

HOW WE TEACH READING AT BIG HORN ELEMENTARY

By Crystal Lenhart, Reading Specialist - Big Horn Elementary, Big Horn, Wyoming



At Big Horn Elementary, we are deeply committed to delivering on the promise of education and equipping every child with the ability to read -- and read well! Learning to read is such an essential skill to not only find success in school and to thrive in society, but to also experience the joy that reading brings to life. We want every child to be successful in reading! We are learning more about what research says about how children learn to read, how to make sure every student learns to read, and what to do when a child encounters difficulty in learning to read. The research that we're learning about and implementing is called the Science of Reading.

When We Know Better, We Do Better!

The reading scores of American children have remained somewhat stagnant for over 40 years! Each year, the data shows that only about 35% of 4th graders (measured on the NAEP) are proficient in reading! Big Horn Elementary's annual data fares much better than that; we typically show that about 65% of our students are proficient in reading based on the state assessment. We're not satisfied with that progress! While the nationwide trend has been to accept that that is the way it is; we at BHE want more for our kids. The research is telling us that while reading is more challenging for some students than others, with evidence-based reading instruction, nearly every child can become proficient by the end of 3rd grade. With the research available to us now, we can realistically set 95% proficiency as our goal in three years.

Decades of research have determined that reading occurs in a specific way in the brain in all people. It does not occur naturally the way that speech does. The process must be taught. It is a process of building neuro-pathways in the brain that link sounds of speech to written symbols or letters. The strings of letters are attached to meaning, and then those 'letter strings with meaning' are stored in the brain's "letterbox" for later retrieval that is instantaneous and effortless. This process is called orthographic mapping and it is our goal to help our students build a giant 'letterbox' of instantly retrievable words. That translates into fluent reading and subsequent comprehension. Guessing at words based on context does not aid in orthographic mapping, phonic decoding does.

The Science of Reading

"The body of work referred to as the "science of reading" is not an ideology, a philosophy, a political agenda, a one-size-fits-all approach, a program of instruction, nor a specific component of instruction. It is the emerging consensus from many related disciplines, based on literally thousands of studies, supported by hundreds of millions of research dollars, conducted across the world in many languages. These studies have revealed a great deal about how we learn to read, what goes wrong when students don't learn, and what kind of instruction is most likely to work the best for the most students."
- Dr. Louisa Moats

A New Path at BHE

If your family has been a part of BHE for some time, you'll notice some changes in how we teach reading; if you're new to BHE, jump on board, it's going to be a fantastic journey! It's an exciting time to be in education as we align our instruction with the Science of Reading!

Listed below are some points of research that we will be addressing as we embark on a new school year at Big Horn Elementary.

Code Emphasis in Primary Grades. This means that grades K-2 especially will focus on acquiring the skills to crack the code of our alphabet to the speech sounds in English. (There are 44 speech sounds in English and 150 ways to read and spell them!) Kids must first learn to decode/sound-out words before they can understand the meaning of text, therefore, we will emphasize instruction in 'cracking the code' in grades K-2.

Explicit and systematic phonics instruction. We will have an order or continuum of phonics skills, progressing from simple to complex, that will be followed throughout the early grades. Students will progress through the continuum as they master skills. In the intermediate grades (3-5), word study will continue with more grammar and morphology (learning about word parts such as Greek and Latin roots).

Early intervention. If we see any signs that your child may be struggling with the foundational skills of reading, we will not take a 'wait and see' approach; we will immediately implement interventions and monitor their progress. The best solution to the problem of reading failure is early identification and intervention.

Phonemic awareness. This is the ability to get to the individual sounds in words by listening and to identify and manipulate those sounds orally. While this skill will be emphasized in grades K-2, we will make sure all students at BHE have this necessary foundation. Students in the intermediate grades may need to practice these skills until they have firmed up this foundation of reading. Don't be surprised if you have a 3rd - 5th grader who will be working on phonemic awareness! This is an area that the research has indicated is hugely important!

Decodable Readers. Our early readers will be working with decodable readers. These are books or passages that only include words that the students can 'decode' (sound-out) according to the skills they have been taught thus far. Our kids need practice with the phonics skills they are learning and these books and passages provide that practice. So be aware that at times, your primary students may be bringing home a sheet of paper with a passage for practice rather than a book.

Assessments. Your child will not be assigned a Fountas & Pinnell reading level, such as A, or M, or R (any level A-Z) as in the past. Students will be assessed on the Oral Reading Fluency rate for their grade level. These nationally normed one-minute assessments give us a good indication of how easy or difficult reading is for your child. From there, we will give diagnostic assessments in word reading and nonsense word reading to find out which areas in the continuum of phonics skills they need help with. They will be given a Spelling Survey that will show which phonics patterns they are able to apply in their writing and they will also be assessed on Phonemic Awareness so we can make sure they have those crucial foundational skills. As students become proficient word readers, comprehension is a natural outcome. Comprehension will also be checked with monthly three-minute assessments. If your child shows a weakness in any area, they will be progress monitored and given interventions to help them become stronger in their area of weakness.

Leveled Readers. Your child will not be assigned a reading level that corresponds to a letter of the alphabet. They will work with a variety of text. Some text may address specific phonics needs, some may be grade level text to build knowledge that is pertinent to their grade level, some may be interest-based, some will be at a determined level for fluency practice, but they will not be confined to a certain 'level.' Kindergarten and first grade students will not bring home books with patterned sentences that are easily memorized.

Three-cueing system. This is the practice of teaching kids to identify words by using strategies other than decoding. In the three-cueing system, students are taught that they can identify a word by deciding if it makes sense, if it would structurally/grammatically 'fit' in a sentence, or if it looks right rather than closely examining the phonics patterns in the word and sounding it out. This is a practice that the research has indicated that we must abandon. Your child will not be taught to check pictures to identify words or make guesses based on the first letter they see. We want our students to look at every letter in the words, apply phonics knowledge, and sound words out!

Guided Reading. We have a very effective structure in place allowing us to work with small groups of students in a 30 minute lesson but we will be changing what we call it. Guided Reading will now be referred to as Walk to Reading (We already have Walk to Math and Walk to Spelling). Although we are still guiding students through reading lessons, we are choosing to distance ourselves from the term 'Guided Reading' because that term is connected closely with the teaching of the Three-Cueing system which has been debunked by research. Students will be grouped according to various reasons: needs in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, writing projects or knowledge building/interest, but they will not be grouped based on a reading level.

Knowledge Building and Vocabulary. Research has indicated that reading comprehension is closely connected to the background knowledge we have on a topic we're reading about and by understanding the vocabulary contained in the text. BHE is adopting knowledge-building language arts curriculum called CKLA (Core Knowledge Language Arts) Amplify for students in grades PreK - third and Wit and Wisdom for fourth and fifth grades. Our students will have the opportunity to build a broad knowledge base of history/social studies, science, and the arts. Kids will have access to complex text, often read aloud by their teacher, and in the process, gain more complex vocabulary. The research tells us that building knowledge and vocabulary contributes significantly to their reading comprehension and should be taught beginning in the earliest grades.

Comprehension. The ultimate goal of all reading instruction is for students to understand what they read. The model of The Simple View of Reading demonstrates that reading comprehension occurs only when students have both Decoding/Word Recognition Skills and Language Comprehension skills. Children need the essential skills to get the words off the page as well as knowledge, vocabulary, and a good understanding of how our language works in order to comprehend what they read. We must provide instruction that will help students achieve these goals.



We now know a great deal about how the brain develops as we learn to read and what instructional practices are most effective for all children. We are committed to stop doing what doesn't work and be guided by scientific research to ensure that we deliver on the promise of literacy for every BHE student. Again, it's an exciting time to be in education and we need you parents as our partners!