

Solving the Reading Crisis

Why more phonics won't do it, why the system can't explain the failure, and a practical path that can.

First: the crisis is real — but we have grown accustomed to accepting it

Seventy percent of American fourth-graders cannot read proficiently. On the 2024 Nation's Report Card, only 30 percent reached proficiency, and 40 percent fell below even the Basic level — the highest share in twenty years. Scores have stagnated or declined for two decades, through every reform. Yet the phrase “reading crisis” has lost its power to alarm. The children who struggle have never known anything else; they are forced to accept failure because the system does not have a solution. Their parents assume it is the hand they were dealt. Everyone has quietly accepted a national catastrophe. The first step is to stop accepting it.

Second: the current approach is not working

For years the field has answered the crisis with one prescription: teach more phonics, adopt “Science of Reading” curricula, and measure the results. Districts point to rising early-literacy screener scores — DIBELS and the like — as proof the fix is working. But those screeners mostly measure how quickly a child can sound out words and nonsense syllables. They do not measure comprehension. This is why children can post strong screener scores in kindergarten and first grade and then fail the third-grade reading test, which finally asks whether they understood what they read. We are measuring the on-ramp and calling it the highway. The needle on actual reading has not moved.

Third: the system cannot tell you why — and has no real solution

Ask why the crisis persists, and the system has no answer. Its entire toolbox holds two tools: change the curriculum again or provide more teacher training. Both assume the problem is the *instruction*. When scores stay flat, the response is simply a louder version of the same thing — more phonics, taught more insistently. There is no explanation for the failure because the failure is not where everyone is looking.

The system can measure the failure. It cannot explain it, and it cannot fix it — because reading does not run on phonics. It runs on **memory and meaning**, and both run on a **brain that must be ready** before any instruction can work.

Fourth: here is why (the part no one explains)

Skilled reading is not sounding words out. Watch a fluent reader and you will see the truth: they recognize whole words instantly, from memory, and go straight to meaning. Sounding out is what we do only when we hit a word we do not yet know — and in that moment we have stopped reading and started learning the word.

The brain takes in the light and pattern of print, recognizes the word-shape it has stored, links it to meaning, holds that meaning in working memory while the next words arrive, and builds comprehension. **Every word a reader knows has become a sight word.** Memory, not phonics, does the heavy lifting to accomplish fluent reading with comprehension.

Phonics still matters — it is the on-ramp that helps a child map a new word into memory the first few times. But it is one small tool near the top of a much larger structure, not the structure itself. And there is a deeper truth beneath even memory: **instruction acts on a brain; it cannot build one.** A reading lesson has nowhere to land if the child's underlying systems — attention, memory, processing speed, visual and auditory processing — are not yet developed, or if the child arrives under-slept, undernourished, or carrying stress and trauma. Those systems are built early, at home, long before the reading lesson.

The practical solution: find the gap, close the gap

If the cause is a set of underdeveloped skills rather than too little phonics, the solution follows plainly. A struggling reader has a *skill gap* — one or more weak links in the chain that reading depends on. The current paradigm inspects only a narrow slice of that chain. The fix is to widen the lens and work in three steps: **understand, evaluate, act.**

Understand that reading rests on the whole child — home stability and stress, social-emotional skills and mindset, background knowledge, and the cognitive processing skills that do the actual learning. **Evaluate** the full set, not just phonics: a brief look at wellbeing and stress at home, mindset and confidence, vision and tracking, the cognitive skills of memory, attention, and processing speed, and the child's true reading level. **Act** by closing whichever gaps are present with targeted, mostly low-cost, self-guided tools — brain-skill training to strengthen the weak cognitive links, and a memory-based reading program that builds instant word recognition rather than drilling phonics alone.

Most of this takes about twenty minutes a day, and most skill gaps are trainable and closable. The work is carried by the family, supported by a community “village,” and matched to the child's age: in the earliest years the family simply builds the reader through talk, reading aloud, sleep, and nutrition; in grades K–3 gaps are found and closed early; for older students the same diagnosis heals years of accumulated struggle. Crucially, this is screening used *to build, not to sort* — to close gaps before a child is ever tested, labeled, and shamed for them.

“But...” — answering the three objections

The busy teacher says, “I don't have time.” This does not add one more program to an overloaded plate. The heavy lifting happens at home and in short, self-guided training — not in the classroom. The teacher's role simply shifts from carrying every struggling child alone to recognizing, early, that a child has a skill gap the curriculum cannot close, and helping route the family to the support that can. Family is the key to the solution.

The administrator says, “That's not our approved process.” It need not replace the approved curriculum or wait on state adoption. It is a diagnostic-and-family-support layer that runs alongside whatever a district already uses — identifying the real gaps and closing them through home and community. The alternative is to keep doing more of the same and allow the failure to continue.

The parent says, “That's the school's job — I don't know how to teach reading.” You do not need to. In the early years your job is not to teach reading but to *build the reader* — talking, reading aloud, protecting sleep and nutrition and safety — which needs no curriculum at all. And when a child struggles, you are not asked to teach reading either; you are guided, step by step, to find the gap and use simple tools that do the teaching. The school cannot run the full diagnosis for every child. You can, for yours.

The path to a solution

Admit the crisis is real. See that the current approach is not solving it. Notice that the system can neither explain the failure nor fix it. Understand the real cause — reading runs on memory and meaning, on a brain that must first be ready. Then act on the real levers: build strong brains early, and find and close the full set of skill gaps before we label a single child. That is a path the system does not offer — and it is the one that leads to a true solution.

Stop accepting failure

Build stronger brains—empower reading success