. Teachers were identified as outliers if their classroom effect size was at least two standard deviations from the average effect size. More information on the calculation of effect size can be found in Appendix A.

The non-outlier group consisted of teachers whose student groups had average or below-average scores. Outlier third grade teachers were identified at the following schools:

Title I Schools
- Heritage Elementary School
- Legacy Elementary
- Sandstone Elementary School
- Sunset Elementary School

Non-Title I Schools
- Bloomington Hills Elementary School
- Coral Canyon Elementary School
- Crimson View Elementary School
- Little Valley Elementary School
- Majestic Fields Elementary
- South Mesa Elementary

Outlier teachers from both Title I schools and non-Title I schools were invited to participate in a brief survey of instructional practices and a follow-up 20-minute recorded interview conducted via Zoom. To help triangulate findings, non-outlier teachers were also invited to participate in the survey and interview.

In total, five outlier and ten non-outlier teachers participated in the project. Data analysis involved reviewing surveys and thematically coding interview transcripts. While some themes emerged in both outlier and non-outlier groups, the following themes were more prominent in the outlier group and supported by the research literature.

	Student Population	Title 1 Status	Locale	% Racial Minority	% Low Income	% Limited English	% Students with Disabilities
Bloomington Hills Elementary	589		Rural - Fringe	21%	32%	3%	16%
Coral Canyon Elementary	519		Suburban - Midsize	35%	58%	13%	20%
Crimson View Elementary	534		City - Midsize	14%	15%	2%	16%
Heritage Elementary	461	✓	City - Midsize	36%	58%	15%	18%
Legacy Elementary	566	✓	City - Midsize	61%	62%	38%	21%
Little Valley Elementary	622		City - Midsize	8%	12%	<1%	14%
Majestic Fields Elementary	713		Suburban - Midsize	11%	14%	2%	17%
Sandstone Elementary	491	✓	City - Midsize	50%	66%	21%	23%
South Mesa Elementary	593	✓	Rural - Distant	11%	14%	1%	15%
Sunset Elementary	452		City - Midsize	40%	61%	12%	21%

(USBE, 2024)

PRACTICE IN ACTION

Theme 1: Outlier Teachers Used Decoding and Fluency Practices

Outlier teachers consistently integrated both decoding and fluency practices into their daily instruction. Survey and interview data revealed that outlier teachers were more likely than non-outlier teachers to emphasize the use of decoding and fluency practices in their classroom. The following practices were frequently mentioned by the outlier teachers:

Frequently Mentioned Decoding Practices:

- Phoneme-grapheme mapping
- Blending and word building
- Multisyllabic word reading routines
- Morphology instruction (prefixes, suffixes, roots)
- Reading decodable text

Frequently Mentioned Fluency Practices:

- Repeated Reading
- Choral reading
- Dyad reading
- Practicing fluency phrases
- High-frequency word instruction and practice
- Using grade-level text

Decoding Practices

Phonological awareness, decoding, and sight recognition of words are the three key elements in word recognition (Scarborough, 2001). Decoding is "the ability to translate a word from print to speech, usually by employing knowledge of sound-symbol correspondences; also, the act of deciphering a new word by sounding it out" (Foorman et al., 2016, p. 38). The National Reading Panel's (2000a) review of over 10,000 reading studies found teaching students to recognize word parts, words, and decode were some of the most effective instructional techniques because they build automaticity and fluency. While students may be able to apply various reading strategies, "even the best reading comprehension strategies cannot compensate for a student who is unable to accurately decode the words" making decoding a critical skill for early readers (Heggie and Wade-Woolley, 2017, p. 88).

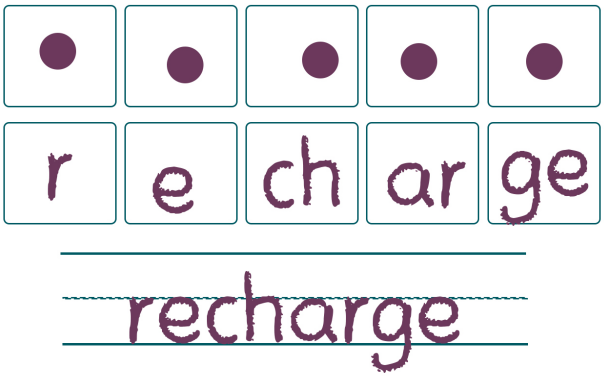
Phoneme-Grapheme Mapping Instruction

Phoneme-grapheme mapping helps students visually connect sounds (phonemes) and letters (graphemes), relating each letter or letter combination to its corresponding sound. This process fosters an understanding of the alphabetic principle—the "systematic and predictable relationship between written letters and spoken sounds" (Armbruster et al., 2010, p. 11). Research indicates that direct, explicit, and systematic instruction in phoneme-grapheme mapping accelerates learning and can potentially overcome phonological processing challenges in letter-sound development (NRP, 2000b; Piasta & Wagner, 2010; Earle & Sayeski, 2016).

Blending and Word Building Practice

Students connect their knowledge of letters and sounds with phonemic awareness to improve spelling and pronunciation. Blending, a key component of this connection, involves combining individual phonemes to form words, as well as combining onsets and rimes to create syllables, and then combining syllables to form complete words (Armbruster et al., 2010, p. 6). Explicit instruction in phonological awareness, includ-

Phoneme-Grapheme Mapping



Word Building Practice

The sound a is spelled ai.
A b is at the beginning. A t is at the end. What is the word? [bait]

Change the t to l. What is the new word? [bail]

Change the b to t. What is the new word? [tail]

Add a t to make the /tr/ sound.
What did you add? [r]
What is the new word? [trail]

Make the word plural.
What did you add? [s]
What is the new word? [trails]

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ing blending, has been shown to be highly effective in numerous studies (NRP, 2000b; Foorman et al., 2016; Jonas, 2019).

Multisyllabic Word Reading Routines

Syllables, consisting of a vowel sound and surrounding consonants, are fundamental building blocks of words. Targeted practice in reading multisyllabic words is essential for developing reading proficiency, as over 90% of English words contain more than one syllable (Heggie & Wade-Woolley, 2017). Effective strategies for improving multisyllabic word reading include both syllable- and morpheme-based approaches (Kearns & Whaley, 2018). While multisyllabic words are so prevalent, research on word recognition has historically focused primarily on monosyllabic words, highlighting a gap in the understanding of how readers process longer words.

Morphology Instruction (prefixes, suffixes, roots)

Understanding meaningful word parts (morphemes) helps students decode and comprehend whole words. The What Works Clearinghouse practice guide on foundational reading skills found strong evidence to support teaching students to "decode words, analyze word parts, and write and recognize words," citing six studies with positive morphology outcomes (Foorman et al., 2016, p. 74). Because the four most common prefixes and suffixes account for 97% of all prefixed and suffixed words in printed school English, explicit instruction in morphology is particularly valuable (Honig et al., 2000).

Reading Decodable Text

Decodable text, also known as controlled text, is specifically designed to reinforce word reading skills that students are currently learning or have previously mastered. While research specifically on the use of decodable text is limited, there's broad agreement that students need to practice newly acquired skills, and that decodable texts can be a valuable tool for this practice (NRP, 2000a; Shanahan, 2024; Shanahan, 2005). The What Works Clearinghouse practice guide for foundational reading skills recommends practicing decodable words both in isolation and within connected text, finding strong evidence to support the value of decoding words in context (Foorman et al., 2016).

Template for Replication: Decoding

According to the Utah State Board of Education (USBE) English Language Arts (ELA) standards, students should monosyllabic phonics skills by the end of second grade (2.R.4, USBE, 2023a). Any remaining monosyllabic phonics needs should be identified through a reliable diagnostic screener and addressed systematically during Tier II intervention time. For third grade, the Utah has the following decoding standard:

Standard 3.R.3: Demonstrate mastery of age-appropriate phonics skills.

a. Identify and begin using the combined knowledge of all letter-sound correspondences, syllabication patterns, morphology (e.g., roots and affixes), and etymology to accurately read unfamiliar multisyllabic words in and out of contex

b. Read and spell words with all six syllable types (i.e., open, closed, CVCe, vowel team, vowel-r, consonant -le) in multisyllabic words.

c. Identify and know the meaning of the most common prefixes and derivational suffixes.

d. Identify the unaccented syllable in multisyllabic words (e.g., nation, active, atomic) when reading and spelling.

e. Read and spell common irregular words (USBE, 2023a)

This standard suggests that third-grade Tier I decoding instruction should focus on promoting accurate reading of long words with multiple syllables of varying syllable types and polymorphemic words with common prefixes and derivational suffixes.

How 'Long' Should the Words be?

Students should be accurately blending words with 5-6 phonemes by the end of second grade (2.R.3, USBE, 2023a). Therefore, words with 5-6 phonemes could be considered a minimum threshold for decoding instruction in third grade. Another approach is to scaffold instruction based on the number of syllables found in grade-level texts. Kearns & Hiebert (2022) found that 98% of unfamiliar words in second- and third-grade core reading programs were four syllables or less, suggesting that third-grade decoding instruction should emphasize words with 3-4 syllables.

How to Teach Students to Read Long Words

Research suggests that teaching explicit strategies for reading long words can improve students' word reading accuracy (Kearns & Whaley, 2018). Two common instructional approaches include Carol O'Connor's Every Syllable Has At Least One Vowel (ESHALOV) and Anita Archer's Overt Strategy (O'Connor, 2015; Archer et al., 2011).

ESHALOV includes understanding that every syllale must have a vowel and syllables divide into predictable patterns. To use the strategy:

1. Underline all the vowels.
2. Connect vowel teams.
3. Seperate the word into syllables.
4. Read each syllable.
5. Read the word.

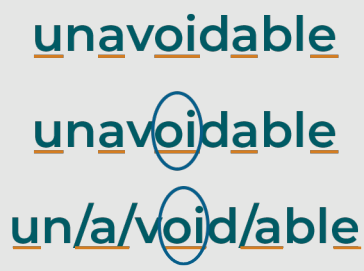
The Overt Strategy includes the following steps:

1. Circle the prefixes.
2. Circle the suffixes.
3. Underline the letters representing vowel sounds.
4. Say the parts of the word.
5. Make it a real word.

These approaches contain notable overlap, particularly the use of both syllabic and morphologic strategies for decoding words. These are simple, flexible approaches that students can begin to incorporate within days of being introduced (O'Connor et al., 2015).

Long Word Reading Strategy Examples

ESHALOV



Overt

Fluency Practices

Fluency is characterized by the ability to accurately read grade-level texts aloud with appropriate rate and suitable expression (Hasbrouck & Glaser, 2018). When students read fluently, they can more easily comprehend texts because their cognitive effort is focused on making meaning rather than decoding (Perfetti, 2007; Sabatini et al., 2019; Snow et al., 1998). Recognizing and reading familiar words, along with the ability to decode unfamiliar words, are foundational skills for fluent reading of connected text (White et al., 2021). Large reviews of research on reading have concluded that fluency is "critical to both reading comprehension and future reading success and ease" (Foorman et al., 2016, p. 32; NRP, 2000a). Fluency is not a stage of development, rather, fluency can change depending on the material read, amount of practice with a text, and familiarity with a topic (Armbruster et al., 2010).

Repeated Reading

Repeated reading, a technique involving reading the same text multiple times, is a valuable strategy for improving oral reading fluency (ORF). Research suggests that a balanced approach, incorporating both reading a variety of texts and repeated reading of specific texts, is most effective for supporting ORF development (Foorman et al., 2016). A key benefit of repeated reading is that it strengthens fluency, and this improvement transfers to the reading of new texts (Shanahan, 2005). The National Reading Panel (2000b) emphasized the importance of oral reading, rereading, and one-on-one feedback for developing fluency.

Choral Reading

Choral reading involves a group of students reading aloud together, typically guided by a teacher's voice. This practice supports correct pronunciation, appropriate reading rate, and provides opportunities for self-correction (Paige, 2011). One study of struggling fourth-grade readers found that combining choral reading with assisted and repeated reading strategies improved both their fluency and reading comprehension skills (Kodan & Akyol, 2018, p. 175). While the National Reading Panel (2000a) concluded that guided oral repeated readings are important for building fluency, some researchers caution against whole-class choral reading. They suggest using this strategy strategically, in small groups, to ensure that the teacher can effectively monitor each student's reading (Foorman et al., 2016; Paige, 2011).

Dyad Reading

Dyad reading, a paired oral reading strategy with roots in neurological science, involves two partners reading from the same text. One partner reads aloud while the other partner follows along, tracking the words with their finger. This method fosters collaboration and provides support for the less fluent reader. A study conducted in Utah schools paired students of varying reading levels, having them read from books two to four grade levels above the lower-performing partner for 15 minutes daily over 95 days. The results showed significant improvement, with students' reading comprehension scores increasing by an average of more than two grade levels (Brown et al., 2017).

Fluency Phrasing

Students who are not fluent do not group phrases together, which hinders understanding.

One way that/
light travels including light
from the/
sun is in the form/
of waves.

Fluent readers group phrases and clauses together to make sense of passages.

One way that light travels/
including light from the sun/
is in the form of waves.

(Armbruster et al., 2010, p. 20)
(ReadWorks, 2025)

Practicing Fluency Phrases

Fluency phrases are short word groups, such as phrases and clauses, that often contain high-frequency words or commonly paired words. These phrases, which are not complete sentences, help readers develop prosody—the expressive aspects of ORF that include appropriate phrasing, pauses, and intonation (Armbruster, 2010). To read with prosody, students must be able to quickly chunk longer texts like sentences into smaller, meaningful units. If students are not explicitly taught to recognize and read phrases it can hinder their fluency and comprehension, especially with complex texts (Benjamin & Schwanenflugel, 2010).

High-Frequency Word Instruction and Practice

High-frequency words are commonly encountered words that readers should recognize instantly and

automatically, without needing to decode them. This automaticity frees up cognitive resources, making it easier to read and comprehend text. The most frequent 100-300 words account for 50-70% of the words children encounter in print, and just thirteen words make up roughly 25% of all words in school texts (Green et al., 2024; Johns & Wilke, 2018). By repeatedly practicing these high-frequency words — examining their phoneme-grapheme relationships, decoding them, and reading them fluently — students can quickly recognize a significant portion of the words they encounter. This automaticity aids comprehension and allows students to focus their cognitive resources on decoding unfamiliar words.

Using grade-level text

Utah's ELA standards emphasize exposing students to a wide range of texts representing diverse genres, time periods, topics, perspectives, cultures, and backgrounds (USBE, 2023a, p. xi-xii). The standards also stress the importance of immersing students in challenging, complex texts to actively construct meaning, answer questions, solve problems, and develop arguments. To ensure appropriate text complexity, the reading standards across grade levels reference the grade-band Lexile chart.

Research suggests that optimal learning occurs when students read texts with 95% accuracy, but more challenging texts can be beneficial when accompanied by appropriate scaffolding and support (Allington et al., 2015; REL Southeast, 2019).

Text Complexity Grade Bands and Associated Lexile Leveles

Text Complexity Grade Band	Lexile Range
K-1	N/A
2-3	450-790
4-5	770-980
6-8	955-1155
9-10	1080-1305
11-12	1215-1355

(USBE, 2023a, p. xiii)

Template for Replication: Fluency

Scaffolding Oral Reading

The Utah standards for English Language Arts for third grade include the following standard for fluency:

> Standard 3.R.4: Read grade-level text with accuracy and fluency to support comprehension. (RL & RI)

As discussed in the previous section, supporting students' accurate word reading provides a foundation for developing word reading fluency (Burns, 2023). To further develop fluency, incorporate a high volume of scaffolded text reading into the instructional day. The Utah P-12 Literacy Framework recommends 15 minutes of Tier I fluency practice per day in third grade (USBE, 2023c). This time is best spent on scaffolded reading of connected grade-level texts. Approaches for scaffolding oral text reading include:

- Listening passage preview
- Echo reading
- Choral reading
- Partner reading (Synchronous or Turn-Taking)

These approaches, especially when used in conjunction with repeated reading, can be flexibly implemented to support students in reading a high volume of classroom texts. Furthermore, 15 minutes should be considered a minimum, as scaffolded text reading should also be integrated into intervention time and content area instruction. It is essential that fluency practice occurs in texts t hat are meaningful and relevant for comprehension. Fluency practice can and should be integrated with the texts used for comprehension instruction, eliminating the need for a separate set of fluency-specific texts.

Theme 2: Outlier Teachers Explicitly Prioritized Instructional Tasks

The outlier teachers indicated that prioritizing instruction tasks is an important aspect of their approach. One teacher said,

"I think sometimes teachers can get too many resources and it can get overwhelming. You feel like you need to do it all and you need to teach it all. But I think, um, stepping back and being like, what's most important? What do my kids really need to know? And then how can I help teach that in an engaging, exciting way?"

Another teacher said,

"[The curriculum] gives you an overabundance of resources, like they give you more than you would ever need. And so, you have to get good as a teacher at picking out the important things that are going to align with your core standards."

These statements from the outlier teachers indicate they felt overwhelmed by the abundance of instructional materials . Several noted more topics to teach than time allows. However, these statements also show that outlier teachers proactively considered student needs and grade-level standards to design effective instruction. This process requires a high degree of content and pedagogical knowledge, along with a pragmatic understanding of effective application.

Evidence for the importance of instructional prioritization also exists in Utah's P-12 Literacy Framework (2023c) under the following sections:

Instruction and Intervention
Critical Indicator B
"Educators tailor instruction, interventions, and extensions to meet the needs of each student based on data" (p. 6).

Assessment and Feedback
Critical Indicator C
"Teachers collaborate frequently to analyze assessment data to guide planning, preparation, lesson delivery, and intervention/ extension." (p. 8).

These indicators suggest that instructional prioritization should be centered around student needs, as evidenced by multiple sources of data, while still meeting on-grade standards.

Template for Recommendation: Prioritization

Acadience Screening Data

Reviewing third-grade Acadience data is a valuable tool to help prioritize instruction in Tier I. Table 1 displays the benchmark and grade-level cutoffs for the end-of-year third-grade Acadience Oral Reading Fluency, Accuracy, and Reading Composite Score.

The end-of-year grade-level targets provide important goals for teachers to strive for in their classrooms. Following the RTI framework, one goal could be 80% of students in a classroom reading at 99% accuracy and at least 118 words correct per minute. Until that goal is met, robust (multisyllabic) decoding and fluency support should be a central focus of Tier I instruction and should be integrated across content area texts. Prioritizing scaffolded reading of grade-level texts and the multisyllabic skills requisite to access those texts will provide key progress toward these goals.

Table 1
End-of-Year Third-Grade Acadience Cutoffs

Measure	End of Year Benchmark Cutoff	End of Year Grade Level Target
Accuracy	97%	99%
Oral Reading Fluency	100	118
Reading Composite Score	330	405

Decoding Diagnostic

Students performing below grade level should also receive additional diagnostic assessments to determine specific word-reading needs. Recall that per USBE ELA Standards, all monosyllabic word-reading skills should be mastered by the end of second grade. Therefore, any lingering basic decoding needs should be prioritized and addressed directly during Tier II intervention time. If more than 20% of the students in a classroom have a common decoding need, teachers may wish to address those in Tier I time as well. This decoding instruction should be explicit, include decoding and encoding of the targeted letter-sound combination, and provide plentiful opportunity for practice.

Theme 3: Outlier Teachers Avoided Low-Leverage Practices

Non-outlier teachers were more likely to report using low-leverage practices—practices that do not align with the evidence base. These practices included the following:

Low-Leverage Practices

- Differentiating based on text levels
- One-minute fluency timings (not for assessment purposes)
- Isolated worksheet practice during centers
- Skill of the Week comprehension strategy instruction

Low-Leverage Instructional Practices

Four practices reported by non-outlier teachers were identified in the literature as low-leverage.

It is important to note that these practices were not necessarily identified by participants as central to their instruction. Given the limitations of the study sample, it is impossible to know how commonly these practices are implemented in Utah classrooms. However, their mention by teachers and their identification as potential low-leverage strategies in the literature justify their inclusion in the analysis. A rationale for why each of these practices is considered low-leverage is provided below.

Why Differentiating by Text Is Ineffective

While differentiating instruction is important, using leveled texts as the primary means of differentiation is not supported by current research. This practice typically takes two forms:

1. Grouping by ability: Students are grouped and given different texts based on their reading level.
2. Offering different versions of the same text: All students receive the same text, but the publisher provides different versions written at varying levels of complexity.

There are several reasons why differentiating by text level is discouraged. When students only read easily accessed texts, they have little opportunity to grow as readers. Furthermore, students assigned to lower-level texts may miss encountering sophisticated vocabulary, complex sentence structures, and challenging ideas. In the case of multiple levels of the same text, lowering a text's complexity often comes via the manipulation of words and sentences (McNamara et al., 2012).

Often, connectives such as 'because,' 'so,' 'however,' or 'next' are removed, changing a compound sentence into two or more independent sentences. Similarly, ancillary nouns and adjectives are often removed to shorten sentences. In each case, these words must be inferred by the reader. While the text may be of lower complexity metrically, it may be harder to understand because students must infer the missing information, increasing the cognitive burden.

Instead of differentiating by text level, scaffolding access to texts through effective instructional practices provides all students with access to grade-level or appropriately challenging texts.

> "Limiting access to complex texts…may oversimplify what readers are able to do evenwhen decoding accuracy and comprehension are not nearly perfect"
>
> (Fisher & Frey, 2014, p. 348)

Why Using One-Minute Fluency Timing for Non-Assessment Purposes Is Ineffective

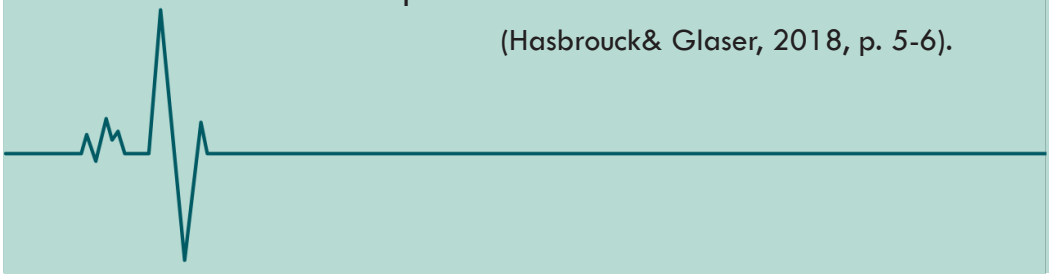
Oral reading timings are a valuable and reliable approach for assessing students' fluency development. However, using timings as a primary approach for promoting reading fluency lacks evidence.

Common fluency definitions include accuracy, rate or speed, prosody, and comprehension. It is a complex process, but assessments only reliably assess accuracy and rate (Torgesen, 2000; Deeney, 2017). Deeney (2017) argues that while one-minute timings are appropriate for quick, reliable assessment of accuracy and fluency, but they are not a teaching strategy.

In classroom, personal, and assessment contexts, students are often expected to read for much longer than one minute. Curriculum focused on short, connected texts, such as those used for fluency timing, "not only fails to capture the kids of reading students do but paints a distorted picture of what reading is" (Deeney, 2017, p. 443). Research-based recommendations suggest providing a range and volume of texts is likely to be far more productive for fluency growth.

Furthermore, the ability to persevere through text–also known as reading stamina–is an important aspect of skilled reading. Artificially limiting fluency practice to one-minute timings may limit opportunities for students to develop this stamina. ORF timings are an important assessment tool in the classroom, but their use should primarily be for assessment purposes .

> "Like blood pressure, body temperature, and cholesterol, ORF scores can serve as "indicators" of health and wellness, and scores at the "average" level are, in fact, optimal. As professional educators, we need to understand this correlation and challenge those who promote the incorrect notion that weshould push students to read ever faster"
>
> (Hasbrouck& Glaser, 2018, p. 5-6).



Why Isolated Worksheet Tasks During Centers Are Ineffective

Although popular in practice, research specifically investigating the use of centers in ELA classrooms is sparse and typically grouped with seatwork (Shanahan, 2018). However, the available evidence offers several concerning findings:

- High-achieving students tend to exhibit more on-task behavior during centers and seatwork than low-achieving students (Anderson et al., 1985).
- Centers and seatwork can frequently interrupt teacher-directed group instruction (Worthy et al., 2015).
- Centers and seatwork tasks tend to be unmonitored by teachers (Rupley & Blair, 1985).
- Centers and seatwork tasks tend to be disconnected from other classroom instructional content (Rupley & Blair, 1985).

These findings on centers and seatwork tasks contrast with the effective practices established in the broader reading research base, which indicates that students benefit more from teacher-led instruction than from independent tasks or practice (Brophy & Good, 1986). This is especially true for average and below-average readers (Connor et al., 2005). Another study found that the most effective schools in the sample spent the least amount of time on independent activities (Taylor, 2011).

While the potential effectiveness of centers for all students requires further research, the reality is that teachers often need to provide independent work for some students while working with others. Given this, it is crucial to carefully consider the necessity of any independent work and to provide appropriate scaffolding and support.

Template for Elimination of Low Leverage Practices

Teachers should critically examine their instructional repertoire for low-leverage practices and replace them with higher-leverage alternatives whenever possible. Even in classrooms with strong outcomes teachers should regularly question the rationale for using any low-leverage practices. Setting mastery goals–ideally supported by instructional coaching–can help teachers replace low-leverage instructional practices.

The following resources provide a template a template and guidance for this practice: Sample Template for Instructional Practice Replacement.

An editable copy of this template may be downladed in a variety of formats including, Word, Google Docs, Google Slides, and PDF.

What is the low-leverage instructional practice?	
What are the outcomes of the low-leverage instructional practice?	
What is the replacement high-leverage instructional practice?	
What are the outcomes of the high-leverage instructional practice?	

What does the replacement instructional practice look like?	What other resources or materials will help us learn about the successful implementation of the replacement instructional practice?

Where can we observe the successful use of the replacement instructional practice?	How will we know when we have succeeded at implementing the replacement instructional practice?

PROJECT LIMITATIONS

This project included a range of teachers with varying classroom outcomes resulting in some overlap in the practices mentioned by outlier and non-outlier teachers. Therefore, this analysis does not suggest that practices present in the outlier classrooms were entirely absent in non-outlier classrooms. Rather, the survey and interview data indicate that these practices appeared more prominent and were emphasized in the outlier classrooms.

Furthermore, this project relied solely on survey and interview data. While we assume all instructor responses accurately reflected their classroom instruction, direct observation data would provide more nuanced insights. Similarly, the sample included only teachers from a single school district known for adopting Science of Reading practices. A larger, more diverse sample across multiple districts or the entire state may have yielded more nuanced data.

Finally, outlier status was determined using beginning- and middle-of-year Acadience Reading assessment data. More robust data analysis, such as incorporating end-of-year Acadience data, RISE data, or more sophisticated analytical approaches may have resulted in a more robust process for identifying outlier teachers.

CONCLUSION

Educators, administrators, local education agency, and state personnel all share the desire to promote the reading proficiency among Utah's readers. Third grade reading proficiency is a key benchmark for predicting future reading success. Therefore, it is imperative that Utah's stakeholders invest in the practices most likely to yield the greatest results. This investigation into outlier teachers within Washington County School District found that teachers with a high degree of student growth:

Emphasized word reading and fluency practices

Prioritized instructional tasks

Avoided low-leverage practices

These three themes may provide a template for other third-grade teachers wishing to enhance reading outcomes for their students.

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APPENDIX A

Measurement of Growth

The researcher calculated effect sizes (Hedges & Olkin, 1985), to measure the growth of each school by grade level between the Fall 2023 and Winter 2024 administrations of Acadience. Effect size is a commonly used metric in educational research to quantify numerical differences among groups. An effect size is calculated using the number of students, group mean, and group standard deviation for Time A and Time B. The resultant outcome is in standard deviation units. Thus, an effect size of 1.0 represents a group shift of one standard deviation.

The formula used to calculate the effect sizes in this project is displayed as Formula 1 where M1 is the middle of year Acadience composite average for each grade level team at each school K-3 and M2 is the beginning of year Acadience composite average for each grade level team at each school K-3. The pooled sd represents a weighted average of the standard deviation from both timepoints.

$$g = \frac{M1 - M2}{pooled\ sd}$$

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