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For Gen Alpha, learning to read is becoming a privilege

Joshua McGoun, a K-12 public-school teacher in Frederick, Maryland, first noticed a change in his students about 10 years ago. They began to struggle with focus.

Increasingly, younger kids were not nailing basic reading skills before third grade — a crucial window. Those who miss it have a tough road ahead in middle and high school. Even adept readers in their tweens and teens have become afraid of complex or extended reading tasks and more comfortable with short texts or bite-size summaries.

McGoun, who has a doctorate in education, shared one stark example. With struggling readers, he hands each child a book upside down and backward. "They should be able to turn the book the right way up and open it at the first page," he said. These days, "some students aren't able to do that."

This is not unusual. Across the US, kids are struggling to read. Last year, reading performance for fourth graders hit its lowest level since 2005, and teachers expect that number to keep tumbling.

The panic to turn things around quickly is driving a wedge between teachers, politicians, and parents, all pointing the finger of blame at one another.

The Senate education committee, calling it a crisis, is pushing school districts to retrain teachers in a trendy new teaching style called "the science of reading," which has dramatically improved literacy in some areas (scroll down for more detail on that). Parents with resources to do so are moving their kids to schools that tout science-backed teaching styles.

Some teachers and policy experts worry this frenzy may have an ironic side effect, putting pressure on public schools to resolve a problem that cannot be tackled in the classroom alone.

"It makes the task of teaching harder," McGoun said, referring to new literacy programs and a focus on test results. "We're burning out at a faster rate, and it's causing a lot of apathy."

Gen Alpha kids, aged 2 to 12, need to discover the joy of reading, he and other teachers say. It's doable, but it's a more creative and slower process that many parents don't have time to wait for.

Teaching a 6-year-old to read is political

There has never been a golden age for reading scores in America. The record high was in 2017, when 37% of US fourth graders pass their NAEP reading test — just 5% higher than the most recent results.

Still, this new low raised alarm among lawmakers who were already concerned about screens and loneliness among Gen Alpha.

“The long-term implications will be dire” if literacy does not improve, Sen. Bill Cassidy, the top Republican on the Senate education committee, said in February. “We are at risk of having an entire generation of children, those who were in their prime learning years during the COVID-19 pandemic, fail to become productive adults if reading proficiency does not improve.”

His proposed solution? Get all teachers to use the same, evidence-backed teaching style.

Teaching styles have served as political footballs for over 100 years. The fierce, ongoing debate — known as the “reading wars” — dates back to at least the mid-19th century, when Horace Mann, then Massachusetts’ education secretary, slammed the alphabet as “skeleton-shaped, bloodless, ghostly apparitions” and said children should be taught whole words rather than their structure.

While teaching unions maintain that teachers should be able to draw from various teaching styles, it’s a tough sell with parents.

“Parents and others are getting upset about their kids’ literacy curriculum because they've heard that there's a certain way to teach kids how to read, and that might not be properly implemented in schools,” Carly Robinson, a senior education researcher at Stanford University, said.

Recently, the “science of reading” method (see chart below) has been touted as a silver bullet that transformed literacy rates in Mississippi between 2013 and 2019 — even in areas with high child-poverty rates, which typically correlate with lower literacy levels. It became known as the “Mississippi Miracle.”

In a February report, the Senate education committee said teachers who still used other methods — particularly the three-cueing system — were setting students “up for failure in the long run.”

TEACHING STYLES

In other states, parents want a Mississippi Miracle of their own.

Susie Coughlin, a mom in Falmouth, Maine, found herself going down rabbit holes about literacy techniques after her 5-year-old daughter, Carter, repeated kindergarten. Despite spending a second year at that level, the little girl had fallen behind in reading and writing.

One day, near the end of the school year, Coughlin saw a piece of Carter's homework where she had written, "I went to the osen," rather than, "I went to the ocean." The teacher had not corrected the mistake because the emphasis was on visual cues — a picture of the sea — rather than spelling. Coughlin was appalled; spelling was why Carter struggled to keep up in other classes. The mom took up her concerns with the teacher, who, she said, defended the visual method.

Coughlin said that the impression the teacher gave off was that the school was "just going to let your child slide through." "So we hit the brakes."

Carter finished the year, but her parents elected to send her to a private Catholic school for first grade. In her new school, Carter was taught to "sound it out" — articulating the word as she read it rather than scanning pages for context cues.

Her progress was dramatic, Coughlin said. Now 8 years old, Carter thrives in her second-grade reading classes. "It broke my heart when her confidence was in the toilet at her old school, but her bucket of self-esteem is filling up," Coughlin, who has since enrolled Carter's younger brother at the same school, added.

Coughlin said her family was fortunate to have the resources to go private because the annual fees at the Catholic school are relatively low: $10,000 a child, compared with about $40,000 for secular private schools in Falmouth.

Forty-five states and Washington, DC, are considering bills that would retrain public school teachers in new, evidence-based reading practices. Susan Neuman, a professor of childhood and literacy education at New York University and an education official under President George W. Bush, said the bills represented "the biggest, boldest, and most inclusive effort to date to promote high-quality, scientifically supported reading instruction for all children," adding: "We cannot fail."

Educators are not so bullish about another initiative that requires retraining and devotion to new materials that cost hundreds or thousands of dollars a year, preventing creativity with the syllabus.

"The problem is that some school districts think: 'We pay for this program, and therefore you have to use this program.' You can't use anything else," McGoun said.

While his school allows for flexibility, he's seen panic take over in other districts, he said: "As a teacher, you can't even make your own materials. It's because the school district attended a conference and learned about a particular program — they promised XYZ outcomes if you only use its resources."

Nailing the right method is not a teacher's biggest concern, McGoun said. "The most important thing an educator can do is provide good pedagogy by focusing on the student's interests," he said. "When you have motivated students, they will read."

Kids are falling out of love with the written word

Students, McGoun said, have "fallen out of love" with the written word because the march of technology has made it seem "alien" and "outmoded" to them.

Parents know tearing a school-age child away from a phone is no easy feat. No matter what literacy technique you employ, the pull of screens tends to be stronger.

T here are efforts to leverage technology to help with literacy. Some artificial-intelligence programs, already appearing in classrooms, listen to students read aloud and give them instant feedback on pronunciation and comprehension, an alternative to having students play a reading game for 10 minutes on their own.

Subtitles on TV shows have proved beneficial for early readers by presenting words on a screen that a child will read, sometimes without even realizing it — so much so that the actor Jack Black joined a campaign to promote subtitles to boost kids' literacy.

Tara West, a former kindergarten teacher and the founder of the literary-coaching organization Little Minds at Work, believes the benefits of constructive tech could outweigh the harm of kids spending too much time on screens. "Kids gravitate toward anything that's digital," so teachers can take advantage of that, West said, adding: "Technology is going to go far."

Getting teachers on board may not be easy. In a recent Pew survey of elementary-school teachers, 47% of respondents said they weren't sure how AI in classrooms would influence their students' learning.

Jeff Jarvis, a public-school teacher in Los Angeles, is skeptical about the tech method. Sure, it might work in small groups, "but you'd almost definitely be struggling to use it effectively in a large class with 25 kids," he said.

Educational digital media is "often attached to visuals, not texts," Jarvis said, adding: "They're getting quick blurbs from Snapchat and TikTok but nothing in-depth."

Teachers like Jarvis and McGoun say that, at the most basic level, kids should be surrounded by books to simply learn how they work — turning physical pages instead of swiping on an iPad, for example. That's where parents come in.

Pavel Buyeu, a 43-year-old dad from Seattle, said that when his daughter, Liza, now 15, began to show a reluctance to read, he feared she'd miss out on the joy and satisfaction of discovering books as a kid.

"Liza and I are from different generations with different interests," Buyeu said. Still, he said he would like to see her enjoy some of the books he loved when he was younger. "My favorites were 'The Adventures of Tom Sawyer,' 'The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,' and 'The Little Prince,'" he told Business Insider.

Buyeu devised a "game" to make reading fun for Liza. He'd take his daughter to the bookstore and have her pick a title in return for privileges like sleeping in on weekends. The pair read and discussed the books before writing an alternative ending to the plot. Family members voted on a winner, which motivated Liza even more.

"Reading became a joy for her," Buyeu said, adding that Liza's reading speed and spelling improved, said.

Buyeu's game speaks to the power of parental involvement — a luxury not afforded to every kid.

Parents with means are paying for tutoring

Learning to read isn't just about getting a grade; it can reverberate throughout someone's career and personal life. Want to vote? It helps to be able to read and comprehend complex material.

If not all students become readers in school, you will start to see "the haves and the have-nots," Neuman, the former education official, said — people with the money to pay for extra help moving ahead in school and life, and those relying on public resources falling behind.

Kumon, a private company that provides after-school math and reading tutoring, has recorded a recent surge in its number of new students, with enrollment increasing by 56% between 2020 and 2024. The company's methodology incorporates both meaning-based instruction and phonics

Kalisha Brooks of Indian Land, South Carolina, enrolled her son, Corey, at Kumon when he was in kindergarten during the COVID-19 pandemic. She was worried that the disruption of the health crisis might set him back.

“I’d read articles about children being home and getting further and further behind,” Brooks said. So she bit the bullet, budgeting an extra $200 a month for Corey to have twice-weekly reading classes. She’s glad she did. Corey, now 8, performed above average in second grade and is now in third with a renewed confidence in reading.

Jessica Mercedes Penzari and her son, Hendrix. Momo Takahashi/BI

Jessica Mercedes Penzari, a 40-year-old mom in New York City, can relate to Brooks’ dilemma. Her son Hendrix's kindergarten report card showed that he had dramatically fallen behind in reading within months. “It was a moment of panic,” Penzari said. “Once you fall behind, getting caught up is so difficult. I thought, ‘I’m slipping as a mom because my eye isn’t on the ball.’”

Penzari secured a private tutor — a special-education teacher who lived in her building. She babysat the woman’s kids in exchange for the typically $75-an-hour

lessons. It proved successful. Hendrix, who recently entered second grade, is back at proficiency level and above grade level in some subcategories.

C hildren who have fewer educational resources find themselves a step behind their peers at the outset. Just 10% of multilingual students can read proficiently by fourth grade compared with 33% of fourth graders overall, the NAEP found.

Last year, Nichelle Watkins, who lives in public housing in Baltimore, told Fox 45 News that her fourth-grade son, Logan, still could not read and that they couldn't afford tutoring.

"How is he supposed to be productive if he can't read?" she said in the news segment.

"They go there to be babysat for eight hours and come home," the mom added, referring to Logan's elementary school. She said legislators — to whom she later wrote pleading for improvements — ignored the problem.

"I feel like they don't care. It's not their children," she said.

What now?

Former WWE CEO Linda McMahon, Donald Trump's presumptive education secretary. Bill Clark/CQ-Roll Call, Inc via Getty Images

Linda McMahon, President-elect Donald Trump's pick to lead his Education Department, will have a mammoth managerial job on her hands if she is confirmed.

M cMahon, a former wrestling executive who sat on the Board of Trustees for Sacred Heart University and served one year on Connecticut's Board of Education, supports Trump's plans to deliver funds for education directly to states, giving them the authority to choose how to spend the money. She's sparked anger from some educators who argue her plans would hurt public schools. She has also been accused in a recent lawsuit of enabling sexual abuse of kids in the WWE. McMahon has denied the allegation, and the lawsuit is on hold while another court rules on the constitutionality of such cases.

In an emailed statement, Trump-Vance transition spokesperson Liz Huston told BI that McMahon "is ready to deliver on President Trump's agenda to restore America's education system and prepare our next generation for the future."

Robinson, the Stanford researcher, said teachers would need much more funding to implement all the new bipartisan reading policies coming through states. Still, it's not enough to simply shower schools with cash — smart policies are key. "Just giving money without any guidelines isn't actually that helpful if you want it to be directed in a certain way," Robinson said.

In the meantime, all of these moving parts have created a divide between parents and teachers, who point the finger of blame at each other. It's easier to take on someone close to you than to tackle unanswerable questions, such as, "how much have screens derailed attention spans?", and "how much education funding is enough to make a difference?"

Jarvis, the special education teacher in LA, said he understands parents' frustration that something so fundamental to modern life now feels impossible. He agreed that federal funding for literacy programs is essential to stop reading rates from tumbling further.

In the meantime, he said that parents can make a major difference by engaging in reading with their children at home. Take your kids to libraries, the teacher said. Let your kids see you reading books at home, he added, to create motivation and a rich environment for "reading to flourish."

"Put down your own electronic devices and read with your kids, even if it's just for 15 minutes a day," Jarvis said. "Let them read aloud to you and then ask questions about the text. It's important to have parent-child time away from technology."