



# A Field Guide to the Literacy Tsunami

Published by [karenavaites](#) on [April 9, 2019](#)

An important national conversation about how we teach reading has been gaining *major* momentum over the last 6 months, as reading instruction has been in *The New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *EdWeek* editorial pages, and I-could-go-on.

I've been summarizing this "literacy tsunami" for educators. Lately, the updates have come fast and furious!

Trying to catch the wave? I got you, friend.

Here's an executive summary of the 7 key themes, with plenty of links to additional reading:

# 1. Media Coverage About Reading Instruction Has Been Everywhere

In September, a documentary-plus-article called *Hard Words: Why aren't kids being taught to read?* went viral, spawning other articles and kicking off a national dialogue.

See how the wave gained momentum by reading along here:

- [A Literacy Tsunami Warning for K-12 Educators](#) captures the early reaction, from the *NYTimes* to the *WSJ* to esteemed literacy leaders.
- [Literacy Tsunami: Crest Edition](#) adds teacher and district leader reactions, legislative activity in 5 states, and more, as reading issues hit the front page of *The Philadelphia Inquirer* in early March.
- [Literacy Tsunami: Drumbeat Edition](#) has the latest, as of March 22nd.

# 2. Concerns About Teacher Prep Are a Theme

*Hard Words* exposed shortcomings with the literacy coursework in many teacher preparation programs.

EdWeek explored it in [Teachers Criticize Their Colleges of Ed. for Not Preparing Them to Teach Reading.](#)

In a recent [Chalkbeat survey](#), most teachers agreed that their preservice training didn't adequately cover reading. Also, teachers say that "American schools pay little attention to the science behind reading instruction."

Powerful accounts have emerged, like [the experience of kindergarten teacher Lindsay Kemeney](#), who learned key research while supporting her dyslexic son:

"I became angry. Why was I never taught about dyslexia? Why was I never taught about the National Reading Panel (2000)? Why was I never taught about structured literacy? Why was I never taught about explicit, systematic phonics and phonemic awareness? Why wasn't I told that there

was a method that would reach ALL learners and not just the top 40%? Why aren't teachers given this vital information?"

### 3. Concerns About Reading Instruction Are Another Theme

Simply put, decades-old research has conclusively shown us how kids learn to read, yet those evidence-based practices are missing from many classrooms. Twenty years ago, the research was crystallized by the [National Reading Panel](#) – then it informed our new state standards – but unfortunately, curriculum and practice have been slow to catch up.

Literacy goddess and Common Core lead author Sue Pimentel summarized the concerns in a recent EdWeek piece, [Why doesn't every teacher know the research on reading instruction?](#) (Republished [here](#) without a paywall.) Literacy guru Tim Shanahan also [writes frequently](#) about it.

The refrains:

- [Phonics instruction matters](#), and it's missing or under-supported in many reading programs, so programs attempting balanced literacy are often, well, imbalanced.
- Leveled reading groups remain pervasive, even though [evidence suggests they don't work](#) (beyond K-1) and there are [better approaches](#).
- Content knowledge is essential to reading comprehension, yet [almost no one knows this key research](#).
- We spend too much time on reading 'skills and strategies,' and this work [doesn't produce the learning outcomes we seek](#). Many folks assume those approaches will improve test scores/outcomes, but unfortunately, [that's not the case](#).

### 4. District Leaders Call it a 'National Reading Crisis'

Brian Kingsley, Jared Myracle, and Robin McClellan penned a recent, viral EdWeek

editorial on all of the above, [\*We Have a National Reading Crisis\*](#) – republished [here](#) without a paywall.

They speak with refreshing humility about their own learning journeys:

“It’s perfectly possible to become a principal or even a district curriculum leader without first learning the key research. In fact, this was true for us.

We each learned critical reading research only *after* entering district leadership.”

They also issue a powerful call to action:

“Educators urgently need a national movement for professional learning about reading. We should declare a No Shame Zone for this work—to make it safe for all educators to say, ‘I have unfinished learning around literacy.’”

If you read one thing in this whole blog, [read what Jared, Robin, and Brian have to say.](#)

## 5. Talk of Solutions is the Silver Lining

Yes, there is good news! (Woot.)

Many point to a recent “curriculum renaissance” that makes it easier to bring evidence-based practices into classrooms today than it was just two years ago, thanks to a recent surge in research-aligned options.

Now, I know curriculum isn’t historically a hot category. (*#Understatement.*) But the curriculum landscape has changed dramatically, and it’s worth a new look.

To understand why district leaders are buzzing about curriculum, read Brian Kingsley’s blog, [\*Literacy is the Innovation Opportunity of 2019\*](#), for two good reasons:

1. Brian serves as CAO in Charlotte-Mecklenburg (NC), the 18th-largest

district in the US, and he previously served as CAO in Wake County (NC, #15) and Broward County (FL, #6). No one knows more about improving reading instruction across schools than Brian Kingsley.

2. He's quite optimistic. "Vastly improved reading outcomes are *actually within reach*," he writes. We should all know his reasons for saying so.

Then read about the promising outcomes and powerful stories coming out of other districts. It's persuasive stuff, y'all.

### Additional Must-Know Info:

Two respected curriculum reviewers, EdReports and Louisiana Believes, make it easy to find the quality materials, and to pinpoint issues in any materials that you adopted pre-curriculum renaissance.

## 6. Parent Advocacy is Emerging

This national conversation has been public, often playing out in social media. EdWeek noted this trend: "Platforms like Twitter and Facebook have exploded with parents, researchers, and educators advocating for a systematic approach to teaching reading." This has pulled in parents, especially the active dyslexia parent community.

For example, EdWeek's Stephen Sawchuk interviewed Moms who've been writing Open Letters to their district, calling for better reading practices. What I find striking is that the Moms are incredibly well-informed. One of their open letters made an issue of the EdReports review of the district's curriculum (*spoiler: it's not good*). The moms reference the same research base and reading practices cited above. It seems that Dyslexia Moms are doing their homework.

The chatter in the Twitterverse suggests that dyslexia advocates are organizing regionally and nationally. I'm predicting an increase in informed advocacy by parents.

## 7. Professional Learning Is Becoming the Hot

## Topic

With leaders calling for a “national movement for professional learning about reading,” the obvious question becomes: where can folks go to learn the key research?

I would emphasize [Brian Kingsley's point on professional learning](#): many district leaders tout the PD that accompanies the excellent, research-aligned curricula, because of the powerful comprehensiveness at play: giving teachers both the research *and* research-aligned tools. Read [more from Brian](#).

Where can folks start learning right this minute? Well, I filled this blog with links for a reason, friend! Happy clicking-and-learning.

### Additional Professional Learning: My Short List

A group of savvy district leaders created an excellent [curation of reading research and articles](#); it's great for getting started.

Achieve The Core [holds excellent webinars](#) that are on point and earn raves.

Also, I'd suggest checking the reviews of your ELA curriculum on [EdReports](#) and [Louisiana Believes](#). If your curriculum is not “all-green” on EdReports and/or Tier 1 on Louisiana Believes, you'll want to understand the gaps in the materials.

There are other options... more than I can fit in an exec summary, but I'll try to write about them soon. I also see efforts underway to create new professional learning opportunities... watch this space!

## The Equity Opportunity Within

This conversation can feel daunting, 'cause it's a lot to process. Yet it's inspiring, too:

*Poor literacy outcomes for our most vulnerable students are the equity issue of our time. We now have real opportunity to improve reading outcomes in a significant*

way – and that should inspire us all!

I share the optimism of Brian Kingsley and the other pioneers in this space, because I've seen the work in districts that are elevating their reading game by aligning with these practices. I became a curriculum evangelist by hearing the educator feedback in districts that implemented “all-green” curricula and supported their teachers with excellent PD in the process... it's a game-changer. I wish I could take you into those classrooms... it would quickly compel you, too.

My optimism increases every time I see educators sharing research! So please Be Sweet and Tweet informative pieces. Give out research like candy at your PLC meetings. Skywrite it above elementary schools. Let's keep bringing more educators into this important national conversation.

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