

We the Media

We are learning no fewer than 30 sight words at our house. Every evening at bedtime, our four-year-old scans the pages of her storybooks for words she recognizes and beams when she spots one. She surprised me when she proclaimed she saw a sight word during this year's Super Bowl half-time performance, where "One" Love was projected in the sky. Clearly, our little girl is excited about reading!

As a parent, I know I have done the right things to encourage this. My husband and I read to our daughters daily and encourage storytelling. We practice writing the alphabet and find ways to incorporate learning during playtime and special outings. Not every child has these same opportunities, though. Evelyn and her classmates came home with a list of sight words but no other instructions for how to use them effectively or what else we should do to foster reading. Even I—a parent presumably in the know about all those right things—have wondered whether my methods are setting the strongest possible foundation for my daughter. What is a parent to do?

Turns out, literacy—especially teaching the "right way" to read—remains a hot topic in the media. Emily Hanford of American Public Media has written and produced an extensive series on reading instruction and concludes that teachers are woefully undereducated on how to teach their students to read effectively. She argues phonics is the way to go and that more focus on it will fix reading gaps. Indeed, research shows phonics is critical to early reading instruction. But it is not a silver bullet. Research also

suggests that too much time spent on phonics leaves other areas of reading development in a deficit. Things like context, vocabulary, and concept knowledge, which are strong predictors of long-term reading and writing success, also need attention, writes researcher and reading expert Nell Duke, an author in this issue of the *Standard*.

Other authors in this issue take equally measured looks at how policymakers can and should interpret the reading wars arguments to make sound policy decisions around literacy, especially for our most vulnerable students. They make clear that literacy issues are complex and that policies to address them should be multifaceted and consider the full spectrum of research. As educators Jared Myracle, Brian Kingsley, and Robin McClellan write in a recent *Education Week* op-ed, "Literacy work is a both/and, not either/or."

As you read through the articles in this issue, think about how parents would interpret them. Chances are, while your board is busy gathering knowledge and convening the brightest literacy experts to help inform your policymaking, parents and teachers in your state may not be getting their information from the same vetted sources. Hear what they have to say and what literacy issues concern them most. But most important, communicate the *why* in your policymaking decisions early and often, and work with local districts to ensure the implementation of literacy policies, whatever they require, are inclusive of families and meet their needs. ■



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