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‘Kids Can’t Read’: The Revolt That Is Taking On the Education Establishment

Fed up parents, civil rights activists, newly awakened educators and lawmakers are crusading for “the science of reading.” Can they get results?

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In suburban Houston, parents rose up against a top-rated school district, demanding an entirely new reading curriculum.

At an elementary school in Hutchinson, Minn., a veteran teacher is crusading for reform, haunted by the fear that, for 28 years, she failed children because she was not trained in the cognitive science behind reading.

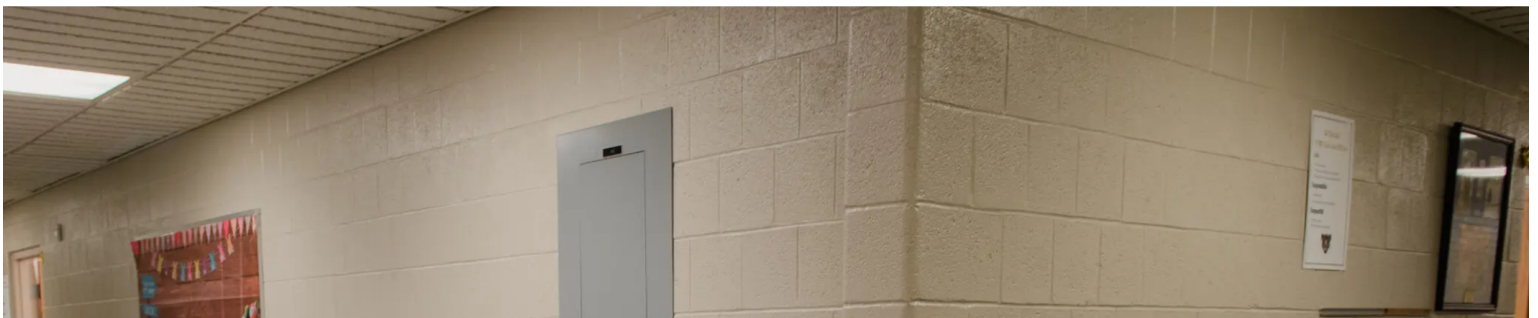
And Ohio may become the latest state to overhaul reading instruction, under a plan by Gov. Mike DeWine.

“The evidence is clear,” Mr. DeWine said. “The verdict is in.”

A revolt over how children are taught to read, steadily building for years, is now sweeping school board meetings and statehouses around the country.

The movement, under the banner of “the science of reading,” is targeting the education establishment: school districts, literacy gurus, publishers and colleges of education, which critics say have failed to embrace the cognitive science of how children learn to read.

Research shows that most children need systematic, sound-it-out instruction — known as phonics — as well as other direct support, like building vocabulary and expanding students’ knowledge of the world.





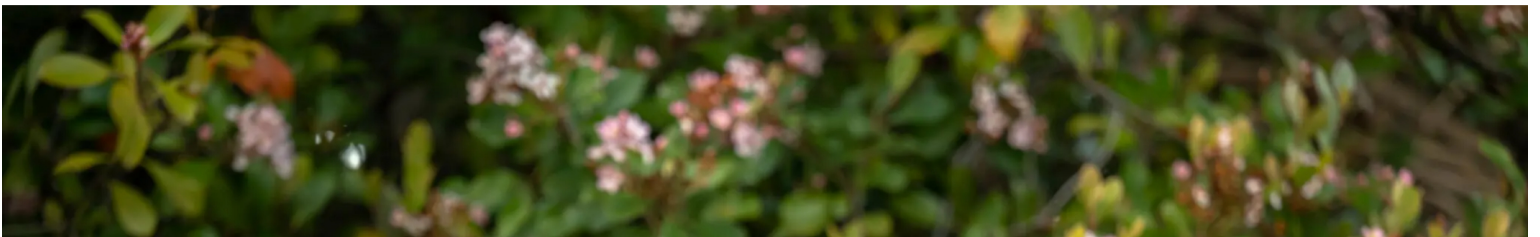
Students must keep building skills — moving from “The Snowy Day” to Shakespeare. Hannah Yoon for The New York Times

The movement has drawn support across economic, racial and political lines. Its champions include parents of children with dyslexia; civil rights activists with the N.A.A.C.P.; lawmakers from both sides of the aisle; and everyday teachers and principals.

Together, they are getting results.

[Ohio](#), [California](#) and [Georgia](#) are the latest states to push for reform, adding to almost 20 states that have made moves in the last two years. Under pressure, school districts are scrapping their old reading programs. Even holdouts like New York City, where [hundreds of elementary schools](#) were loyal to a popular but heavily criticized reading curriculum, are [making changes](#).

About one in three children in the United States cannot read at a basic level of comprehension, [according to a key national exam](#). The outcomes are particularly troubling for Black and Native American children, nearly half of whom score “below basic” by eighth grade.





Kareem Weaver, an education activist with the N.A.A.C.P. in Oakland, Calif. Mike Kai Chen for The New York Times

“The kids can’t read — nobody wants to just say that,” said Kareem Weaver, an activist with the N.A.A.C.P. in Oakland, Calif., who has framed literacy as a civil rights issue and stars in a new documentary, “[The Right to Read](#).”

Science of reading advocates say the reason is simple: Many children are not being correctly taught.

A popular method of teaching, known as “balanced literacy,” has focused less on phonics and more on developing a love of books and ensuring students understand the meaning of stories. At times, it has included [dubious strategies](#), like guiding children to guess words from pictures.

The push for reform picked up in 2019, when [national reading scores](#) showed significant improvement in just two places: Mississippi and Washington, D.C. [Both had required more phonics.](#)

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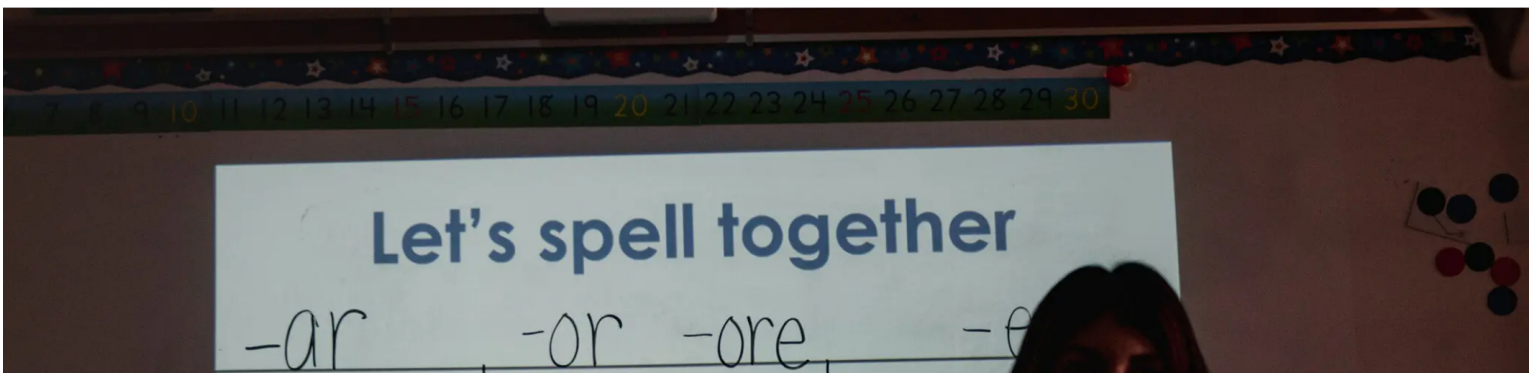
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But what might have remained a niche education issue was supercharged by a storm of events: a pandemic that mobilized parents; Covid relief money that gave school districts flexibility to change; a fresh spotlight on racial disparities after the murder of George Floyd; and a hit education podcast with a passionate following.

“There is this urgency around the story, this unbelievable grief,” said Emily Hanford, a journalist at American Public Media. Her podcast, [“Sold a Story,”](#) detailed how stars of the literacy world and their publisher diverged from scientific research. It racked up nearly 5 million downloads.

The movement has not been universally popular. School districts [in Connecticut](#) and [teachers’ unions in Ohio](#), for example, pushed back against what they see as heavy-handed interference in their classrooms.

Even within the movement, there are quiet rumblings of worry. There is no established curriculum for the science of reading — it refers to a large body of research that must be woven into the craft of teaching.





At Panther Valley Elementary School, teachers said a curriculum was not working. Hannah Yoon for The New York Times

Can such a sprawling and enthusiastic movement stick to the science — across thousands of schools and classrooms? Can real change be executed and sustained?

“I saw this post where somebody said, ‘Reading wars are over, science of reading won,’” said Mark Seidenberg, a cognitive scientist at the University of Wisconsin.

“I’m sure it will be on a T-shirt soon,” he said. “But actually, nobody has won until we’ve actually seen we’ve improved literacy outcomes — especially with kids in groups where there is a long history of being left behind.”

A ‘Perfect Storm’

It all feels a bit familiar to Susan Neuman, an education official under former President George W. Bush.

In 2000, at the behest of Congress, a National Reading Panel [recommended](#) many strategies being argued for today. And the Bush administration prioritized phonics. Yet that effort faltered because of politics and bureaucratic snafus.

Dr. Neuman, now a professor at New York University, is among those who question whether this moment can be different. “I worry,” she said, “that it’s déjà vu all over again.”

Today’s movement, though, is less top down, and far more

dynamic.

“You had this perfect storm happening,” said Jennie McGahee, a mother in Hudson, Ohio, who watched her son James muddle through reading and writing in elementary school.



Jennie McGahee with her son James, 12. Dustin Franz for The New York Times

A former teacher, Ms. McGahee tried to help at home. But she came to believe a central problem was the curriculum: a popular [program by Lucy Calkins](#) of Columbia University’s Teachers College. Until recently, the curriculum had put less emphasis on phonics and more emphasis on children reading and writing independently.

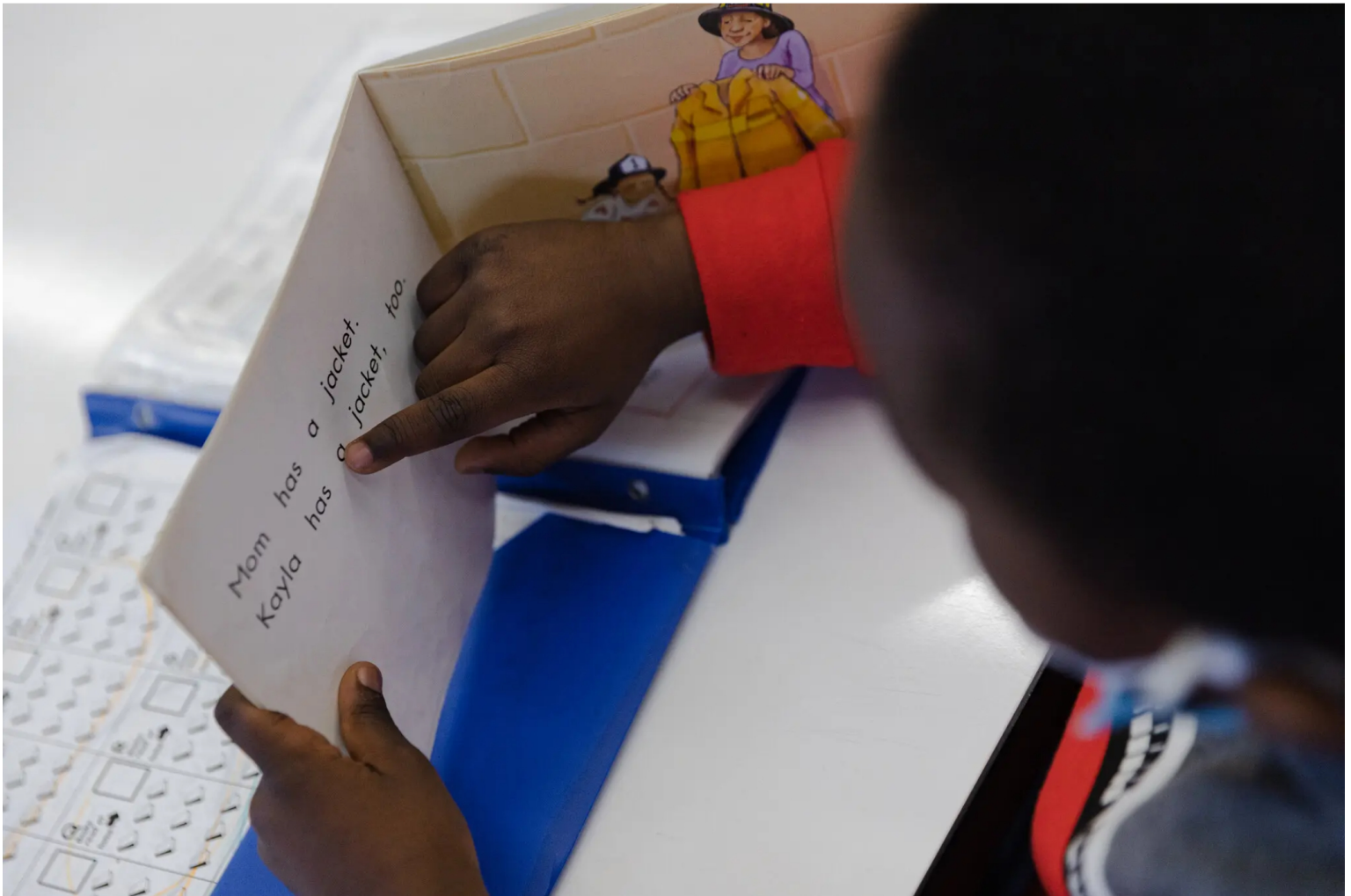
During pandemic Zoom lessons, Ms. McGahee said, other parents in her affluent, mostly white suburb known for its schools also began to question why their children were not getting more explicit instruction.

Then last fall, “Sold a Story” scrutinized the work of Professor

Calkins and others, giving ammunition to parents like Ms. McGahee. She emailed the podcast to her school board, and at a recent meeting, marched up to the microphone.

“This will end with our curriculum changing — it’s just a matter of how long we need to fight to get this done,” said Ms. McGahee, whose son, now 12, still finds reading taxing. The district said it was piloting another program to boost phonics.

Professor Calkins [rewrote her early literacy curriculum](#) last year to include, for the first time, daily, structured phonics to be used with the whole class. In a statement, she said she had always treated phonics as critical. But she added: “To reduce the teaching of reading to phonics instruction and nothing more is to misunderstand what reading is, and what learning is.”



New York City recently decided it would move away from a curriculum that has been used in hundreds of its elementary schools. Thalia Juarez for The New York Times

For many communities, the urgency of literacy is not new.

“These arguments have been made for a long time by a lot of people,” said Sujatha Hampton, the education chair for the N.A.A.C.P. in Fairfax County, Va.

But amid calls for racial justice after the murder of George Floyd, Dr. Hampton saw an opportunity to address gaps in reading outcomes for Black and Hispanic students, compared with white and Asian students in her district.

She pressed for structured literacy in 2021 — [and saw swift change](#).

“I told them, ‘If you don’t switch this, I’m going to make sure that every time anybody Googles your name, what’s going to come up is your statistics and the racial discrepancy in how kids are learning to read here,’” Dr. Hampton recalled.

Science of reading advocates say they are gaining momentum, in part because their battles have converged.

“We had no traction when we were dyslexia moms,” said Amy Traynor, who co-founded a parent group that recently won a curriculum change in Katy, Texas, a Houston suburb. “When we abandoned the use of dyslexia and started talking literacy for all children, that’s when progress started to be made.”

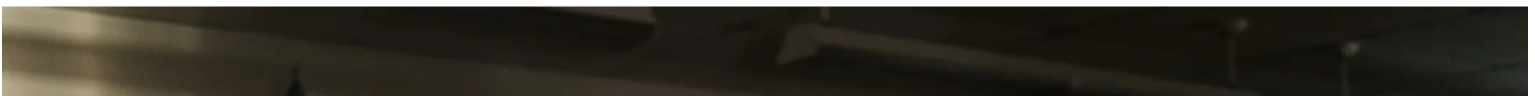
Avoiding Pitfalls

At Panther Valley Elementary, a rural, low-income school in eastern Pennsylvania, the science of reading has been transformative, said the principal, Robert Palazzo.

His school had been using a reading program by the influential educators, Irene C. Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell, whose work has been questioned by science of reading advocates. The district even took out a loan to afford the curriculum, which cost around \$100,000, he said.

But teachers complained: It wasn’t working. Just a quarter of third graders were meeting benchmarks.

“I had to swallow my pride and realize that selecting that was a mistake,” Mr. Palazzo said.





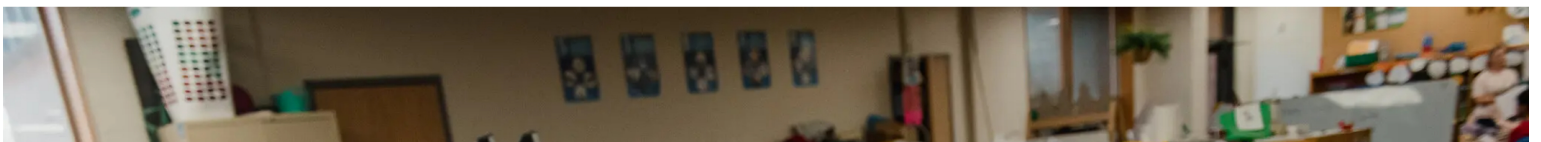
Robert Palazzo, the principal at Panther Valley Elementary, considers himself a science of reading convert. Hannah Yoon for The New York Times

Dr. Fountas and Dr. Pinnell pointed to [research](#) supporting their program and said “countless schools” had achieved positive results. Their approach, they said, includes phonics.

Panther Valley, though, used grants, donations and Covid relief money to buy a new phonics curriculum. The school also recently added 40 minutes of targeted, small-group phonics at the end of every day.

Nearly 60 percent of third graders are now proficient in decoding words, up from about 30 percent at the beginning of the school year, progress Mr. Palazzo hopes will translate to state tests this spring.

Still, experts foresee a number of pitfalls to meaningful reform on a national scale.





At Panther Valley Elementary, students practice phonics for 40 minutes at the end of every school day. Hannah Yoon for The New York Times

For starters, bringing reading science to commercial curriculums is still a work in progress. Schools may scrap their old textbooks but find there is no perfect replacement.

“What’s coming along is in the right ballpark at least,” said Dr. Seidenberg, of the University of Wisconsin. But he warned against treating anything as “gospel.”

There is also the danger of overemphasizing phonics. To establish true literacy, students need to be able to not only sound out words, but also read quickly and build enough vocabulary and background knowledge for comprehension.

Another risk: impatience.

When Mississippi improved reading scores in 2019, it was touted as a “miracle.” In fact, progress came over many years, with systemic reform that included sending literacy coaches to the state’s lowest-performing schools.

“I don’t want the science of reading to be the shiny object — ‘look here, look here,’” said Jack Silva, the chief academic officer in Bethlehem, Pa., [an early adopter of the science of reading](#). “You

forget the hard work that it takes to implement.”

In his district, principals were trained first, then teachers, grade by grade. Eight years later, training is now underway for middle and high school principals, an area that Timothy Shanahan, a professor emeritus at the University of Illinois Chicago, says deserves more attention.

Literacy for early readers is not an “inoculation,” Dr. Shanahan said.

Students must keep building skills — moving from “The Snowy Day” to Steinbeck and Shakespeare.



Joy Palmer, right, is fighting for specialized tutoring for her daughter Dey'Leana, 18. Maddie McGarvey for The New York Times

In Columbus, Ohio, Joy Palmer is still fighting for her daughter Dey'Leana, 18.

Dey'Leana struggled with reading from an early age. Her mother blames, in part, an ineffective reading intervention Dey'Leana received during elementary school. Even after Dey'Leana was

diagnosed with dyslexia at age 9, her mother said, she did not get all the support she needed.

The Columbus district, as it moves toward the science of reading, is no longer using that early intervention program, and said it was working closely with Ms. Palmer and her daughter.

School has not been easy for Dey'Leana. By middle and high school, she stopped raising her hand, pushed back at teachers and at times skipped class.

"I would be stressed," Dey'Leana said.

Now a junior, she is nowhere close to reading on grade level, her mother said.

"What are they going to do now that we are in the repercussion and damage stage?" said Ms. Palmer, who is pushing for the district to provide Orton Gillingham tutoring, a highly structured approach for struggling readers.

Even if executed flawlessly, the science of reading movement cannot solve everything. Poverty plays its own damaging role in students' lives. And some children may always need specialized instruction.

Cathy Kucera is determined to try.

Fueled by regret for what she did not know in her first 28 years as an elementary schoolteacher, she and a colleague, Heather Vaillancourt, are on a two-woman crusade at their school in Hutchinson, Minn. They begged for a phonics-based curriculum and even wrote their own kindergarten lessons, incorporating research they say they were never taught.

"If it means we aren't making friends or we aren't the most popular people on campus, we don't care," Ms. Kucera said. "It's about kids learning to read, and I'm not wasting another day."

Audio produced by Tally Abecassis.

Sarah Mervosh is a national reporter covering education. She previously covered the coronavirus pandemic and breaking news. [More about Sarah Mervosh](#)

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