

The Learning First Alliance
Action Plan and Professional Guide (1998)
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In the late part of last century and the early part of this century, interest in the Science of Reading peaked. Reid Lyon's speeches and writings were a part of this. Several national reports joined in. One example: an ["action paper" tells of a massive effort](#) by a consortium of organizations and national reports. This increased interest led to the nationally funded Reading First program at the beginning of the century. This program was consequential and growing until the funding ceased. Interest then dropped out of sight, within the last decade, which included The Science of Reading. That is, until the awakening of several journalists, i.e., Emily Hanford, and new organizations, i.e., The Reading League, renewed their efforts. (See ["Modern Presentations"](#) on this website.

The "action paper", which came with a "professional guide" companion, played a large part, along with Reid Lyon, in creating the peaked interest at the turn of the century. Every Child Reading, An Action Plan was published [in a special issue of the American Educator](#) magazine, (1998) a publication of the American Federation of Teachers. This "Action Plan" came from a large consortium of organizations called The Learning First Alliance. The contents of the action paper was discussed at the Learning First Alliance Summit on Reading and Mathematics held in Washington, D.C. January 26-28, 1998. It was the collective work of the Learning First Alliance Board of Directors. It has been informed by many distinguish experts in reading." These experts are listed on the first page.

A full copy of the companion Professional Development Guide is available on-line from ERIC.
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED451498.pdf>

"The Learning First Alliance is a permanent partnership of 12 leading educational associations that have come together to improve student learning in America's public elementary and secondary schools. Members of the Alliance represent more than 10 million Americans engaged in providing, governing, and improving public education. The Alliance is an unprecedented, self-initiated commitment to develop and deliver a common message to all parts of the education system to align priorities, share and disseminate success stories, encourage collaboration at every level, and work toward the continual and long-term improvement of public education based on solid research."

The experts were an all-star group of researchers. The twelve member Alliance partnership are listed on the second page. The "accepted indicator" of national reading achievement from the NAEP assessment, at the time, showed that "40 percent of all U. S. nine-year-olds scored below the 'basic' level". The sad news is that that number has hardly budged since that time, in spite of this massive effort.

The Learning First Alliance paper and Guide, like the work of Reid Lyon, (see above postings) is a good substantive summary of what had been learned up to that point and what is still known as the Science of Reading. No changes have been made since. The Guide gives additional details on general points and adds details on how they can be applied in teaching. However, gaps can still be seen in the practical applications. (It's a work in process, see Mark Seidenberg's quote in the Introduction.) The

gaps exist to this day because they have yet to be resolved in the Science. This has contributed to some critical ambiguity and weakness in the application of the science.

The goals and ambitious reforms called for were well put, for that time, or any time for that matter. They have become standards yet to be accomplished twenty years later. At the time, the Alliance was “forging a strategy to ensure reading success for all”. They advocated for a “focus on practices grounded in research”. They claimed that “a consensus about what works (was) emerging” that went beyond the “conflict between ‘whole language’ and ‘phonics’ advocates”. The Alliance advocated a practice by “educators and policy makers” that took advantage of the “best available research” to use as a “basis for decisions about reading instruction and policy”.

The Alliance members were hopeful that this work would result in dramatic changes in reading achievement at the national level. The Guide states that “Central in the discussion of school improvement is the belief, supported by research, that almost all students can learn to read and that much reading failure is preventable.” The Learning First Alliance's 1998 action plan on early reading instruction aligns with several other reviews that rest on decades of reading research...(that) identify scientifically validated practices that enable all but 2 percent to 5 percent of children to read, even in populations where the incidence of failure is often far higher.”

Looking back in time, it is obvious that these goals were not met. (see the Modern Presentations posted, especially Emily Hanford) Not meeting them may have been partly due to the fact that the Guide was not specific enough. Districts and policy makers were left to fill in the details of instruction for very beginning readers. This is where the details are vital. A failure in applying the most effective methods, in detail, at this level would weaken this massive effort and result in many children failing to meet the stated goals in the primary grades. This lack of progress would show up on the NAEP test of fourth graders. The “gaps” in the Guide were not their fault. They went as far as the Science would allow. The science had not, and still has not, resolved questions on the details of instruction. Therefore, the Guide could only go so far. The details had to be filled in by practitioners. This led to a wide variety of methods that followed the Guide and the Science as far as it led.

A Personal Perspective.

This is not to say that there was no research at the practical level that led to effective programs during this time. There were teachers and programs that were experiencing excellent success with applying the Science. It was simply the case that they had not been recognized and given sufficient research at the most detailed levels by mainstream researchers. This kind of situation has improved but mostly continues to exist.

I had been participating in a doctoral program at Boston College in the 80s where I started to become familiar with the science. I continued to teach in classrooms and follow the developing research on reading throughout the 90s. By 1997, I was able to persuade my district to allow me to conduct a three-year, 1st and 2nd grade program with all research-based programs. They allowed this, but I had to raise the funds of about \$20,000 over the summer myself. The three-year program was very successful. I had good testing results, but the district still discontinued the program. Interesting enough, though, the district later participated in the national Reading First program, (2002-7) which used the same programs that I had demonstrated.

At the end of the three years, I took an early retirement and began working on persuading six sponsoring districts, one at a time, to accept a k-5 charter plan with the same programs and approach. The charter schools continue to operate. I was proud to take part in the peaking interest of the Science of Reading during this time.

Pre-K and Kindergarten

The paper begins with what to do in pre-K and kindergarten. At this level, references are made of a “broad array of language experiences, the importance of background knowledge, stories and books, and concepts of print. Particular attention was given to the importance phonemic awareness and learning the alphabet and letter sounds, the primary contribution of The Science.

The action paper expresses it well. “Phonemic awareness is demonstrated by the ability to identify and manipulate the sounds within spoken words. Children can be taught to hear that ‘cat’ is composed of three sounds: /k/, /a/, /t/. They can learn to assemble those phonemes into words (blending) as well as learn to break words (segment) into their phonemes, even before they are writing letters or words.” They appear to be referring to oral pre-reading skills, phonemic awareness without letters, in preparation for “their more formal instruction in reading with a comfortable familiarity with the sounds that letters represent and with ‘hearing’ those sounds within (spoken) words.” The open question is, how are these oral phonemic awareness skills taught? How do they learn to blend and segment spoken words?

Coupled with this oral learning is learning alphabet songs, match pictures or objects with initial letters, play games with letters and sounds, and so on.... By the end of kindergarten, children should be able to recognize, name, print letters, and know the sounds they represent.” This seemed to be the extent of what can be taught in kindergarten, as seen by the Alliance. (see comments below regarding this limitation.)

Phonemic awareness is stressed as a research-based preparation for first grade. The Guide does refer to the [National Reading Panel’s report](#), published in 2000, as a resource. It lists the kinds of phonemic awareness skills that need to be taught (pg 13, Table 1), however, it did not include a reference to the Panel’s recommendations on how phonemic awareness can be taught. In that report, six different exercises are identified as research supported activities for teaching phonemic awareness. Programs with just these activities were widely published for use in kindergarten classrooms to prepare for formal, explicit, systematic instruction in first grade. These six activities are ways to teach the kind of phonemic awareness skills listed in the Guide on page 13, Table 1. The effectiveness and usefulness of these exercises has some credibility, although, they are yet to be tested against other ways of more efficient and effective ways to prepare kindergarten children to read.

First Grade

The Alliance placed a high priority on learning to read in the nine months of first grade, as “arguably the most important in a student’s schooling.” (see my argument below) However, they added that “Unfortunately, it is also in the first grade where common instructional practice are arguably most inconsistent with the research findings.” (The Alliance already seemed to know of possible gaps in the application of principles learned from the Science.) They continued to say that first graders need “Training in alphabetic basics”. This includes, learning “how to blend isolated sounds into words for reading and breaking words into their component sounds for writing.”(blending and segmenting with letters for reading and spelling,) It appears that the writers assume that children will receive training in the oral blending of sounds into spoken words and breaking spoken words into segments before applying these tasks with letters for reading and spelling. For reading, children must “have a basic

understanding of how the letters of words, going from left to right, represent their sounds”. Children must “have a firm grasp of these basics **before formal reading and spelling instruction begins**”. These are solid, research-based principles that need specific details on how they are applied. This is where the gaps are.

The National Academy of Sciences study, Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children, (1997) is quoted on the importance of learning these basics in first grade. “The bottom line is that all children have to learn to sound out words rather than relying on context and pictures as their primary strategies to determine meaning.” The Alliance paper reports that “research shows that all proficient readers rely on deep and ready knowledge of spelling-sound correspondence while reading, whether this knowledge was specifically taught or simply inferred by students. Conversely, failure to learn how to use spelling/sound correspondences to read and spell words is shown to be the most frequent and debilitating cause of reading difficulty. **Well-sequenced phonics instruction** early in first grade has been shown to reduce the incidence of reading difficulty even as it accelerates the growth of the class as a whole. Given this, it is probably best to start all children with explicit phonics instruction.”

The importance of using “strong reading materials” that teaches the basics is stressed, along with strategies for teaching comprehension skills. The importance of learning writing and spelling skills is also stressed. Where are these strong “well-sequenced phonics instruction” reading materials? Describing them in general terms is insufficient. (some sources could have been named.)

The success in teaching these skills is dependent on appropriate class-size and curriculum-based assessment. Effective grouping strategies is also stressed. The difficulties in finding ways of teaching beginning reading in small groups was discussed. Various alternatives are described. They serve as an example of the lack of rigorous detail.

As an experienced kindergarten and first grade teacher, I found that the best strategy for grouping in three groups is to have a reading specialist teach one group along-side the classroom teacher teaching a second group. The classroom teacher can teach the third group after these two are finished. Students in the first two groups can have follow-up assignments from their lessons to complete at their seats. It works better to have the third group be the higher group. These children are more likely to be capable of finishing follow-up assignments the next day when the other two groups are being taught first. This strategy shortens the time in which children are doing seat work assignments, which means the independent work is meaningful. Most schools have at least one title-one or resource room teacher available to teach one group everyday as their teaching assignment. It also may be better for the classroom teacher to teach the lowest group. This is not one of the plans that the Alliance identified. All of their options were faulty.

The action paper claims that “By the end of first grade,.... Most students should, in fact, be able to decode virtually any phonetically regular short word with short or long vowels and read a large number of high-frequency sight words.” Instructional needs of children in second grade are discussed that includes a need for quality literature, expository texts and the ability to understand increasingly complex content of all sorts.

Given the fact that 40 percent of third graders “are not reading adequately” and meeting the goal of all children reading by the end of third grade, the Alliance acknowledges meeting this goal was “**an enormous undertaking**”. (It continues to be.) To accomplish all of this, the paper identified ten broad actions to take, actions that included time, funds and hard work: “base decisions and adoption of texts on evidence, nor ideology, provide professional development, promote whole-school adoption, involve parents, improve preservice education and instruction, provide additional staff, improve early identification and intervention, introduce accountability measures for early grades, and finally intensify reading research”.

Commentary

The Alliance takes a traditional approach to teaching grades k-2. The purpose of kindergarten is to prepare for formal instruction in reading. First grade is to cover the basics, and second grade is for extending to more independent reading. This tradition has broken-up some in the last twenty years but essentially continues to be followed.

In teaching beginning reading, a serious problem emerges in teaching many children decoding skills. Of course, this is a big topic. Whole books are written on it. In my view, the Guide only touches on a universal problem with decoding that was evident in Reid Lyon’s chapter article of 1998 and continues to this day. It has to do with initially teaching “sound blending” in Table 2 and in the side-bar statement page 15 of the Guide, “To read, children must know how to blend isolated sounds into words. The bottom line is that all children have to learn to sound out words rather than relying on context and pictures as their primary strategies to determine meaning”. All of this is extremely important, but is left with important ambiguities and gaps. It’s one thing to name what to teach and quite another to describe how it’s done.

The Alliance did not acknowledge the particular common difficulty children have in learning decoding at the beginning - where the difficulty is and how to get through it. Lennea Ehri, an important researcher and writer on the topic, states that learning these basic skills is the hardest part of learning to read.

Early researchers in the 1960s and 70s discovered that beginning decoding is where children have the most difficulty in learning. It is especially seen with children who have very little awareness of phonemes and therefore have very little idea about what letters are for. Beginning readers often have trouble forming a word from the dictated sounds or even from just identifying the letters with their sounds. They can learn the word ‘stop’ but have no idea what the letters do in that word. For them, the word could be spelled and learned as ‘hijk’, and it didn’t matter. For even a simple word like ‘man’, they don’t know how to sound out the letters so that one letter blends into the next to make a word that can be identified from their speaking vocabulary. i.e., blending sounds or letters into words. It sounds simple to us adults, but to a none literate child, it’s a strange task. For lots and lots of children, this becomes a Block in their learning to read. Perfetti calls this a “bottle-neck”. It’s a bottle-neck because of the Block. This has multiple consequences. One is, they revert to memorizing whole words. The Block was identified early in research history, but a satisfactory answer to how it can be prevented remains unknown or unverified. (More on this later)

In my experience of teaching in both first grade (in the three-year project) and kindergarten (in the charter schools), I found that the preparation of phonemic awareness for decoding of reading real words can be accomplished simply in kindergarten. Therefore, reading can be formally taught in kindergarten. This enables gains in learning, at the same level, that was identified for first grade. I've written a small paper called, [Teaching all Kindergarten Children to Read](#), posted on this website, that describes this process.

Kindergarten children can be taught to read at a level described in the Alliance Action Plan and Guide for first graders. Then, this therefore means that they have a true head-start in learning to read more advanced material in later grades (1-3). This possibility has yet to be noticed by most current Science of Reading advocates. Details on how to teach through the critical 'block' in children's learning are missing. In tracing the history of the science on this website, watch to see how this is repeatedly missed.

The action paper reveals weaknesses that still exist in the practical applications of the science. In the [Posted Introduction to the Science](#), it is stated that the Science of Reading was, and is, long in theory and short in application.

The scientist Mark Seidenberg is quoted in the Introduction,
“The Science of reading is a work in progress”.