

The NASBE Interview

Meredith and David Liben are literacy researchers, educators, authors, and curriculum designers. Together, they founded two innovative schools in New York City: New York Prep, a junior high school in East Harlem, and the Family Academy. NASBE President and CEO Robert Hull interviewed them in March.



You've been working in education for decades and can bring a historical perspective to this question: Have we moved the needle on literacy?

Meredith: Yes and no. I'll give you my yes: We have moved the needle on text complexity. Text complexity has stayed a component of all the college and career readiness standards in each of the states—the ones that are still calling themselves Common Core and the many that are not, even when they have done a total rewrite of their content. I remember saying in 2010, after the Common Core was first ratified in 46 states, that insisting on text complexity was going to pull the curtain back on problems with reading that had never gone away. If kids can't decode and if they don't have the vocabulary and reading fluency they need—which many don't—they are going to have a tough time accessing grade-level texts. So a spotlight is getting shone on these problems. It's affecting all classes of Americans now because a significant number of middle- and upper-class children are also failing to read well. Emily Hanford has written quite a few pieces for American Public Radio that have gotten wide audience around students with reading deficits who were failing to thrive in a “balanced literacy” classroom, which is the norm.

David: Have we moved the needle? More complex texts are being put before more students than were before the standards. Probably an even larger effect is that more students are reading nonfiction than used to be. Before, you could easily go through K-5 without ever, as part of your instruction, reading nonfiction. That is almost impossible now. More complex text—that's movement of the needle. More nonfiction—that's movement of the needle. But if you can't read the text, the needle hasn't moved for you. If we ask whether there are more kids now who can read text that is the right level of complexity and richness so that they can move on to college, we haven't moved the needle at all. The data are overwhelmingly clear about that.

How do we make sure trailing readers can access those complex texts?

Meredith: Balanced literacy, leveled readers, and the idea of matching children to texts at their current level of reading ability mean that many kids get pigeonholed into low levels. The research base is crystal clear that kids who need to be accelerated are not—they're flat lining with lower level texts. If teachers are not giving them access to grade-level texts, they are not at all meeting college- and career-ready standards. I was on a call with a national assessment company yesterday—we were talking about our Academic Wordfinder Tool—and they kept confusing what resided in the child with what resided in the text. I said, “Understand that it's measuring the text, not whether kids can access it at that grade level.” We need to keep straight that “grade-level text”

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Glossary of Literacy Terms

Balanced literacy. An approach to literacy instruction wherein teachers integrate reading and writing so that students learn how to use literacy strategies and skills and have opportunities to apply what they are learning. Texts are usually leveled readers or trade literature. Components include phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, fluency, and reading comprehension. Although phonics is included, it rarely follows a systematic sequence, as recommended by the National Reading Panel; in most cases, it is “dropped in” as needed.

Basal readers. Textbooks used to teach reading—typically a single-volume anthology with textbook-driven lessons. In middle and high school, these are sometimes referred to as anthologies. In both cases, these include all English language arts elements: reading, writing, language, vocabulary, and grammar.

Chunking. Breaking a text into component parts or segments. Sometimes used to help students reading below grade level to read grade-level text.

Grade-level complex texts. Texts that are determined by quantitative methods (usually Lexiles) and qualitative analysis to be appropriately complex for a given grade. Text complexity determined in this manner increases with each grade so that students by the end of grade 12 are reading texts with comparable complexity to those used in college and careers. Text complexity is intrinsic to the text and does not take student reading levels into account. (Text difficulty, an interaction between the text and the reader, is not the same as text complexity).

Decoding. Sounding out words and blending sounds together to read words.

Fluency. Ability to read texts at grade-level complexity with speed, accuracy, and expression appropriate for the text.

Leveled readers. Texts determined qualitatively, and in some cases quantitatively, to be appropriate for a given grade level. Unlike grade-level texts, leveled texts are not designed to increase over the K-12 grade span so that students reach college and career levels by the end of grade 12 and usually only relate to K-8 grades. In leveled reading programs, students are assessed to determine their grade level and read only or primarily text at their assessed level.

Scaffolds. Literacy supports designed to enable students reading below grade level to read texts at grade levels of complexity. Examples include reading aloud while students follow along in the text, chunking text, providing vocabulary in advance, and multiple reads of the same text for different purposes.

is an absolute; it's very stern. Children getting access to it is the work—the noble and challenging work—in education right now. That doesn't mean only a few of your college-bound kids get that access and the rest are swimming in shallow water somewhere because you haven't even taught them how to do the breast stroke. Our work is giving kids tools—whether it's chunking questions, chunking the text itself, reading it aloud, building fluency, or whatever is blocking kids from getting that access. That is the work of teaching: to provide ladders, scaffolds, tools, but always providing access to grade-level texts. There are lots of ways to do that, including parents reading aloud complex texts to their kids before they can read. Teachers can do that, too. It should not only be a practice of educated parents to read out loud—years beyond their kids' ability to access that text—Harry Potter to a five or six-year-old. Why can't that happen in schools? That is the kind of practice we need to introduce and make commonplace. Those don't clash with the goals of balanced literacy—to make reading a joy and to make lifelong learners. There's a bit of confusion about that. Kids need the muscles to become agile, lifelong readers, and they are not getting those reading muscles through current practices.

David: I will approach this question somewhat differently. There are three ways children learn to read in this country—or don't learn to read. I'll start with what is still most common, and that is the basal reader approach. Basals now do include a grade-level, complex text, and then they have leveled texts that teachers use when they slough off the kids after having read the complex text. There is now research, named in a new report called “The Opportunity Myth,” on how many teachers actually use the complex text and certainly not research on how many teachers spend much time on the complex text.¹ That [basal reader approach] is still the majority, but it's the shrinking majority. There are certainly fewer teachers using basal readers than were 10 years ago.

The second most popular is what usually falls under the umbrella of balanced literacy—Fountas & Pinnell Classroom, or the Teacher's College Reading and Writing Workshop Program, or schools that have adopted the approach without necessarily purchasing those materials. In that situation, nobody is reading a complex text

except students already reading at or above grade level. Nobody else gets the chance to get there. Everybody gets a lesson, usually on a comprehension strategy or a standard, and then goes off and reads their own-level text. All those programs have increased [use of] nonfiction, but they are still leveled-text programs because that is their DNA. They are not going to put a grade-level text in front of everybody. Their belief is that if kids work with texts at their level, have a lesson where they hear a text read [to them] at grade-level complexity, and maybe do a little work with it, then that will do the job. It won't. There is no research showing this working except in the earliest grades, and we now have a good deal of research showing that texts at a variety of levels works better.

There is a third way that kids are learning to read. This is exemplified in five core ELA programs: Core Knowledge Language Arts, Bookworms, Wit and Wisdom (by Great Minds, the same people who did Eureka Math), American Reading Company, and EL Education. Those programs are in use now in the neighborhood of 3,000 schools, which is not nothing. These approaches are entirely different, in that they are not balanced literacy as we usually see it, they're not guided reading, and they're not leveled reading. They have a core text at grade level that most of the time is also connected to a topic in order to grow knowledge, and then students read additional texts on that same topic at their own level. That's an entirely different plan for teaching kids to read that has never been done before on a large scale—it's a huge difference: One, it's conveying knowledge. Two, everybody's reading a grade-level complex text. Three, kids do go off and read other text at their current levels—which they have to do in order to grow knowledge and grow vocabulary—but it's not apartheid. They are all reading their own texts; they are all being exposed to grade-level complex text, too.

It's not that students are suddenly all reading at grade level. But everybody is reading texts they can understand connected to the central topic. In most cases, students are choosing these other texts. Teachers in these programs report their weakest readers are more motivated and involved than ever before, and this is because they are reading the core complex texts with everybody else. They do not spend

the longest, most important part of the day separated by reading level. Everybody's focus is on the topic—whether it is explorers, sports and society, or habitats. The kids who are the weak readers do not have this feeling that they are somehow separate and lower. That makes an extraordinary difference in the culture and the feeling of the school and the classroom. And this follows the science of reading.

These new types of core ELA programs are beginning to gain market share. In terms of how children read and how children feel about reading and about themselves—because it's very difficult to feel good about yourself in a school setting if you can't read—I think these programs are the only way the needle is going to move. Anything else is moving the proverbial deck chairs on the Titanic.

Can you talk about the lagging adolescent reader and the need for remediation?

David: Funny you should ask.

Meredith: We have a book on foundational reading coming out in May that addresses this. It's from Learning Science International, and it's called *Know Better, Do Better: Teaching the Foundations so Every Child Can Read*.

David: I'm not going to go into the guts of it, just the implications. The reason why catching up students who are behind is so difficult is that they don't just have problems with actual reading, foundations, decoding, and fluency. They absolutely have those problems, but that's not all. If you can't read, you enter a trajectory where three things don't develop for you that do develop for proficient readers: their knowledge of the world grows, their knowledge of words grows, and their ability to read increasingly complex text grows. The students who enter third grade roughly proficient enter a virtuous cycle: Each of those factors grows the others. The more you can read more complex text, the more words you will learn, and the more words you learn, the more you'll be able to learn to use those words to learn about the world. If you don't enter that trajectory, you enter another trajectory where everything grows less or not at all. That's a downward spiral. And therefore, a child who needs to be remediated needs to

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See whatever power you can wield and wield it, with two things in mind: One, what we've been doing hasn't worked! So two, we have to do something entirely different.

be remediated on everything she failed to get along that trajectory: Her knowledge has to grow, her vocabulary has to grow, her experience with and ability to read complex text has to grow—and also you have to undo the emotional damage that being a weak reader has done to that child all those years. If you don't address all four, absolutely nothing will happen. That is why—despite tens of millions if not hundreds of millions of words and dollars—there has not been one remediation effort that has proven successful at scale. Not one. I don't even know if there's one that's proven successful at one school. We have a proposal for designing a course for students entering the ninth grade years behind that addresses all of this. The chances of finding someone brave enough to implement a unique course that overhauls systemic reading failure and deals with it in a holistic fashion: slim. But maybe there is someone out there.

Meredith: We are trying to tackle this problem. We're looking for a partner to pilot that course and publishers who are willing to modify materials to make them suitable for students who are entering high school far behind. It does take a radical redesign.

What do you see as the policy ecosystem enabling the sort of instruction you recommend, given that state boards don't generally select curriculum? Are there policy levers to promote it or are there barriers to remove?

Meredith: Eight states are working together on materials acquisition principles. They are branching out into new teacher policy and new teacher induction—exactly what you are talking about—and they are committed to developing best practices as well as learning from each other. Nebraska's capable chief academic officer, Cory Epler, called Student Achievement Partners to come out to conduct professional learning around two of the basal programs in widespread use in his state: Reading Wonders and Journeys. We did a bit of a Trojan horse: We did show the attending districts materials adaptation for both of those basals. But all our examples of alignment and best practice came from one of the five curricula that David just described. So we showed them what excellent

looked like, and then we said, but this isn't what you are using, so here's what you have to do to make Wonders and Journeys sort of work. There have been loads of follow-up calls from those districts, asking SAP for more guidance, information, and support around procurement.

Louisiana tackled the policies on all fronts, and they did it with a hostile legislature fighting them every step of the way. By creating favorable pricing for resources fully aligned to their ELA standards, they incented good decision making and then left districts on their own to make those decisions. So if you want to make a bad choice, you have to pay to do it in Louisiana. Even if it is just scaled agreements like that, that is a powerful thing and an underexploited opportunity. Now they are tackling teacher licensure and training equally vigorously.

David: Napoleon escaped from Elba with only a few men and when stopped and confronted, said something like, "Surely, you're not going to kill your emperor." And then he proceeded to nearly take all of Europe once again. I think it would take a Napoleon at this point to fix American education entirely. So my advice to a state board would be something along these lines: See whatever power you can wield and wield it, with two things in mind: One, what we've been doing hasn't worked! So two, we have to do something entirely different. And in ELA, there are entirely different approaches out there. Do whatever you can to get your districts to adopt one of those programs. And don't just go by reports on curriculum alignments. Just because they're aligned with academic standards doesn't mean they're right for your districts. Our government says GM pickups and Priuses are safe to be on the road, but that doesn't mean they are the same vehicles. These ELA programs are all really different from each other while all being aligned. My advice is for state boards to use the bully pulpit. Because you don't have much de jure power, use what de facto power you have to a) change the materials acquisition process and b) change it in the right direction. I don't think it's a matter of policy, I think it's a matter of personality and force—that is, using the bully pulpit. If you get one or two or three districts in your state to do the right thing, they are going to get results in two or three years, and that might influence other people.

What should state boards with authority to approve teacher licensure, preparation programs, and assessments consider?

Meredith: State school boards could really lead. Colorado is just starting an effort to reexamine licensure when ed schools go for reevaluation. There's an organization, the U.S. Teacher Inspectorate, that is modeled after the British reviewing system. Louisiana, for example, has contracted with them to review their new apprenticeship and residency models. That is something for universities to stand up and take notice of. Many education professors in universities' teacher preparation programs don't know the science of reading. It's hard enough for teachers to admit they are doing something wrong and harming kids. For someone who got their Ph.D. dissertation 20 years ago, they are going to keep barking up that tree for the rest of their careers. They are dug in. Who is it that says, "Physics advances one funeral at a time," David?

David: Max Planck said it. The problem is that there are way more education professors than there are physics professors. So waiting for them to die takes a lot longer. And similar to any good horror film, and any good monster, they recreate themselves.

Meredith: There has to be a course on the science of reading, which could create the same groundswell that we started this conversation talking about: a three-credit course on what is known about how the brain processes the English language in written form. That course should be required for everybody because you've got this pernicious problem that kids can't read in older grades, and their teachers are completely in the dark; they have no equipment for helping those students. You already have that expertise in micro in the special education departments. That holds true whenever I talk to recently licensed teachers, as it does from my own teacher prep experience from the mid-1980s: The only careful instruction I got was when I took special ed teacher prep courses. That expertise and those syllabi can simply be shared, for now, as a starting point until new courses are developed. There are already some good starts.

The other thing to do would be something like the bar exam for licensing lawyers. There is now no accountability for the product they are turning out at any state university when they graduate teachers. Track through: How effective are these teacher graduates in their first few years at the schools they are going to? How much work do the school districts have to do to create minimally ready teachers?

We also have to ask whether the Praxis is measuring what makes for good practitioners. Right now, it's our bar, but it's not an effective one. Very competent practitioners get pulled out of education because they can't meet the bar on the Praxis—having nothing to do with how effective they are in teaching their students. And what is the Praxis doing to help put candidates of color in front of students of color—with all the benefits we know that provides? We need to somehow elevate the teaching profession as a serious alternative for people of color in this country so kids have more role models and there is a viable pathway to the middle class and college. That has to be part of the answer, too. Teacher shortages are terrifying me, that we are not seen as a noble profession for people to go into. Then there's a longer-term societal question: Do we value education enough to pay teachers to be professionals?

David: I'll talk about student assessments. Step number one is pretty straightforward. There are assessments available that have been universally used for years now: [for example,] the TOWRE Test of Word Reading Efficiency. It has two parts: one on word recognition and one decoding, the difference being that the word recognition tests are actual words and the decoding part is nonsense words, so you can ascertain that the student can actually decode and has not memorized the word. Those assessments determine, along with fluency assessments, student proficiency, and they have a long history. They are not used in schools for a number of reasons. One, teachers are afraid to be held accountable in these early grades. Two, there is an idea that if you give a kid a test in the first grades, even if it's only 15 minutes, he will grow up to be a mass murderer or worse. Yet as an Annie E. Casey study has shown, the early grades are pivotal, by far more important than any other grade. These are concrete, research-based, proven ways to assess student progress

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in beginning reading in kindergarten, first, and second grade. Mandate that these tests are given. If you have the power to do it, do it. They are simple, and they do not take a lot of time.

There's a brilliant teacher professional development course called LETRS, designed by Louisa Moats, although I would add a comprehension piece, addressing knowledge and vocabulary, but that's eminently fixable. And you say elementary teachers who graduate from your teacher preparation program have to pass this assessment. If you take the course and pass it, you are done. Nothing else you need to do. Mandate that for teacher licensure for elementary teaching, and start assessment of student progress in kindergarten, first, and second and focus on reading itself. ■

¹"The Opportunity Myth" reports on an exhaustive review of thousands of student assignments and finds that only 17 percent of the assignments they reviewed met the standards for their grade level. Most assignments (including assigned readings) were below grade level. "The Opportunity Myth: What Students Can Show Us about How School Is Letting Them Down—and How to Fix It" (Washington, DC: TNTP, 2018).

cont'd from page 27... Writing Standards

Of course, supports to help educators use these resources to meet their students' writing needs will be necessary. These include multi-modal, practice-based professional development, intensive coaching, and peer-to-peer mentoring networks in which teachers pilot, refine, and reflect on implementation of curricula and associated materials. ■

¹National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges, "The Neglected R: The Need for a Writing Revolution" (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 2003); National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges, "Writing: A Ticket to Work...or a Ticket Out. A Survey of Business Leaders" (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 2004).

²For instance, in a nationally representative sample of 700 adolescents, 85 percent reported using some form of electronic personal communication (e.g., text messages, social network posts, blogs, emails) for daily social interaction, self-exploration and expression, and reflection on current events. See National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges, "Writing, Technology, and Teens," Pew Internet and American Life Project (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 2008); A.H.S. Harris, "Does Expressive Writing Reduce Health Care Utilization? A Meta-Analysis of Randomized Trials," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 74 (2006): 243–52.

³Reports on writing assessment are available on the Nation's

Report Card website maintained by the National Center for Education Statistics.

⁴Laura Cutler and Steve Graham, "Primary Grade Writing Instruction: A National Survey," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 100 (2008): 907–19; Sharlene Kiuahara et al., "Teaching Writing to High School Students: A National Survey," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 101 (2009): 136–60.

⁵Stephen P. Klein et al., "What Do Test Scores in Texas Tell Us?" *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 8, no. 49 (2000): 1–20; Peggy O'Neill et al., "What Teachers Say about Different Kinds of Mandated State Writing Tests," *Journal of Writing Assessment* 2, no. 2 (2006): 81–108.

⁶Gary A. Troia et al., "Content and Alignment of State Writing Standards and Assessments as Predictors of Student Writing Achievement: An Analysis of 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress Data," *Reading and Writing: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 31 (2018): 835–64.

⁷Michael B. Henderson et al., "The 2015 EdNext Poll on School Reform: Public Thinking on Testing, Opt Out, Common Core, Unions, and More," *Education Next* 16, no. 1 (2016): 9–20.

⁸Gary A. Troia and Steve Graham, "Common Core Writing and Language Standards and Aligned State Assessments: A National Survey of Teacher Beliefs and Attitudes," *Reading and Writing: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 29 (2016): 1719–43.

⁹Lasisi Ajayi, "High School Teachers' Perspectives on the English Language Arts Common Core State Standards: An Exploratory Study," *Education Research for Policy and Practice* 15 (2016): 1–25; Audrey F. Murphy and Elizabeth Haller, "Teachers' Perceptions of the Implementation of the Literacy Common Core State Standards for English Language Learners and Students with Disabilities," *Journal of Research in Childhood Education* 29 (2015): 510–27.

¹⁰National Commission on Writing, "The Neglected R."

¹¹Cutler and Graham, "Primary Grade Writing Instruction"; Ruie J. Pritchard and Ronald L. Honeycutt, "The Process Approach to Writing Instruction: Examining Its Effectiveness," In Charles A. MacArthur et al., eds., *Handbook of Writing Research* (New York: Guilford Press, 2006); Gary A. Troia and Mary E. Maddox, "Writing Instruction in Middle Schools: Special and General Education Teachers Share Their Views and Voice Their Concerns," *Exceptionality* 12 (2004): 19–37.

¹²Gary A. Troia and Natalie G. Olinghouse, "The Common Core State Standards and Evidence-Based Educational Practices: The Case of Writing," *School Psychology Review* 42 (2013): 343–57.

¹³Gary A. Troia et al., "The Common Core Writing Standards: A Descriptive Study of Content and Alignment with a Sample of Former State Standards," *Reading Horizons Journal* 55, no. 3 (2016): 98–141.

¹⁴Sheila Byrd Carmichael et al., "The State of the State Standards—and Common Core—in 2010" (Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Foundation & Institute, 2010).

¹⁵Steve Graham and Karen R. Harris, "Common Core State Standards, Writing, and Students with LD: Recommendations," *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice* 28 (2013): 28–37.

¹⁶Troia and Maddox, "Writing Instruction in Middle Schools"; Jennifer Gilbert and Steve Graham, "Teaching Writing to Elementary Students in Grades 4 to 6: A National Survey," *The Elementary School Journal* 110 (2010): 494–518.

¹⁷Karen R. Harris et al., "Bring Powerful Writing Strategies into Your Classroom!" *The Reading Teacher* 66 (2013): 538–42.