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Oregon has stagnant reading achievement -- and a plan to fix it

By **Betsy Hammond, The Oregonian**
March 24, 2010, 8:20PM

Oregon students' reading skills have plateaued along with those of fourth- and eighth-graders nationwide, according to national test results released Wednesday.

The results lend urgency to a **statewide initiative** the state Department of Education will launch next month to change how reading is taught from kindergarten through senior year of high school, says Julie Anderson, department reading specialist.

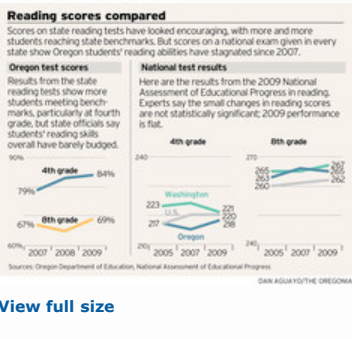
Among the proposed changes: More intensive small-group lessons for weak readers in first and second grade; daily 40-minute reading lessons for all seventh- and eighth-graders, separate from their English classes; measuring every student's reading skills several times a year; and remaking every high school teacher, including those in physical education and shop classes, into experts at teaching teens how to read texts in their field.

Oregon showed **a lack of progress on the National Assessment of Educational Progress** reading exam, the only one given in all states. Only a third of fourth- and eighth-graders showed full proficiency, and their average scores were a statistical tie with 2007, the last time the test was given.

That seems to contradict recent results from Oregon's state reading tests, which have **shown more and more students reaching grade-level reading benchmarks** in elementary and middle school.

But state officials concede the national results are correct. Oregon schools have gotten more students who read just below grade level to improve enough to pass the state test, they say, but they haven't boosted the reading skills of students across all ability levels much.

"We want more widespread growth among all students," says Tony Alpert, director of assessment and accountability



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Oregon's reading plan

A governor-appointed panel of educators, employers and others has developed a plan to fix reading instruction in every grade, drawing on research-proven practices. See details [here](#). Some highlights:

Kindergarten to second grade: This is the time to discover and fix reading difficulties. For most students who take the state reading test at the end of third grade and are found to read below grade level, it's too late to fully fix the problem. All students have their reading skills measured at least three times a year. Those who are

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at the state education department.

Oregon can post that kind of across-the-board improvement by following the recommendations of the reading **how-to guide** that will be formally unveiled next month after years in the making, says Anderson, the state reading specialist.

Following the plan would require schools, districts and the state to treat reading as the paramount skill taught. Many schools now end formal instruction in many reading skills after third grade and most high schools barely teach reading.

The new approach won't be mandatory, nor will schools be given big financial incentives to adopt it.

But Nancy Golden, superintendent of the **Springfield school district**, which has begun following most of the new recommendations, said she thinks most districts will come on board when they hear the excitement among teachers and see the great results for students in districts that are early adopters of the new techniques.

Behind get extra help. Those who are furthest behind spend as much as 2 1/2 hours a day learning pre-reading and reading skills.

Grades 6-8: Every student takes a reading class geared to his or her reading level. The classes, separate from traditional English classes, run 40 to 60 minutes a day.

High school: Teachers teach students how to read and analyze text in their subject, whether physical education or physics. Content-specific reading skills and vocabulary are explicitly taught and practiced in all classes for a total of at least two hours a day.

Source: Oregon Department of Education

- [Portland State University](#)
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Even if it makes changes and starts to see results, Oregon still must play catch-up with states such as Massachusetts, Connecticut and Pennsylvania, which are far ahead in teaching students to read -- and still getting better, results from the national test show.

Anderson said the concrete, step-by-step details in Oregon's plan will make it easier for schools to show progress. New requirements that every student, beginning with this year's sophomores, pass the state reading test to get a diploma will also help spur interest, she said.

"This framework really does address the needs of every learner. It's the first time we've done anything like this," Anderson said. "I think we're going to see a big difference (in students' reading skills) in two or three years."

- **Betsy Hammond**

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Posted by **terleigh**
March 24, 2010, 7:29PM

Not true. Kids can now read. 66 and 67 passed.

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Posted by **lanquan**
March 24, 2010, 7:37PM

The new plan... spend more money because more money means better grades, right? According to the hard working teachers, just give them more, more, more and after they collect PERS (thanks taxpayers), they'll teach those kiddos. Grades are sure to rise! hahahaha

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Posted by **EducationReality**
March 24, 2010, 8:33PM

So, the Oregon Department of Education has a new plan for improving literacy. Seems like they had a new plan under Reading First & No Child Left Behind that was supposed to raise reading achievement among Oregon's students. Alas, those Reading First and NCLB plans didn't improve the literacy of our students (or at least that's what the research and assessment results show when you compare Reading First schools with non-Reading First schools). It seems like the ODE specialists have missed the boat.

Yet, another initiative. One of the major factors in the discrepancy between the state assessment scores and the student scores on the NAEP is that the NAEP requires both written and multiple choice responses. The statewide assessment has been all multiple choice. Oregon has one of the highest rates nationally in terms of students skipping items -- the items that they skip are the ones where they have to write. Probably none of these initiatives will investigate the motivation of the students in answering these questions. It's like we give a test and we expect our students to do their best. I don't know about you, but unless the test really means something to me, I probably won't do my best if it involves more than just marking multiple choice answers.

Perhaps the ODE specialists need to spend some more time in the classrooms of today, especially the elementary classrooms.

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Posted by **grickle**
March 24, 2010, 8:39PM

Oh, horsepoo....so shop teachers and PE teachers are going to teach reading? Does this mean we're going to buy textbooks for shop and PE? Let's not get too carried away, folks. You already need 2 courses in the teaching of reading to get a high school teaching credential....what are we going to add to that?

Why are kids who can't read promoted to middle and high school? If they read at a 5th grade level (not uncommon in H.S. students), they need to stay in the 6th grade until they reach grade level. If they don't improve...put them in a trade school, like they do in Europe.

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Posted by **grickle**
March 24, 2010, 8:41PM

terleigh and lanquan,

I've said before, any article on education brings out the nuts who have plenty of opinions, but know nothing about the real problems. Thanks for proving my point.

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Posted by **terleigh**
March 24, 2010, 10:59PM

Grickle? My original statement was sarcasm.

Here's a serious commentary:

- 1) Oregon does a poor job of managing it's educational budget.
- 2) Oregon is an ultra liberal state and, by definition, is inherently focused more on symbolism than substance.
- 2) Oregon's educational system does a poor job of holding teachers and children to basic standards and continues to pass unprepared kids to the next grade level.
- 3) A disproportionate percentage of (not PC to say which children I'm talking about) don't read English very well.
- 4) Too many Oregon teachers are more interested in contracts and PERS than education.

This pretty much sums it up - except for the rationalization, excuse-making and name-calling that will surely follow my comments.

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Posted by **idalou**
March 24, 2010, 8:47PM

One suggestion: at least once a week every middle school and high school teacher should spend the first 5 or 10 minutes of each class reading a news article aloud from a newspaper. This would serve at least three purposes:

1. Settle the kids down for the start of class;
2. Give them some interesting new information on a topic; and
3. Whet their appetites for reading newspapers on their own.

The articles could be related to the subject taught (science, health, art, etc.) or just be entertaining (sports, human interest, social issues, etc.) The students might want to discuss the article, but no tests should be allowed.

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Posted by **baddogcarl**
March 24, 2010, 9:07PM

We are 20 years into the Oregon Educational Act for the 21st Century. Can we please stop pretending that ODE can be part of the solution?! What a splendid joke! ODE has advocated for years focusing energy on the kids who were closest to passing in order to move rates up. And it's worked, except at 10th grade where first they had to lower the score and now they are delaying the testing by a year. And now they are somehow blaming others for adopting this strategy?

The Reading First crowd? They have been all the rage among districts seeking extra money for years! They helped to create the problem and they don't represent any hope for solving it.

And, finally, Springfield? They start out with third graders that outperform state averages (by 3.6 percentage points in 2009) and terminate with 10th graders whose passing rates are 7.6 percentage points below the state average! This demonstrates, among other things, that passing in the 3rd grade isn't much help. But hey, they've shown appropriate enthusiasm, so let's all follow their lead!!!!

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Posted by **kithogan**
March 24, 2010, 11:03PM

PHONICS only thing that teaches kids to read.

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Posted by **baddogcarl**
March 25, 2010, 7:31AM

Phonics doesn't teach any reading any more than acoustics teaches music.

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Posted by **phosphorus**
March 25, 2010, 3:14AM

No, kithogan, the BEST way for kids to learn to read is for someone that they love and respect to sit down with them and read together EVERY DAY.

The fact that reading ability has "stagnated" tells me that this is not happening, and that in turn tells me that parents and mentors are not doing

THEIR job.

That in turn tells me why other things are happening, for example, gang activity, teen prostitution and police having to bean- bag a violent 12 year-old out alone at night.

In short, that tells me why so many of our kids are screwed up!

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Posted by **terleigh**
March 25, 2010, 8:18AM

Phosphorus - Spoken like a true loving and caring parent...and right on target. However, the majority body politic in Oregon would likely brand you as a right wing radical with an unrealistic point of view. After all (as they would rationalize) "They are busy."

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Posted by **shallowender**
March 25, 2010, 9:50AM

Here is where all the pukers, left and right miss the boat. This is about LETTING THE TEACHERS DO THEIR JOB! Kill all the "initiatives", lose the "plans", get the administrators out of the process, and LET THE TEACHERS TEACH. That is what they are trained and licensed for, and PAID FOR! Get all the political BS out of their way!

Accountability is a buzzword meaning "find someone to Blame! Preferably someone who is from a different political viewpoint!"

Yes, early reading by parents to kids is tremendously important, as is turning off the electronics and handing them a book. And parents who don't should be held "accountable".

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Posted by **Mad As He****
March 25, 2010, 3:15PM

shallowender,

Well said, and after thirty two years as a teacher, I agree.....but it will never happen. Those in the education business who do not teach wouldn't have much to justify their positions without all the new plans, schedules, ideas, and rules they always seem to create. The teacher in the classroom has very little actual input on what they are supposed to be doing. Oh there is lip service to involving teachers, but in reality all the decisions have already been made before any group of teachers are asked for their input. At that point the meetings involving teachers are all about molding their view of the coming changes that will happen with or without their input.....and all but the newest teachers know this.

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Posted by **chartest**
March 25, 2010, 3:04PM

What a bunch of hueey. Oregon requires their teachers to exceed the certification requirements of almost the entire 50 states. Meaning they can teach in any other state without further education an certification.

How is it that we have "The most certified, educated, best paid" teachers but, our children still need a curriculum change? Again! Some one isn't quite telling the full truth here. I know, if I would just pay more taxes for schools, PERS, administrators,etc... the children would "then" be able to read.

How much do we spend per student? How many graduate? Now they can't read either? I must be missing something here. It must be my lack of skills to read this article and make sense of it all. Then again, reading hueey isn't easy even in these times.

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Posted by **chartest**
March 25, 2010, 3:15PM

The only word the state of Oregon teachers union doesn't want to, can't, refuses to, just can't make me read is "No". No more money until the grades come up. No more money. NO!

And while its on my mind: I really wish I could re-shuffle the cirriculum every time it made me, the educated one, look bad. Can't really "Blame" it on the kids now can we? Can't "Blame" it on the taxpayers since they have been taxed for every last nickel in their pockets for their children. Can't really "Blame" it on the administrators. Oh, wait. Maybe there is just a sliver of responsibility on their parts. Just a sliver. The day is coming when teachers and administrators will be embarrassed as a whole to tell society what they do for a living. We hired them to do a job. My children probably will not be able to read about it but, informal communication still thrives.

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Posted by **blastthepast**
March 25, 2010, 4:54PM

Oregon schools can't even teach our kids how to read? I always thought reading, writing and arithmetic were the predominant subjects taught in schools. No? I guess sports is more important. Like schools spending millions for artificial turf football fields. Oh well, I guess I'll just have to keep paying taxes so PERS can still keep doling out the money. Like my neighbor, a school teacher, who retired at age 58. Who must be getting a good pension because he golfs every day at a private golf club, plus goes to Palm Springs every year for 2 or 3 months and golfs there. And me like the fools working hard and paying taxes, I had to work until I was 65. Oh well, such is life.

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Posted by **Mad As He****
March 25, 2010, 6:30PM

blastthepast,
You sound pretty bitter. Do you really blame teachers because their

choice of employment provided a better pension system than yours? Seems like we can all find some other occupation that pays better or has better benefits. So should we all hate or disparage any group that has better pay or benefits.

I retired from teaching at 58 as well after thirty two years teaching in the same school district. I cannot afford what you say your neighbor does but I don't feel hostile toward him. Perhaps he put more money away every month or had lower expenses that I did. Seems a waste of your energy to blame others for whatever situation you find yourself in. I taught thousands of students and no two came to my class with the same skills. They were all individuals and I provided them with the best education in my subjects that I could. All performed differently due to their individual skills and motivations.

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Posted by **chartest**
March 25, 2010, 6:41PM

Envy is not healthy but, you must admit that PERS is pretty good for a servant. Someone that we hired to teach our children. Let's try education without PERS for 10 years. What affect would this decision have on our children's reading abilities? Something to think about.

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Posted by **Mad As He****
March 25, 2010, 7:44PM

"pretty good for a servant"

What makes you think we are your "servants" ?
That is a very offensive suggestion. All teachers pay the same taxes you do.

BTW, PERS is a legal, contractual retirement system. There have been several major reforms of PERS over the years and the courts have ruled that past contractual obligations must be honored. So you would have the legal retirement that I worked thirty two years for withdrawn with no refunds of the thousands of dollars I contributed to it and the interest that those dollars earned?

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