



COACHING

THE SCIENCE OF READING

Supporting and Sustaining Change
in Evidence-Based Literacy Instruction

AUSTEN HECKER, EDD AND CHRISTA D. HARING, PHD



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Gryphon House

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INTRODUCTION

As researchers and former teachers who have worked with students with reading difficulties within classroom and clinical settings, we (Christa and Austen) have witnessed the complexity of effecting system-wide change. The realities of the classroom often make it difficult for teachers to take a bathroom break, let alone read about new research and subsequent changes to instructional policy. When you have dozens of unread emails, a student who has asked you to tie their inexplicably wet shoelaces, four students who are not at their assigned spots on the rug, a trail of ants snaking along the back wall, and an unannounced observation by an administrator, during which a student will inevitably notice the trail of ants and alert their peers as if it's the apocalypse, and in that moment, you wish you could be raptured . . . the new state legislation regarding literacy instruction is justifiably out of mind.

We have lived in that world, and as adoptive moms, both of us still live in the world of inexplicably wet laces and invading ant colonies that regularly interrupt any semblance of routine. While our professional roles now involve supporting educators and literacy leaders rather than directly working with students, both of us still identify as educators and have grown to appreciate the messy spaces where crucial learning occurs. We also see the gaps where policy, research, and practice fail to align. Students with reading difficulties are the first ones to get lost in the gaps formed by this misalignment, so the stakes are high for those of us in positions of literacy leadership to bridge the distance between policy and practice. We wrote this book as a tool and resource to those similarly tasked with this behemoth assignment of building the bridges as we cross the canyons ourselves.

WHERE WE ARE

Over the past several years, we have been working to support the implementation of state-level legislation so that it leads to instructional practices that improve outcomes for children. Like many of the literacy-related laws passed across the country in the last decade, our state's legislation is multifaceted and addresses the need for high-quality instructional materials, a comprehensive system for assessment, teacher training, and support for students at risk of reading difficulties. For many teachers and school leaders, implementing this change means new teacher training, new screening assessment systems, new core and intervention curricula, and new literacy plans for school districts and individual students. Navigating just one of these elements can prove challenging, especially when changes must be implemented across more than one hundred extraordinarily diverse school divisions. As literacy coaches and leaders in our state, our collective work centers on supporting school leaders, teachers, and reading specialists during the implementation of the recent literacy requirements. While our specific roles and our experiences engaging in this work are varied and unique, as authors, our objective here is the same: to share the knowledge gleaned from experience as a means of continuing this work and empowering others to engage in this process of system-wide change as well.

WHO WE ARE

Christa and I (Austen) have worked together for the past five years as members of a team designed to support the implementation of our state's literacy legislation. Prior to our work together, Christa served as a speech-language pathologist, special educator, teacher educator, and researcher in the field of literacy education for more than twenty years. Before pursuing a graduate degree in literacy, I taught English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), as well as a reading remediation program in the middle grades prior to spending several years teaching in the elementary classroom.

Over the past five years, our current team has expanded and now includes all the authors included in this text. Our work involves training, coaching, and supporting educators across the state as they adjust and align practice with policy. First and foremost, this work entails our own engagement as learners, partners, and leaders as we seek to understand and share our learning with the field. This book furthers this endeavor by documenting our experience and reflecting on the lessons we have learned throughout our collective efforts to support literacy and learning for all.

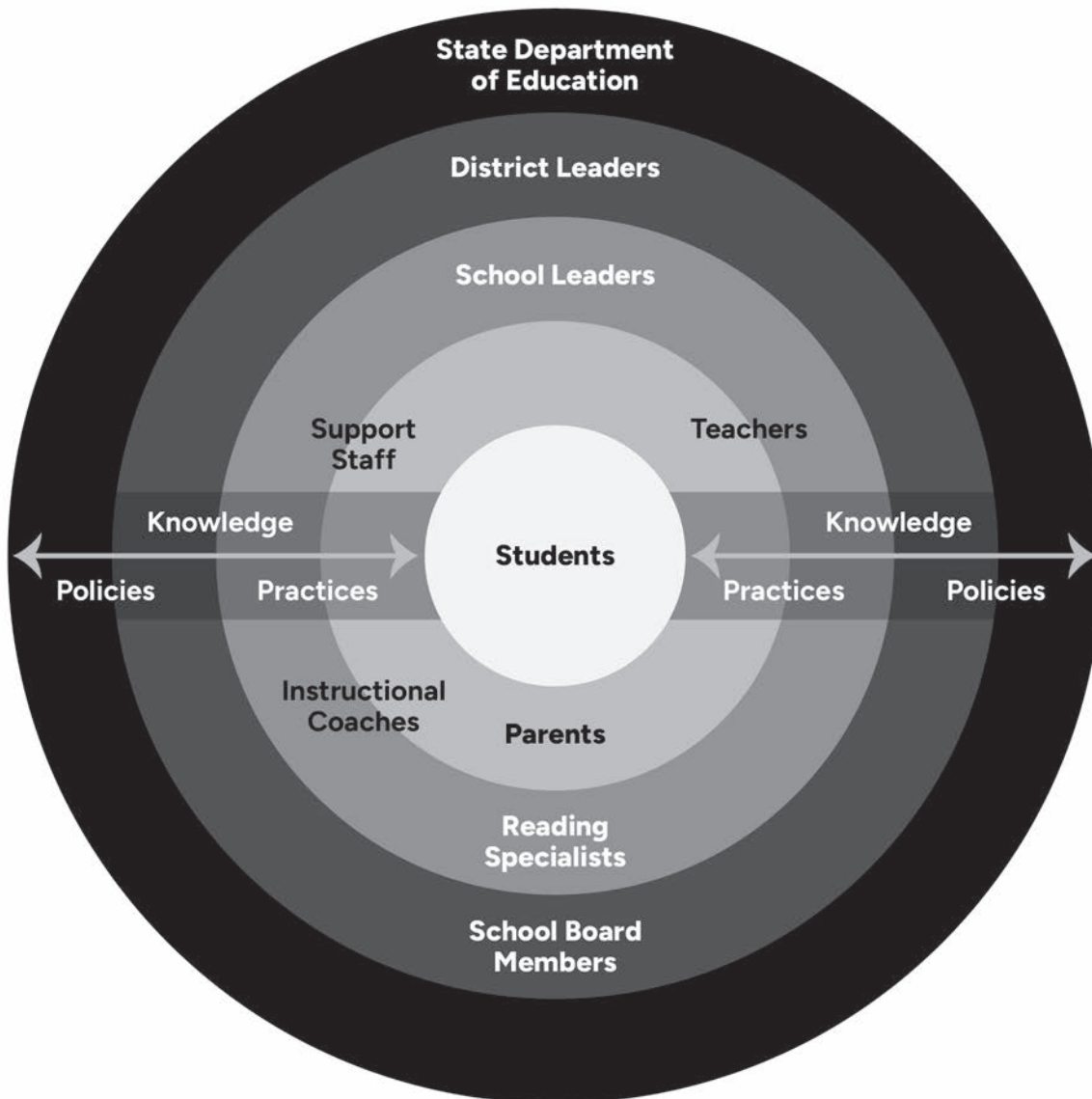
WHERE WE ARE GOING

This text is organized into three parts aligned to the change implementation process: preparing for change, implementing change, and sustaining change. Each section contains chapters related to the necessary actions, dispositions, and conditions for aligning literacy instructional practice with science-based reading research and the law. Most of the subsequent chapters are organized by guiding questions with guiding principles that are expounded upon in response to each question. These principles highlight the key takeaways from experience and research. Personal and fictional vignettes are included throughout each chapter. As authors, we endeavored to protect the identities of the individuals, districts, and schools we serve by using pseudonyms or creating fictionalized narratives based on experience. These experiences are intended to ground our work in the realities and complexities of public education.

Who This Is For

While our work is primarily addressed to those serving as coaches or leaders within school settings, we believe that change is dependent upon shared knowledge informing both policy and practice across stakeholders. The graphic that follows identifies many of the stakeholder groups involved in this process of system-wide change. Ultimately, every stakeholder plays a significant role in this process of implementing and sustaining changes to literacy instructional practice. When knowledge is shared across these stakeholder groups, and the broader systems align policy and practice with this knowledge, that is when change is possible. As depicted in the following graphic, our work centers on students. By sharing the knowledge gleaned from research and experience, we hope to support the horizontal arrows as knowledge is translated into aligned policies and instructional practices that benefit all students.

Figure 1.1 Stakeholders in Educational Systems



Why Now?

Given ongoing political dynamics, this content feels necessary, relevant, and urgent. Literacy instruction is an asset that has been wielded throughout history for both oppression and liberation. We believe that our work is critical to sustaining the freedoms that historically made our nation such a unique harbinger of hope on a global scale. Despite the continuous change that characterizes education, literacy is crucial to the pursuit of a more equitable and just society. Our work is to this end: that our readers may gain understanding and insight into what it takes to implement and sustain evidence-based literacy instruction on a large scale.

CHAPTER 1

Where We Have Been, Where We Are, and Where We Are Going

Austen Hecker

Growing up, I always believed my sister was smarter than I was. She was two years ahead of me in school, and I assumed that with age came knowledge. I paid little regard to the afternoons at the local library spent observing my mom quiz her with homemade flashcards, until the day I began to recognize the words before my sister could accurately identify their initial sounds.

Back then, my sister's teacher instructed my mom to take her to the eye doctor. While her difficulties with decoding were not related to sight, the ophthalmologist diagnosed dyslexia. I watched my brilliant sister struggle through school, as my mom dedicated herself to "fixing" the dyslexia with flashcards and reading glasses. Somewhere in those early elementary years, my sister stopped believing that she was smart, and in the years that followed, I witnessed dozens of opportunities suffocated by her self-doubt. Three decades have passed since that diagnosis, and she is a wonderful mother. I just wish she could see herself the way I always have—brilliant, capable, and incredibly resilient.

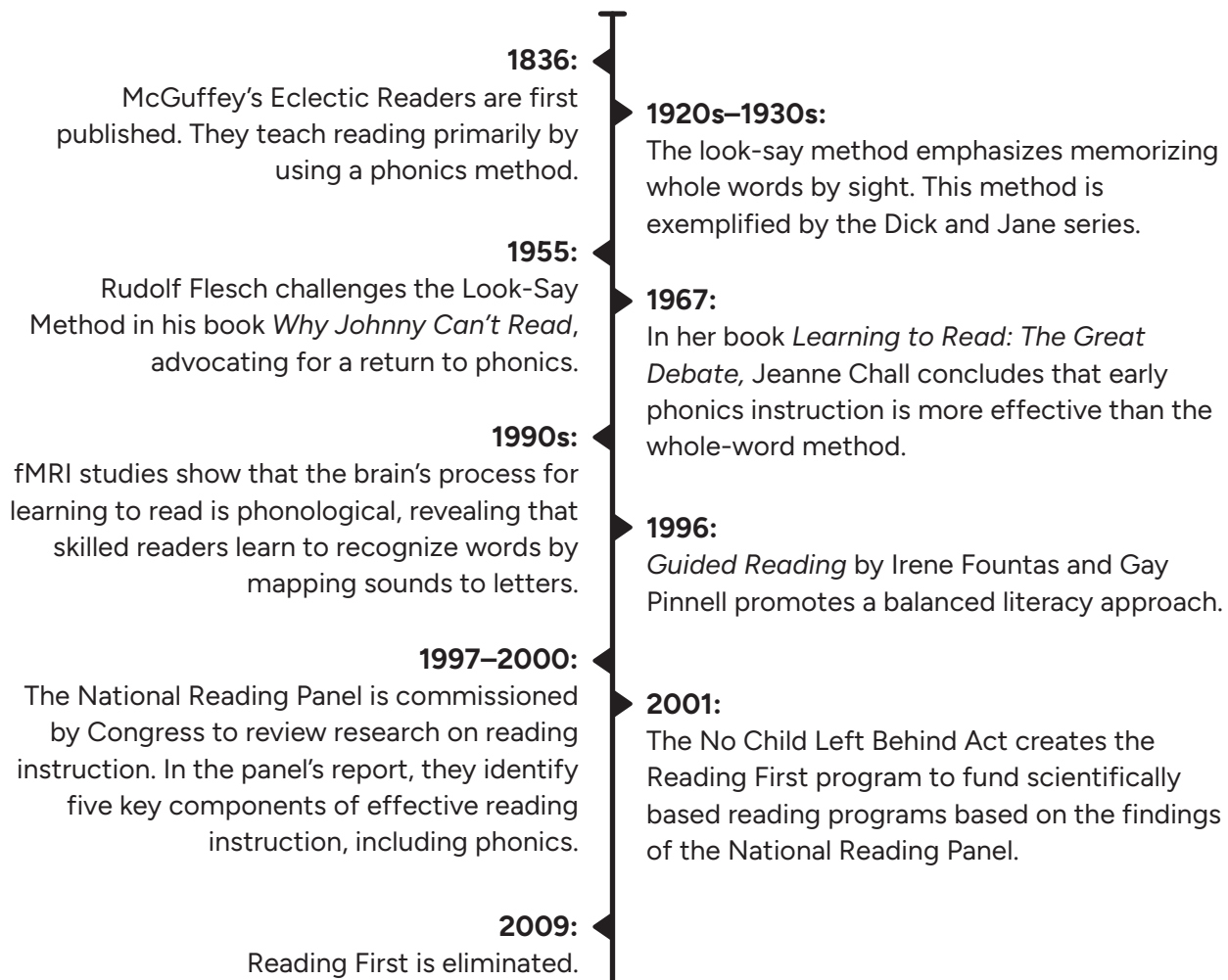
While I recognize that the stories we tell ourselves are often simplified and corrupted by emotion, I frequently wish that my sister's teachers had known what we know now about literacy, the brain, and dyslexia. When thinking about this book, its conceptualization, and my current work to support evidence-based literacy instruction for all students, I suppose this is a critical element of my "why." I am too familiar with the domino effect that can occur when widely held misconceptions about literacy misinform instructional practice, and I am dedicated to changing the narrative before the dominoes collapse.

Over the past six years, as I have supported teacher training in science-based reading research, I have learned that my sister's story is devastatingly common. My colleagues, the other authors of this text, and the thousands of reading specialists who have interacted with this work share similar reasons for their engagement. We all believe in the power of literacy as a tool for liberation, equity, and change, and for many of us, this belief is rooted in personal experience.

This text is dedicated to the victims of what we did not know. We owe it to you to share what we have learned about navigating change within complex systems so that all students have access to evidence-based literacy instruction. It is our collective effort as authors and educators to diffuse the knowledge gleaned from research and experience so that the narrative changes.

A BIT OF HISTORY

Unfortunately, in education, variability is the only constant. While each new group of students presents unique challenges, decades of research demonstrate that all students benefit from certain instructional practices related to literacy. However, these practices have not always aligned with policy and curricular programs. It is important to unpack some of the history related to literacy instructional practice so that we can understand our current context and the rationale for this text.



BRIDGE THE GAP

Between Policy and Practice in Early Literacy Instruction



Across the country, new state literacy mandates are driving a dramatic shift in how reading is taught—but many educators are left wondering how to apply these changes in real classrooms. *Coaching the Science of Reading* offers practical, research-based guidance to help educators, coaches, and school leaders implement evidence-based literacy instruction with confidence.

Structured around three key sections—preparing for, implementing, and sustaining change—this essential guide brings clarity to what the research means for practice. With insights from nationally recognized experts, authors Christa Haring, PhD, and Austen Hecker, EdD, equip readers with the tools to support sustainable implementation, improve instructional alignment, and create stronger systems for student success.

Discover how to:

- 1. Navigate state literacy mandates and align instruction with current research
- 2. Provide effective, data-informed coaching and feedback
- 3. Understand what the science of reading looks like in everyday classroom practice
- 4. Build sustainable systems that support long-term literacy improvement
- 5. Bridge classroom, coaching, and policy through a shared, evidence-based approach

Whether you're a teacher, coach, or district leader, *Coaching the Science of Reading* will help you turn policy into meaningful practice—and support every child's journey toward literacy.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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