We know how to teach reading—why aren't students getting better at it?

22 January 2020, by Whitelaw Reid

Lovette says all school, district and state leaders must be held to at least the same standards of knowledge and mastery in the science of reading and effective instruction as the teachers they lead. Credit: Sanjay Suchak, University Communications

Literacy is a problem in our nation's schools. A big one.

Reading performance has remained virtually stagnant for decades, with nearly two-thirds of the country's fourth- and eighth-grade students reading below levels deemed "proficient" on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

Why is this happening?

Gail Lovette, an assistant professor in the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education and Human Development (with a Ph.D. from UVA and three school-aged children of her own) took a deep dive into the issue.

Lovette theorized that the problem extended beyond teachers, so in the fall of 2019 she and UVA graduate student Kenni Alden surveyed the regulations of 51 state educational agencies (in the 50 states and the District of Columbia).

Lovette—who spent 10 years as a teacher and administrator before coming to Curry as doctoral student in 2010—wanted to see what, if any, expertise in reading development and instruction was required in each state to receive initial or renewed licensure as administrators.

In a recent op-ed for *Education Week*, Lovette and Alden wrote that the results were "as disappointing as they were revealing."

UVA Today spoke with Lovette.

Q. In your op-ed, you use the phrase, "the science of reading." How do you define this?

A. Learning to read is critically important to a child's success in school and life. In fact, research has demonstrated strong correlations between low early literacy skills and high incarceration rates and poor health outcomes. I would argue that ensuring that all students learn to become skilled readers is one of the most important functions of schools.

Reading does not develop naturally for the majority of children, so knowledgeable teachers must provide explicit, skilled literacy instruction beginning in kindergarten.

We use the term "the science of reading" to refer to the firmly established evidence base of cognitive and educational research that demonstrates both how reading skills develop in children and the most effective instructional methods for teaching children to read. We also know from an extensive body of research that we must continuously screen young children for possible reading delays and intervene early and intensively to prevent reading failure.

When I am working with teachers and school and district leaders we use Gough and Tunmer's (1986)

"Simple View of Reading" model to understand the science of reading development. "The Simple View of Reading" demonstrates that reading comprehension, the ultimate goal of reading, is the product of word-level reading skills and language comprehension. Because it is the product of these two components, a deficit in one will negatively impact overall reading comprehension.

Much of the recent public discourse surrounding our nation's poor literacy outcomes has focused around the realization that many teachers lack even basic knowledge of the science of reading development, and that early elementary students are not always receiving systematic and explicit instruction in the skills that facilitate word-level reading, such as phonics and phonological awareness.

Moreover, some of the most widely used reading curricula are not aligned with the science of reading and continue to popularize discredited and ineffective methods of teaching reading.

Q. Why did you decide to examine state requirements for knowledge of the science of reading for K-12 administrators?

A. Understandably, a great deal of public scrutiny has recently been directed toward teachers and the universities that train them, leading many states to enact legislation that mandates that teachers possess and demonstrate knowledge of the science of reading development and reading instruction.

As we discussed in our op-ed, teachers do not work in a vacuum. Knowledgeable school and district administrators must lead the way for major literacy reforms. I began my own elementary teaching career without a crucial understanding of the science of reading development. The vast majority of my students did not meet reading benchmarks and failed the high-stakes test at the end of the year. The administrators who evaluated me, however, always gave me high marks for my fidelity to a largely ineffective literacy curriculum. It wasn't until I began to seek opportunities on my own to learn more about other methods and philosophies for literacy instruction that I realized how much I did not know about reading.

In 2006, I became a school administrator and was surprised that many of the school- and district-level administrators whom I worked and collaborated with lacked a basic understanding of reading development—even those who were leading schools working to close significant achievement gaps and improve reading outcomes. My administrator colleagues frequently cited their teaching experiences in only secondary schools or in content outside of literacy (such as math or fine arts) as reasons for their lack of reading knowledge, despite their state licensure as a K-12 school or district leader.

In my own graduate coursework to become a licensed K-12 administrator, the science of reading was never addressed. I was curious if this was isolated to just my own experience, or if this lack of preparation was widespread, so my 2014 dissertation work at UVA examined if any of the 51 state educational agencies within the United States required that prospective administrators have and demonstrate this knowledge in order to receive initial licensure.

At that time, I found that none of the 51 agencies explicitly required nor assessed prospective administrators' knowledge of the science of reading and effective reading instruction. Moreover, the vast majority of states granted K-12 administrator licensure even if a candidate had no prior experience, teaching or otherwise, at the elementary level. This is especially problematic as the early grade levels are critical to children's reading development.

Given the increasing requirements for teachers' knowledge of the science of reading for initial and renewed licensure over the last several years, we were curious to reexamine if there were any changes to these requirements for administrators over the past five years.

Q. What were your most recent findings that led to your op-ed?

A. Despite ongoing efforts to significantly improve reading achievement for children across the

country, there were no changes in requirements since my 2014 study. As of September 2019, not one state agency requires that administrators have, much less demonstrate, knowledge of the science of reading to obtain or renew licensure.

Similarly, the vast majority of states continue to license administrators in grades K-12 even if candidates have no early elementary experience.

Additionally, we found that knowledge of the science of reading and effective reading instruction continues to be absent from national-level standards for educational leadership preparation programs and the licensure assessments based on these standards that are used in the majority of the states.

Q. How surprised were you by your findings?

A. I was definitely more disappointed than surprised. I was hopeful that with many of the state agencies adopting new regulations for teachers to have, and in some cases demonstrate, knowledge of the science of reading for initial or renewed licensure, these requirements for leaders would increase in kind. Unfortunately, we found that this was not the case.

Q. Why should administrators be required to know more about reading development?

A. The role of school and district leadership is undoubtedly complex and demanding. However, we know that instructional leadership is second only to classroom instruction in impacting student achievement. School and district administrators have the authority over many factors that significantly influence reading achievement, including evaluating and hiring teachers, selecting and mandating curricula, setting school and classroom schedules, budgeting and resource allocation, and determining professional development agendas.

Q. How can, in your opinion, the situation be remedied?

A. We cannot expect teachers alone to bring about the systematic and systemic curricular and instructional changes that must occur to ensure that all children, especially those most at risk for reading failure, receive effective reading instruction aligned with the science of reading.

As the requirements for teachers to demonstrate this knowledge to obtain and renew licensure have increased, so too must the licensure requirements for administrators, so that they can be expected to truly act as instructional leaders in reading. States are continuing to allow those charged with leading schools, districts and state agencies to improve reading outcomes to be the least knowledgeable about how to do so. In my opinion, states must explicitly require it for all current and prospective school and district leaders, just as they do for the teachers that these administrators lead.

Q. Anything else you'd like to add?

A. I want to recognize the daily hard work of school, district and state leaders, as I would never mean to imply that they do not have their students' success on the forefront of their minds. We often do not know what we do not know until we learn that we did not know it.

As I have worked with administrators to expand their knowledge of the science of reading development, many have reported that they feel more effective and knowledgeable as instructional leaders. They are able to better collaborate with teachers at their schools around literacy instruction and achievement and they feel empowered and equipped to ensure that the literacy instruction, methods, assessments and materials that are in classrooms are high-quality, effective and aligned with the science of reading.

The 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress scores demonstrate that the education field must come together to make major structural changes to school and classroom literacy practices, and that school, district and state leaders must be fully equipped to participate and lead these changes.

Provided by University of Virginia