

The Right to Read in Nova Scotia

Situation

In 2012, the Supreme Court of Canada released its unanimous decision that learning to read is a basic and essential human right.¹ From their Right to Read public inquiry, the Ontario Human Rights Commission concluded that the education system is not meeting this basic human right for Ontario students.² It was determined that Ontario's current approach, based on cueing systems and balanced literacy, disseminated in provincial curriculum, teaching guides, and Faculties of Education, is not based on evidence and is failing to teach many young students to read, and disproportionately so for students at-risk for learning disabilities or from equity-deserving groups.

The situation in Nova Scotia parallels that in Ontario. As reported by the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, about 30% of students in grades 3 and 6 are not reading as expected for their grade level.³ Amongst students from equity-deserving groups, the percentage of students failing to meet expectations on provincial reading assessments increases to around 40%.⁴ Data previously reported by individual Regional Centres showed that overall, about these same numbers of students do not demonstrate accurate and fluent reading in earlier grades. Based on current data⁵, about 2400 students will have left elementary school in 2022 alone, without the foundational reading skills needed for further academic success and at-risk for the life-long consequences and inequities associated with low literacy skills.² The adult illiteracy level is high in Nova Scotia and has negative effects on individuals' opportunities and well-being and on provincial economic development.⁶

Nova Scotia is failing to meet far too many students' basic and essential human right to learn to read.

Background & Assessment

Decades of research has shown what instructional approaches are most effective to teach students to learn the written code of English (principles that also largely apply to other alphabetic languages, such as French). The Right to Read inquiry found that Ontario's curriculum, teacher guides, and promoted practices are based on outdated models of the reading process, of how students learn to read, and of effective instruction.

These ineffective methods of teaching foundational word reading and spelling skills within a balanced literacy approach⁷ largely use leveled readers and teach children to rely on cueing systems to predict or problem solve words in text (e.g., using pictures, sentence structures, story contexts and prior knowledge, as well as prominent letters). This contrasts with research-based approaches which include explicitly and systematically teaching students the code of written English (or French) so they can build quick and effortless word reading – a hallmark of skilled reading.⁸ The Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) made clear that the provincial public education system needed to teach foundational word reading skills through explicit, systematic instruction in synthetic phonics, phonemic awareness (mainly with letters), and accurate and fluent word

¹ *Moore v British Columbia (Education)*, 2012 SCC 61 [Moore].

² <https://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/right-to-read-inquiry-report> (February 2022)

³ https://plans.ednet.ns.ca/sites/default/files/documents/2018%E2%80%9319_LM3-EN_results%20v2.pdf

<https://plans.ednet.ns.ca/results> (take participation rates into account and use of AT); 2021-22 LEM6 for web.pdf (ednet.ns.ca)

⁴ <https://www.saltwire.com/atlantic-canada/news/stark-inequalities-high-performing-and-struggling-schools-in-halifax-261545/>

<https://dbdli.ca/wp-content/uploads/Baseline-Data-on-African-Nova-Scotian-Learners.pdf> ; [2017-03-13.pdf](https://www.hrcce.ca/2017-03-13.pdf) (hrce.ca)

https://plans.ednet.ns.ca/sites/default/files/documents/2018%E2%80%9319_Disaggregated_results_release_LM3.pdf

⁵ 2021-22 RWM6 for web.pdf (ednet.ns.ca)

⁶ <https://www.conferenceboard.ca/hcp/provincial/education/adlt-lowlit.aspx>

⁷ https://www.ohrc.on.ca/sites/default/files/Right%20to%20Read%20Executive%20Summary_OHRC%20English_0.pdf ; (p. 21);

[Structured Literacy and Typical Literacy Practices: Understanding Differences to Create Instructional Opportunities \(idaontario.com\)](https://www.structuredliteracy.ca/structured-literacy-practices-understanding-differences-to-create-instructional-opportunities)

⁸ Castles, A. et al (2018). Ending the reading wars... *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 19, 5-51

reading (including advanced letter patterns and morphology). The Right to Read report stated that teaching these foundational word reading skills is one essential component of a complete and effective early literacy program. The report also condemned early reading interventions that are currently used and do not align with evidence-based practices. Families reported to the OHRC the necessity to employ professionals outside of school at significant financial costs. The report noted the two-tier system and further inequities that result when the public education system fails to teach reading effectively. As well, the social, emotional, and behavioural consequences of not teaching reading effectively were reviewed and are significant.

Nova Scotia's current curriculum and promoted approaches for teaching word reading skills are consistent with the ineffective approaches delineated in the Ontario Right to Read report. Nova Scotia's classroom instruction and intervention programs, even for young readers who are struggling to acquire foundational word reading skills, are based on a balanced literacy and cueing systems approach; methods not consistent with research on effectively teaching and remediating early reading skills.⁹ For example, research has largely not supported the effectiveness of Reading Recovery.¹⁰ One recent study reported that students who received Reading Recovery in grade 1 had worse outcomes in grades 3 and 4 than struggling grade 1 students who did not go through the program.¹¹ Reading Recovery and similar programs for small groups based on balanced literacy, cueing systems, and leveled books, are the most frequent early reading interventions in Nova Scotia's schools.

This situation contrasts with outcomes from research in Canadian school districts demonstrating the effectiveness of explicit instruction in foundational word reading skills. A study in North Vancouver found that only about 3-5% of students failed to develop efficient word reading skills with explicit classroom instruction in the early grades and effective early interventions; these results were maintained through to a follow-up in grade 7.¹² A grade 1 intervention for Edmonton students who were having difficulties focused on teaching synthetic phonics, phonemic awareness with letters, and word reading efficiency for approximately 15 hours, and reduced difficulties to about 2% of the grade 1 student population.¹³ This intervention was also effective for readers experiencing difficulties in grades 2 and 3.¹⁴ One British Columbia district found increasing results over 4 years of implementing effective foundational word reading instruction and interventions as a component of a full literacy program, reporting that "...Grade 4 provincial reading comprehension (showed) 92% meeting or exceeding expectations (compared with 68% provincially)" and (showed) 94% of Indigenous students were meeting or exceeding expectations (compared with 51% provincially).¹⁵ These outcomes were despite the district ranking within the top five most vulnerable in the province on a child-development indicator.

The Ontario Human Rights Commission made numerous recommendations for education systems to meet students' human right to learn to read. These focused on the provincial English Language Arts curriculum and effective classroom reading instruction for all students, evidence-based universal screening practices, and effective early (P-2) and later reading interventions for students at-risk or experiencing reading difficulties. Additional recommendations addressed student accommodations, professional assessments, teacher preparation programs, the use of the term dyslexia, and system-level supports. The recommendations in the OHRC report are compatible with Nova Scotia's Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS) framework for Inclusive Education and are essential to its success.

⁹ Otaiba & Torgesen, 2007. Effects from intensive standardized K and first-grade interventions ... *Handbook of response to intervention*. Springer, p. 212ff. [Early elementary school students are struggling to meet reading benchmarks - Halifax Examiner](#)

¹⁰ [Reading Recovery: A Failed Investment - The Centre for Independent Studies \(cis.org.au\)](#)

¹¹ <https://www.npr.org/2022/05/05/1096672803/reading-recovery-research-schools> » [Petition to dump Reading Recovery and Leveled Literacy Intervention \(spelfabet.com.au\)](#)

¹² Lesaux, N. et al. (2007). Growth in reading skills... *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 99, 821.

Lesaux, N. K., & Siegel, L. S. (2003). The development of reading... *Developmental psychology*, 39, 1005.

¹³ <https://edmontonjournal.com/news/local-news/extra-help-by-researchers-eliminates-reading-gap-for-most-young-students> ; for full study see: Savage, R. et al. (2018). Preventative reading interventions...*Scientific Studies of Reading*, 22, 225-247.

¹⁴ <https://globalnews.ca/news/8720230/alberta-childhood-reading-study-intervention-key/>
<https://www.stalberttoday.ca/localnews/gsacrd-readers-power-up-with-special-training-thompson-georgiou-5230462>

¹⁵ McIntosh et al., (2011). Response to intervention in Canada: *Cdn Journal of School Psychology*, 26(1), p. 32.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Far too many students are failing to learn to read well with Nova Scotia's current approach to early reading instruction. Balanced literacy, leveled readers and cueing system methods for teaching foundational word reading skills are inconsistent with research, have significant detrimental effects and long-term consequences for many students and disproportionately so for students from equity-deserving groups.

Learning to read is a human right in Nova Scotia, as in Ontario and across Canada. Nova Scotia's curriculum, classroom teaching guidelines and early interventions are strikingly similar to those in Ontario. To meet students' right to learn to read, the Nova Scotia government needs to commit to key recommendations from the Ontario Right to Read report. The recommendations are consistent with the MTSS framework and guiding principles of Nova Scotia's Inclusive Education Policy and would support this province's "...commitment to ensuring a high quality, culturally and linguistically responsive and equitable education to support the well-being and achievement of every student".¹⁶

1. Direct system-wide teaching of foundational word reading skills in all P-2 classrooms through explicit and systematic instruction in phonics, phonemic awareness (largely within decoding and spelling), word reading accuracy and fluency, and spelling; these need to be written directly into the curriculum. Remove references to teaching cueing systems from the curriculum, teaching guidelines, and promoted instructional practices, including the current focus on guided reading with leveled books. Align assessment with this teaching, including replacing leveled reading assessments or running records.
2. Require evidence-based early interventions for students in P-2 having difficulties acquiring foundational word reading skills. Effective interventions consist of increased time and intensity teaching foundational word reading skills, including phonemic awareness, phonics and decoding skills, and teaching accurate and quick word recognition. These include sufficient teacher-scaffolding, review, and cumulative practice reading and spelling individual words and reading books with lots of the taught letter patterns.
3. Ineffective early intervention programs based on balanced literacy, cueing systems, and leveled readers need to be replaced. These are currently the first and often only option for young students not keeping pace on word reading skills with classroom instruction. All students having difficulty in P-2 with foundational word reading skills need direct and immediate access to effective, evidence-based early interventions.
4. Universal screening of foundational word reading skills should be implemented in all P-2/3 classrooms to identify all young students in need of immediate and effective early support and interventions.
5. Students in grades 3-12 who struggle with word reading skills need immediate access to effective reading interventions for these skills. This remediation will need to be in addition to accommodations focused on supporting students' access to and full participation with grade-level curriculum.
6. Current elementary-school classroom and early literacy-support teachers, literacy leaders and resource teachers, will need professional developmental, learning opportunities, and ongoing mentoring with these system-wide changes to teaching foundational word reading skills. Research-based programs and resources that support these evidence-based approaches need to be a priority for all P-3 and intervention teachers.¹⁷ Internal and external experts will need to assume leadership roles. Required financial and other system-level resources will be substantial, as will an effective change-management plan¹⁸ addressing multiple levels of the education system (e.g., provincial; regional; school).

¹⁶ [Inclusive Education Policy FIN.indd \(ednet.ns.ca\)](#)

¹⁷ For example, see [UFLI Foundations | UF Literacy Institute](#) as a classroom resource and early intervention

¹⁸ For example, see Michie, S., et al., (2011). The behaviour change wheel: a new method for characterising and designing behaviour change interventions. *Implementation science*, 6(1), 1-12.