

QUESTIONS TO ASK #1

UNDERSTANDING THE SCIENCE OF READING: WHAT PARENTS SHOULD KNOW

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For years, schools across the country have used reading programs and instructional methods that contradict decades of research. The result? Millions of children struggle to read—not because they can’t learn, but because they were never taught properly. That’s beginning to change. Thanks to the work of education journalist Emily Hanford and advocates across the country, parents and policymakers are taking a closer look at how reading is actually taught—and demanding better.*

The “science of reading” is not just a buzzword. It’s a large and settled body of research on how children learn to read, and it shows clearly that reading is not a natural process.† Most students need to be explicitly and systematically taught the foundational skills, like phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension, that strong readers rely on.

Every child deserves a real chance to succeed. States using proven reading methods are seeing clear improvements. Parents can lead the way by asking direct questions and expecting honest answers about how their children are learning to read. You don’t need to be an expert to make a difference.

Red Flags to Watch for in Reading Homework or Curricula

- **Relying heavily on pictures or context clues to guess words:** If your child is encouraged to guess a word because “the picture looks like it” or “the sentence sounds right,” that’s a sign of three-cueing rather than decoding skills.
- **Focus on “sight words” without phonics:** While some high-frequency words can’t be sounded out easily, if a lot of emphasis is placed on memorizing words without teaching how to decode new words, that’s a red flag.

* <https://features.apmreports.org/sold-a-story/>

† <https://www.commentary.org/articles/robert-pondiscio/teaching-reading-right/>

- **Very little emphasis on letter sounds:** If homework or reading activities don't focus on sounding out letters, blending sounds, or breaking words into parts, the instruction may not be following the science of reading.

If you notice these signs, it's important to ask your child's teacher how they are teaching reading and whether the curriculum is based on explicit phonics and decoding instruction.

Questions to ask your school board:

- Is our district using reading curriculum and materials that align with the science of reading?
- What professional development are teachers receiving to support evidence-based reading instruction?
- Are all students in grades K–3 being screened regularly for reading difficulties?
- What kind of extra help does the school provide for kids who are struggling to read?

Questions to ask your child's teacher:

- How are you teaching my child to read?
- Are you incorporating phonics?
- What curriculum do you use, and is it aligned to the science of reading?
- How is my child doing on reading screeners?
- Is my child on track to be reading on grade level by the end of the year?
- What specific reading skills is my child strong in? Where is more support needed?
- If my child is struggling, what kind of intervention are they receiving?

How Parents Can Help Kids Learn to Read at Home

- Read aloud together every day—even 10 minutes helps.
- Practice letter sounds and how they connect to words.
- Play with breaking words into sounds and blending them.

- Ask your child to show how they sound out words at school.
- Encourage writing simple words or sentences.
- Remind them to sound out words, not just guess.

Small steps make a big difference. Celebrate their effort and progress to build confidence.

Reading is fundamental. With proven instruction, every child can learn to read well. Parents must stay engaged, ask tough questions, and hold schools accountable. Work with your child's teacher and support learning at home. Your involvement is key to ensuring your child's success. Don't stay silent. Your voice matters.

WILL is a legal resource for parents, students, and school districts. If you believe your rights have been violated, you can contact us at www.will-law.org/contact-a-lawyer. Depending on your situation, we may be able to help further.

This document is part of the WILL Parental Rights Toolkit. Explore the full toolkit at: www.will-law.org/parenttoolkit

