Muncie Community Schools sees improvements in standardized test scores following the implementation of “Science of Reading” curriculum

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PARTNERSHIP PAPER

Second-grade teacher Savannah Oliphant teaches her students about beetles and other bugs April 8 at East Washington Academy. Once inside the classroom, students are met with curricula that satisfy the standards of “The Science of Reading.” Andrew Berger, DN

The door of Savannah Oliphant’s East Washington Academy classroom is outlined with colorful sticky notes, each with a different sight word or phonetic sound.

Upon coming in each morning, Oliphant’s second graders are prompted to recite a word or phrase from a sticky note, a routine she said “is building confidence, stamina and the ability to read” the more students are exposed to real-life words and their sounds.

Once inside the classroom, students are met with curricula that satisfy the standards of the "Science of Reading."

An August 2019 report from American Public Media Organization (APM) examined how reading instruction methods have changed over time.

According to the report, in the 1800s, children were taught a phonetic method of reading by sounding out words with the aid of McGuffey readers, some of the earliest books for grade-level children.

By the 1930s, reading was thought to be a visual memory process, largely popularized by the "Dick and Jane" picture books of the decade.

The conclusion of whether reading was a skill more dependent on auditory or visual cues was a standard debate until education professor Ken Goodman proposed a "three-cueing system" comprised of graphics, semantics and syntax in his 1967 research paper.

The three-cueing system became "the theoretical basis for a new approach to teaching reading that would soon take hold in American schools," according to APM.

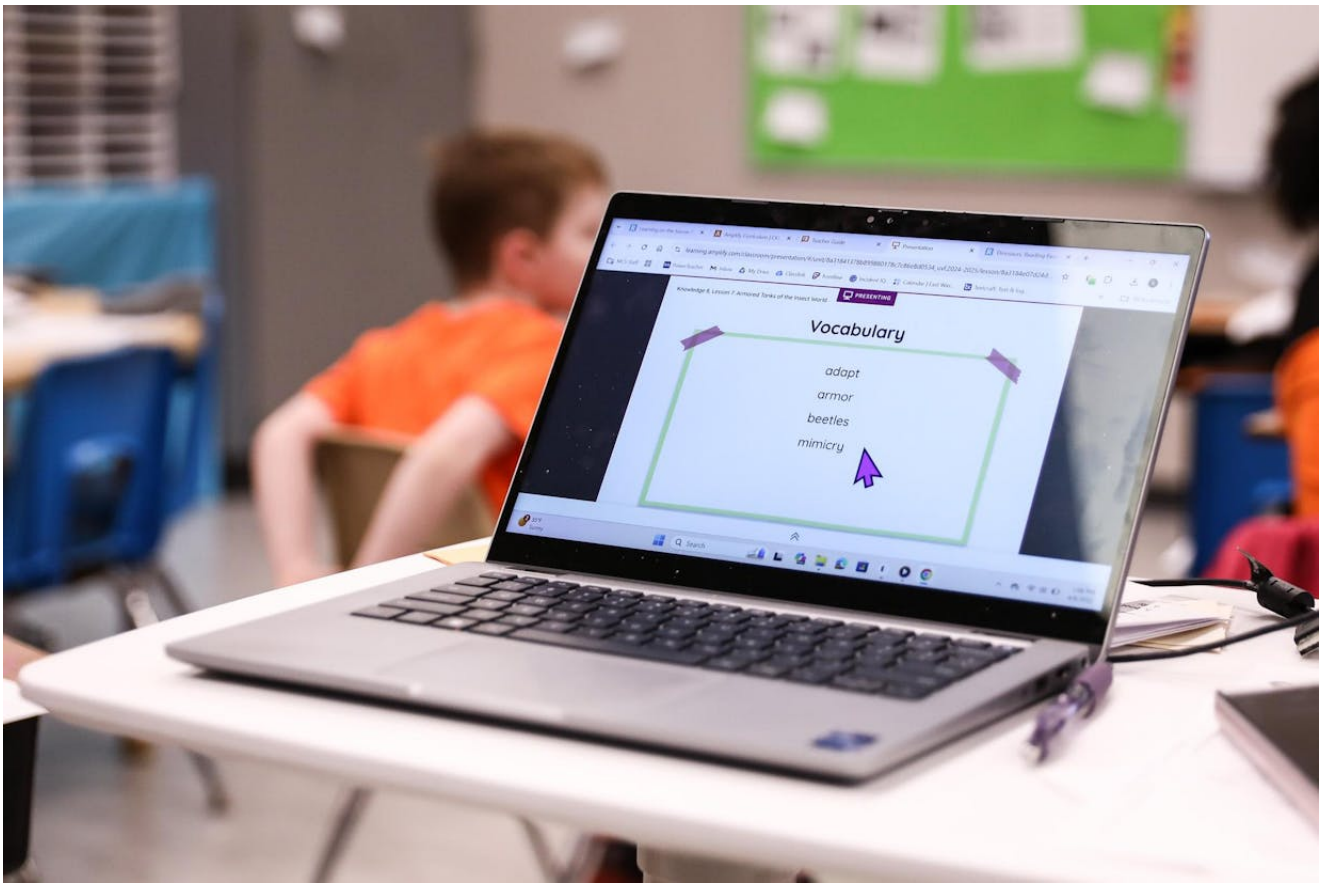
However, Goodman's theory — a rejection of the idea that reading is a precise process that involves exact or detailed perception of letters or words — has since been debunked by cognitive scientists.

Now, picking up the pieces of Goodman's foundational work, teachers and parents have begun to see reading as a science, not a "psycholinguistic guessing game," as Goodman famously coined.

"[The Science of Reading] tells us that there are two parts of the brain we need to put together: reading comprehension and oral comprehension, and one isn't going to succeed without the other," Oliphant said.

She said the "Science of Reading" was first brought to her attention in December 2022 when Muncie Community Schools (MCS) tested different reading-based curricula that adhered to its structure in its schools.

A semester later, the district moved forward with Amplify Core Knowledge Language Arts (CKLA), a program that "puts research into action with explicit, systematic foundational skills instruction and a proven knowledge-building sequence," by working closely with education "experts" and practitioners, according to Amplify's website.



At the time, Oliphant was teaching first grade and piloting the CKLA program at East Washington Academy. She said the decision to teach second grade was partially strategic, as she wanted to keep up with her former students.

“I wanted to follow them not only to see their growth continue, but to [also] see how much they retained, and how much they remember[ed], and to see if [CKLA] was really helping them and how it affected their iRead scores,” Oliphant said.

At MCS, CKLA is divided into two portions: a skills portion, which teaches younger grade-level students how to read, and a knowledge portion, which nurtures students’ comprehension skills at the higher elementary grade levels.

Oliphant said the program is structured this way because “the thing we've learned [through] ‘The Science of Reading’ is these kids have a higher grade listening comprehension and oral comprehension than they do a reading comprehension.”

The program’s reading comprehension books are often fiction. As students get older, non-fiction is slowly integrated into their reading material, as is the case with Oliphant’s current class of second-semester second graders.

Although she was “skeptical at first” of the new curriculum, Oliphant was pleasantly surprised by the impact CKLA had on her students — especially with the integration of nonfiction early in the spring semester to align with Black History Month when students were exposed to

stories of Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks.

“Having them interested really helps them grow in other aspects,” she said, underscoring that exposure to real-life scenarios has enabled her students to become knowledgeable and well-versed in many topics within the mechanics of reading.

“My kids are very much science and social studies kids. They will nerd out,” Oliphant said. “I take them to the library on Friday, and because we read about stuff in [the classroom], it engages their reading and what they want to read in the library.”

A student raises her hand during a lesson about beetles in second-grade teacher Savannah Oliphant’s classroom April 8 at East Washington Academy. MCS was one of the first school districts in Indiana to adopt “The Science of Reading.” Andrew Berger, DN

During the COVID-19 pandemic, MCS, like many school systems nationwide, struggled to navigate uncertainty. At the time, the district was implementing the Fountas and Pinnell (F&P) Literary Method.

“It was good for what it was…But we actually did give up Fountas and Pinnell for Amplify CKLA, because we saw the potential [CKLA] had,” Oliphant said, adding that F&P was very much rooted in the “figure out what the word is based on the picture and sentence” approach that preached literary memorization rather than retention.

The intention behind CKLA, meanwhile, is to “not stop hitting on phonics,” Opliant said, which allows students to read by blending the sounds of letters together to create words. “By the end of kindergarten, they're actually reading little stories, so it's pretty cool,” she said.

Though the program is meant to be implemented starting in kindergarten to best prepare students for the Indiana state-mandated iRead test in the third grade, Oliphant said, because of COVID-19, only this year’s current class of kindergarteners will have all three years of exposure to CKLA at its fullest value.

“We're expecting next year for there to be a lot of those foundational gaps closed, because we finally have a groove down, we know what we're doing [and] we know what is needed. As we continue to build, those foundational ‘gaps’ are slowly closing, which is very good for us,” she said, referencing the more than tripled rate at which her students are hitting the “border” and are expected to pass the iRead test by the time they reach third grade.

Even without all three years of curriculum exposure, early results of CKLA in Oliphant’s classroom indicate positive, lasting impressions, largely due to the repetition of phonics.

“I have always said from the get-go, repetition is key. Repition leads to structure, and a lot of these kids need just that, repetition and structure to build their confidence and stamina [in reading],” Oliphant said.

MCS was one of the first school districts in Indiana to adopt the “Science of Reading.” Oliphant, a 2022 Ball State alumna, said that speaks to the dedication MCS has for its students.

“I don't even live anywhere near Muncie, and I will drive up here 45 minutes every day because this district is so dedicated to the students, and the future of the students and what is needed of the students. Every teacher is a successful teacher when we can meet the students where they are and help them grow — and that's all I see here,” she said.

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