

Senate Education Committee Testimony, May 31, 2023

Patricia L. Scharer, PhD

Professor Emerita, The Ohio State University

Thank you Senator Dolan and members of the Budget Committee for this opportunity to write to you about the sections of H.B. 33 regarding the “science of reading” and “three-cueing approach.”

My name is Patricia L. Scharer and I am Professor Emeritus from The Ohio State University. I have over 40 years of experience teaching first grade, Title I, Reading Recovery and university literacy courses. I am writing to share my concerns about House Bill 33 in hopes that you will thoughtfully consider the recommendations I offer as you finalize the budget bill.

On May 3, 2023, I submitted written testimony to Senator Brenner’s committee which included the findings of the National Reading Panel related to phonics. The panel reviewed experimental studies which met their “gold standard” for reading research and concluded that:

1. “Phonics instruction should **not** (emphasis added) become the dominant component in a reading program, neither in the amount of time devoted to it nor in the significance attached” (*Report of the National Reading Panel: Report of the Subgroups*, p. 2-97). The National Reading Panel concluded that, while phonics is important, it should be combined with comprehension instruction, reading quality books, and writing instruction.
2. “In fact, the effect of strategy instruction on increasing children’s comprehension of texts (the ultimate goal of reading instruction) is far superior to instruction which emphasizes word decoding and sound segmentation and blending, which has less effect on comprehension beyond grade 1” (National Reading Panel, 2000 p. 2-116).
3. Of decodable books, awkwardly written with specific spelling patterns (Dan can fan the man), the panel wrote: “Surprisingly, very little research has attempted to determine the contribution of decodable books to the effectiveness of phonics programs” (*National Reading Panel: Report of the Subgroups*, p. 2-98). (I searched for more recent research on decodable books since 2000 and found nothing.)
4. Phonics programs “...are scripted in such a way that teacher judgment is largely eliminated.” (*Report of the Subgroups*, p. 2-7) and, consequently, do not meet the needs of individual learners.
5. “As with any instructional program, there is always the question, “Does one size fit all?” Teachers may be expected to use a particular phonics program with their class, yet it

quickly becomes apparent that the program suits some students more than others. (2-136)

I believe it would be essential for this committee to carefully consider the panel's research as this bill is revised. I applaud the governor's allocation of funds to support early readers; my life's work has been focused on accelerating the literacy progress of the lowest first graders. And, I believe that phonics instruction is essential for young readers. I have spent my career studying literacy research, conducting research, and teaching struggling first graders to read and write. This bill, however, is based on a definition of the "science of reading" which has been developed by the media; has been uninformed by the majority of literacy scholars; and seems to offer a "magic bullet" that purchasing millions of dollars of phonics materials will ensure that Ohio children learn to read. A strict mandate as described in H.B. 33 is NOT based on scientific studies comparing instructional approaches; will remove instructional decision-making from teachers; and cannot meet the needs of individuals.

Please remember that this pendulum has swung for hundreds of years, most recently during No Child Left Behind during which billions of dollars were spent on a narrow definition of reading teaching and learning that failed miserably. The only winners were the publishers of "approved" materials who gained financially. Please do not allow this to happen in Ohio. I will end my testimony with a beginning of a comprehensive plan which has the potential for raising achievement in Ohio.

First, I would like to speak about the revised definition of three-cueing approach which now reads:

Sec. 3313.6028. (A) As used in this section, "three-cueing approach" means any model of teaching students to read based on meaning, structure and syntax, and visual cues. 35167 35168 35169

The bill goes on to ban the "three-cueing approach" in Ohio Schools. It is important to delete this language. First, I agree with Jeffrey Williams who testified before this committee on May 3, 2023 that these words are not recognized as an instructional approach and scientific studies on these words do not exist. The language in this bill portrays "three-cueing" as negative, even

dangerous for Ohio students so it must be banned. On what basis? Is there scientific proof of its danger? No. There are no scientific, random assignment, comparison studies between this and other instructional models. So, why ban this? Is it to ban programs teaching children to use phonics along with other information. Like, No Child Left Behind, this will only benefit the publishers of phonics materials, not the students. In contrast to “phonics only” proponents, the scholarly literacy research points to using multiple sources of information.

*Reading Research Quarterly* is a highly rated literacy journal. Amanda Goodman, RRQ Co-Editor, noted that, in their 2023 RRQ article, “Donna Scanlon and Kimberly Anderson review 25 years of rigorous experimental studies in which kids were given systematic phonics instruction and also taught to use context cues to help them when they struggle to sound out words. **And what they found was that kids tend to become more successful readers when they get both kinds of instruction, compared to those who get phonics alone. In short, they found that more resources are better.** It’s self-defeating to insist on an either-or choice between phonics and context cueing, as though these practices were at war with each other. It is much more helpful to treat them as complementary.”

Similarly, Reinking, Hruby and Risko (2023) explain in their research article, that phonics instruction has been shown to be **“more effective when embedded in a more comprehensive program of literacy instruction that accommodates students’ individual needs and multiple approaches to teaching phonics”**—a view supported by substantial research” (p. 104).

- 1. Please Delete all language related to “three-cueing approach” for lack of a clear definition and the absence of scientific research demonstrating its value.**

Now, I would like to draw attention to the requirement that, by the 2024-25 schools year, all districts will use only core curriculum materials approved by ODE.

**(B) The department of education shall establish a list of high-quality core curriculum and instructional materials in English language arts, and a list of evidence-based reading intervention programs, that are aligned with the science of reading and strategies for effective literacy instruction. 35170 35171 35172**

35173 35174 (C) Beginning not later than the 2024-2025 school year, each school district, community school established under Chapter 3314. of the Revised Code, and STEM school established under Chapter 3326. of the Revised Code, shall use core curriculum and instructional materials in English language arts and evidence-based reading intervention programs only from the lists established under division (B) of this section.

First, this part of the bill violates the essence of local control which has been important in this state for years. Placing all responsibility in ODE and mandating only approved programs for Ohio schools is sure to be legally challenged.

Next, what is this “science of reading”? If I asked everyone in this room to define it, we would have different definitions from each. The only definition I could find in the bill is this:

science of reading, which includes phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency comprehension, and vocabulary development, and is part of a structured literacy program; 43805 43806 43807

Every reading program I have seen in the past 40 years has included phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency comprehension, and vocabulary development. So, this does not help us to discriminate between programs to approve or ban. Perhaps it is “as part of a structured literacy program.” This is a term which largely exists in the special education literature. So, according to the International Dyslexia Association, “Structured literacy (SL) approaches emphasize highly explicit and systematic teaching of all important components of literacy. These components include both foundational skills (e.g., decoding, spelling) and higher-level literacy skills (e.g., reading comprehension, written expression).” So, again, the definition is sufficiently unclear.

According to literacy scholar, Paul Thomas, “SOR has increasingly become a marketing label for reading materials and programs, often identified as “structured literacy,” which can be scripted programs that de-professionalize teachers and impose a one-size-fits-all approach to phonics on all students.” Surely, this is not the high quality, research-based instruction for Ohio’s children. Dr. Timothy Shanahan, often described as a strong phonics proponent, writes that None of the publicly prominent “science of reading” advocates even mention the value of teaching students about discourse structure (how oral and written language works).

Nevertheless, there is an extensive and rigorous body of instructional research showing that the

teaching of text structure promotes higher levels of reading comprehension with a diverse group of students under a wide array of circumstances (Hebert et al., 2016; Pyle et al., 2017; Wijekumar et al. 2017).

2. **Delete references to “Science of Reading” for lack of a clear definition and no research on instructional approaches.**

### **A New Plan: A Three Tiered Approach**

Below is the beginning of a plan which could be funded by the state budget which would make an impact on Ohio’s young readers.

- A. The only scientifically proven intervention for the lowest first graders is Reading Recovery (see appendix). Using 40% of the funds, train Ohio teachers to work individually with the lowest first graders to accelerate their learning. Reading Recovery has data on every student for the past 35 years; 70% of the students reach the class average within 12-20 weeks. There are already training sites across most of Ohio so training could begin immediately in the fall. This would at least give our lowest children a fighting chance to succeed.
- B. Create a multi-perspective Blue Ribbon Panel of professionals who have taught children to read charged with designing professional development for K-3 teachers to support students most at risk. Ohio has already spent millions of dollars on LETRS training which has no research support. A study published by the federal What Works Clearing House published a study that LETRS training increased teacher knowledge but had no impact on literacy achievement. There are no controlled studies in which the progress of students in classrooms taught by SOR teachers were compared to the progress of students taught by teachers whose practices were consistent with research on best practices. And there is absolutely no research which shows that LETRS is an effective instructional approach. (See Appendix.) Use 30% of the state funds and redirect the LETRS funds at ODE to support this panel and designed professional development across the state.

C. Finally, use 30% of the funds so that schools/districts can do a self-assessment and select appropriate instructional materials to meet their needs. If, for example, the classrooms have not included phonics in their instruction, the schools/districts could purchase materials to close this gap in instruction. Other schools/districts may need additional quality children's literature or leveled books for students to find success in reading text. I'm glad to supply full copies of any of the research I have described and will also be glad to answer questions.

Thank you for your efforts to help Ohio children learn to read and write.

## **Appendix**

### **From the federal i3 Study of Reading Recovery**

- "Our impact analysis revealed effect sizes on the [Iowa Test of Basic Skills] (ITBS) and its subscales that range between 0.30 and 0.42 standard deviations in each year of the evaluation.
- These are large relative to typical effect sizes found in educational evaluations. This benchmark suggests that the total standardized effect sizes was 4.6 times greater than average for studies that use comparable outcome measures." (p. 42)
- "This indicates that Reading Recovery's effects were 2.8 times greater than the reading outcomes of other instructional interventions.
- Similarly, the impacts of Reading Recovery were 3.5 times larger than the average effects of Title I programs reviewed..." (p. 43)

## Research Roundup: LETRS See [HERE](#)

4/12/2022

Language Essentials for Teaching Reading and Spelling (LETRS) is an IDA-accredited professional development program, which has been adopted by several states as required professional development for teachers in early grades, and recommended as such in many more. Many educators across the country have already experienced the training and developed their own informed perspectives on its value and utility.

This Research Roundup summarizes currently available research evidence on the impact of LETRS training.

### **Total studies found: 5**

Measured variables: teacher knowledge, instructional strategies, classroom management, teacher's instructional reading practice, student engagement, student achievement, teacher impressions of training

**Nature of evidence:** 3 dissertations, 2 reports, 1 review, 0 peer-reviewed studies

**Dissertations (3):** 2 found no evidence of positive impact on teachers or student achievement found, 1 had no reportable results related to the program.

### [Houser, A. \(2021\) Effects of the LETRS® Reading Professional Development on Teachers' Self-Efficacy and Reading Instruction](#)

The study was conducted with a convenience sample comprised 174 teachers who completed the Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale and the Framework for Teaching. Four research questions asked about differences between the compared groups in terms of four dependent variables. The results of nonparametric Mann-Whitney U tests found statistically nonsignificant differences between the compared groups in terms of student engagement subscale (U = 3270.5, p = 0.12), instructional strategies (U = 3520, p = 0.42), classroom management (U = 3581.5, p = 0.54), and teachers' instructional reading practice (U = 3539, p = 0.46). **The results found no evidence of effectiveness of the LETRS® professional development in terms of the four dependent measures.**

### [Tillman, T. \(2018\) Improving Reading Achievement at Greenleaf Upper Elementary School: A Mixed Methods Study](#)

Professional development was used to determine if student achievement in reading would increase at the assigned school. Third grade teachers completed face-to-face as well as online training in the Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS). Third grade teachers implemented the LETRS strategy to the students who performed in the bottom quartile in an effort to increase student achievement in reading. **Due to the implementation of**

a new core reading program at the assigned school during LETRS implementation, a determination could not be made if the LETRS strategy or the new core reading program (Collaborative Classroom) attributed to the increase in students' yielded growth upon analysis of the students' STAR reading cut scale scores.

[Vogelsang, Danielle C., "A First Year Program Evaluation of Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling: The Effect on Student Achievement and Teacher Perception" \(2009\). Dissertations. 626.](#)

The study also focused on the perceived effectiveness of the LETRS professional development opportunities provided to teachers as determined by surveys and roundtable discussions. Data from the Lincoln County R-III and Warren County R-III School District MAP tests, survey questionnaire, and roundtable discussions were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The data were analyzed together in order to combine the results and interpret them. Triangulation was achieved by utilizing survey results and the roundtable discussions in order to determine future outcomes for integrating LETRS into reading instruction. No statistically significant difference was found between the student achievement of the LETRS school district, Lincoln County R-III, and the non-LETRS school district, Warren County R-III. Qualitative data revealed that teachers in the LETRS school district believed that barriers to the implementation of the professional development existed. These barriers included time out of the teacher's classroom, the presentation of the material by the LETRS facilitators, and the lack of real-world application with the LETRS strategies.

**Research reviews: (1) WWC based on a single randomized control trial: no effect on student achievement**

[ERIC - ED503728 - WWC Quick Review of the Report "The Impact of Two Professional Development Interventions on Early Reading Instruction and Achievement", What Works Clearinghouse, 2008-Dec](#)

The authors examined data on more than 5,000 second graders from ninety elementary schools in four states during the 2005-06 school year. Study schools were randomly assigned to one of three groups: one in which teachers received training following the "LETRS" curriculum, another where they received the "LETRS" training as well as ongoing instructional coaching, and a third where the teachers received the standard professional development available in their district. Thirty schools were assigned to each research group. The study measured effects by comparing the standardized reading test scores of students from each of the three groups of schools. Study authors reported that providing second-grade teachers reading instruction training using the "LETRS" curriculum (with or without the instructional coaches) did not increase the reading test scores of their students.

**Research reports (2):** 1 found no effect on student achievement, 1 found an impact on teacher knowledge and ratings of instructional practice (compared to no PD), but not student achievement



1. [The Impact of Two Professional Development Interventions on Early Reading Instruction and Achievement](#)
2. [Educator Outcomes Associated with Implementation of Mississippi's K-3 Early Literacy Professional Development Initiative. REL 2017-270, Regional Educational Laboratory Southeast, 2017-Apr](#)
  - [EXECUTIVE SUMMARY](#)
  - Note: this report is the justification for the publisher's categorization of LETRS as a Tier III "Promising Evidence" under ESSA. For more information on evidence tiers, please visit: <https://www.evidenceforpa.org/learn/tiers>