



Top 10 Takeaways from the WNY Science of Reading Conference

The partners in the WNY Literacy Initiative recently hosted some of the leading literacy experts from around the country at the first ever WNY Science of Reading Conference.

Below are our Top 10 takeaways:

1. **The “balanced literacy” approach to reading instruction does not work for many children.** It does not reach students with dyslexia, which represent 15-20% of the population, or students that struggle to learn to read, which represent an additional 30-40% of children.

This explains why at least **30-50% of children in the highest-achieving school districts in WNY are not able to read proficiently, according to NYSED data.**

2. Since it does not reach students with dyslexia or struggling readers, **“balanced literacy” is, by definition, a discriminatory approach** to providing reading instruction in schools.

“Structured literacy”, on the other hand, has the ability to reach 95-97% of children when implemented properly.

We cannot talk about diversity, equity, and inclusion if we do not provide reading instruction in the most inclusive and equitable way possible. **Literacy is a civil right.** Literacy = equity and equity = structured literacy.

3. **Phonics patches to “balanced literacy” curricula do not work.** “Structured literacy” is much more than just phonics. According to the National Reading Panel, effective reading instruction should include phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (including the acquisition of background knowledge).
4. **The science of reading is not a fad or a pendulum swing.** It is a well-established body of research that explains how the human brain learns to read.
5. **The AFT and the NEA explicitly support evidence-based reading instruction.** According to the AFT, “a carefully crafted approach to the teaching of reading reflecting the research consensus that effective beginning reading instruction must include explicit, systematic, core classroom instruction in kindergarten through third grade on these essential components: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.”



6. The consequences associated with not being able to read are staggering. Children who are unable to read proficiently by fourth grade tend to experience much lower educational outcomes. **Furthermore, it is estimated that nearly 50% of those in prison are dyslexic and roughly 80% of prisoners are illiterate.** We must break the illiteracy to prison pipeline.
7. **A growing number of teachers in WNY would like more high-quality professional development in the science of reading and evidence-based reading instruction.** The vast majority of teachers want to learn more about the science of reading so that they can reach more children in their classrooms. This is not surprising. Teaching isn't just a job, it is their life's work.

The WNY Education Alliance and its partners will work to raise funds to provide teachers with training in the science of reading if funds are not made available by local school districts.

8. While some local universities, such as the University of Buffalo and SUNY Geneseo, are providing prospective teachers with training in the science of reading, the unfortunate reality is that most teaching colleges in the area are not. **We need to bring local universities to the table to be part of this important conversation.**

We believe that a policy response is needed to improve teacher training in local colleges. NYSED teacher certification standards should include knowledge of the science of reading and **New York State should support evidence-based reading instruction through legislation,** just as 30 states have already done.

9. We need ALL education stakeholders (teachers, parents, curriculum directors, superintendents, board members) to come to the table to acknowledge that: a) we have a literacy problem across ALL school districts in WNY, and b) **we can improve literacy rates in WNY by working together to provide evidence-based reading instruction** that supports ALL children.
10. Shifting from "balanced literacy" to "structured literacy" will take time and investment – but the data shows that the return on that investment is enormous. This deserves to be the single most important educational priority in WNY.

We cannot let divisions distract us from improving literacy rates and educational outcomes for children; we must work together to address the reading crisis in WNY.