

The four pillars of equity

Building an elementary ELA classroom
where every student succeeds.





Introduction

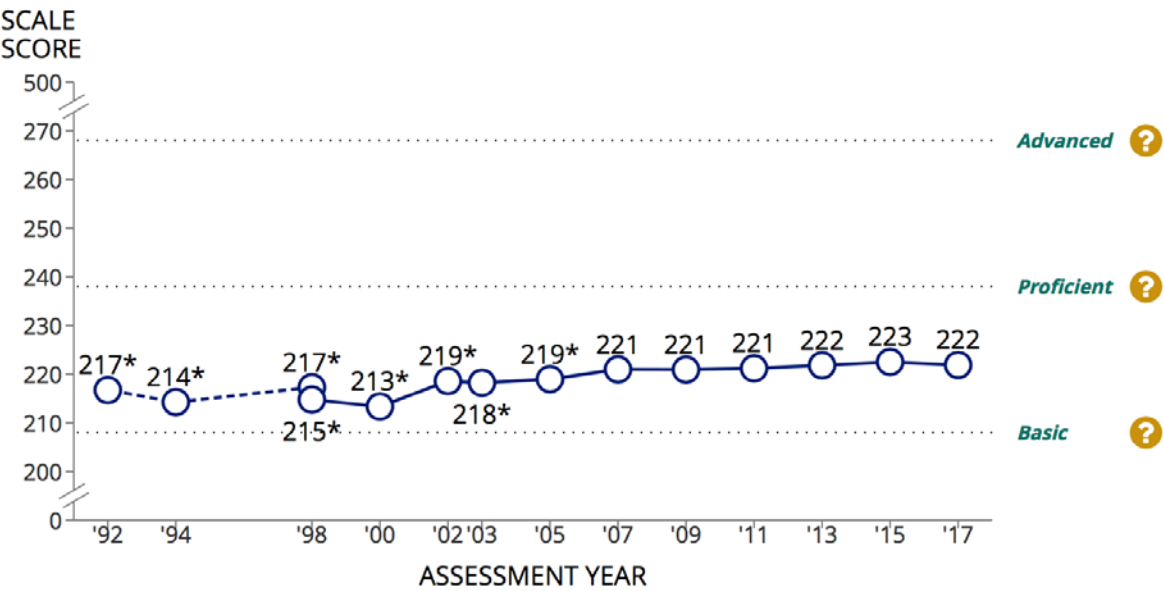
Here is the one thing all elementary school students have in common: **their elementary school experience—what they learn, how they grow—impacts them for life.**

Beyond that, every student is different. Every student walks through the doors of their very first school with a unique perspective and personality—and together they bring into their classrooms a vast range of background knowledge, existing skills, and lived experiences.

Diversity and heterogeneity are inherently valuable. But they carry with them profound and persistent—and increasingly urgent—educational challenges.

Case in point: reading achievement. According to the National Association of Educational Progress (NAEP), U.S. student reading scores across the board have not improved substantially since 1998. The reading gap between students at high-poverty and low-poverty schools remains stubbornly wide.

Trend in fourth-grade NAEP reading average scores



Every academic subject is essential, of course—but it's literacy that unlocks them all. So we know that early reading affects achievement throughout school, and beyond. **That's why it is vital to stand for—even fight for—access to high-quality classroom reading materials right from the start.** Our responsibility as educators is to provide the literacy instruction that gives every student the same opportunity to succeed, even excel.

We believe that every kid is capable of becoming a skilled reader. For us, that belief is more than just a nice idea: it's a foundation for action and a call for high-quality materials that give every kid the same opportunity. **And the latest reading science shows that the best instruction is instruction that supports all students.**

So, based on that science, we have created the **four pillars of equity**: the key starting points for the concrete actions you can take to build a classroom where every student succeeds at reading—and thus where infinite opportunities can open for everyone.

EQUITY PILLAR 1

Teach all kids how to crack the written code.





Once we learn to read well, it *feels* utterly natural—but it’s not. Breathing, crying, moving, and speaking: Generally, these are capacities we are born with. Reading, on the other hand, needs to be taught.

Yet despite ample research and ever-evolving curricular approaches, not all kids have access to the reading instruction they require. **And there’s one thing that reading science indicates that all kids need in order to read: the power to decode**—the ability to match letters to sounds and see the patterns that form syllables and words. Reading science also shows that explicit instruction in phonics and letter-sound relationships is the most effective key to that code. Training young students in decoding actually builds a new area in their brains where letter and word recognition happens—one that functions better and better with practice.¹

Indeed, the National Reading Panel has concluded that “early, explicit, systematic phonics instruction gives kids a learning advantage.”² There’s always room for leaving kids to simply absorb and enjoy the written word, but when it comes to reading *instruction*, that’s like giving every kid in the class one different tool—or leaving them to work with the handful of nails they came in with—and expecting each of them to, by fifth grade, build a house. Phonics means not only giving every student the complete toolkit they need, but also giving every student the *same* toolkit.



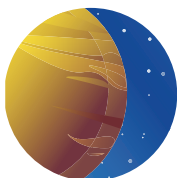
1 Brem, S., Bach, S., Kucian, K., Kujala, J., Guttorm, T., Martin, E., et al. (2010). Brain sensitivity to print emerges when children learn letter–speech sound correspondences. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 107(17), 7939–7944.

2 <https://www.nichd.nih.gov/sites/default/files/publications/pubs/nrp/Documents/report.pdf>

EQUITY PILLAR 2

Expose students to knowledge and vocabulary beyond their lived experience.





Not all students visit museums, play sports, or travel far past the nexus of home and school. **That is why it is our responsibility as educators to bring the world into the classroom.**

Not all students arrive at school with the same background knowledge, yet background knowledge is inseparable from and critical to reading comprehension.³ There is evidence that practicing reading strategies—such as identifying the main idea of a text—can help weak readers, but building only strategies can take readers only so far.

For example, if a student who's never seen a sailboat is asked to read and analyze a text passage about America's Cup, they may not do as well as a student who has. From "Why American Students Haven't Gotten Better at Reading in 20 Years" (*The Atlantic*):

"The failure to build children's knowledge in elementary school helps explain the gap between the reading scores of students from wealthier families and those of their lower-income peers—a gap that has been expanding...[W]ealthy children are far more likely to acquire knowledge outside of school. Poorer kids with less-educated parents tend to rely on school to acquire the kind of knowledge that is needed to succeed academically—and...they're less likely to acquire it there."⁴

Literacy instruction should not assume prior knowledge, but instead focus on building knowledge in the classroom. **We need to seek out curricula that expose students to a diverse array of new topics**—spanning history, science, literature, culture and the arts—all in an intentional sequence that builds a rich, and common, knowledge base from which all students can draw.

**What
will you
discover?**

3 Recht, D.R. and Leslie, L., 1988. Effect of prior knowledge on good and poor readers' memory of text. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 80(1), p.16.

4 Wexler, Natalie. Why American Students Haven't Gotten Better at Reading in 20 Years. *The Atlantic*, April 31, 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2018/04/-american-students-reading/557915/>

EQUITY PILLAR 3

Make sure all students are reading complex text.





Giving struggling readers easier texts does not promote equity. Giving every student complex text does.

In the early grades, when students are just learning how to read, “complex text” generally suggests decodable language that supports explicit phonics instruction. That definition expands as students progress. Literacy expert Tim Shanahan, Ph.D., says text complexity has two components: literary, symbolic, or poetic complexity, plus linguistic complexity.⁵ Complex text is valuable not only as a source of “high-frequency words and learned sound and spelling patterns” but also of rich material that students can sink their teeth into.⁶ **This is the type of text that every student should have access to.**

Yes, even struggling readers. According to Shanahan, limiting kids’ “exposure to linguistic and textual features that they don’t yet know how to negotiate” doesn’t make things better for struggling readers. On the contrary, in fact. It “reduces their opportunity to learn”—and their motivation. “Students often tell me that they hate reading specifically because they always get placed in what they call the ‘stupid kid books,’” he says.⁷

Reading science confirms that student performance improves when students are given

equal access to grade-level text. Referencing a 2017 study by Lisa Trottier Brown at Utah State University,⁸ Shanahan confirms that student performance “improved across multiple measures of reading achievement” when “weaker readers” used “texts at two, three, and four grade levels above their instructional levels with the assistance of lead readers.”⁹

If kids can learn as much or more from grade-level texts—and they can—we should give them opportunities to read the texts that match their intellectual levels and age-level interests. So instead of just placing kids at different book levels, differentiation should be provided by varying the amount and type of scaffolding for the needs of different students. With the proper supports and scaffolds, all students can handle grade-level decodable text. **Using read-alouds, students can even take on above-grade-level material, giving them exposure to complex text beyond what they are able to decode.**

Giving students equitable exposure to complex texts results in more skilled readers across the board. Text complexity gives all students in the classroom the chance to challenge themselves and grow.

5 <https://shanahanonliteracy.com/blog/a-fine-mess-confusing-close-reading-and-text-complexity>

6 <https://achievethecore.org/aligned/supporting-youngest-readers-teaching-skills-reading/>

7 <https://shanahanonliteracy.com/blog/the-instructional-level-concept-revisited-teaching-with-complex-text>

8 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00220671.2017.1310711>

9 <http://www.readingrockets.org/blogs/shanahan-literacy/new-evidence-teaching-reading-frustration-levels>

EQUITY PILLAR 4

Believe all students can achieve.





Student mindset matters. *So does ours.* **It is essential for educators to enter the classroom with high expectations for all students—and with the belief that every student is capable of meeting, even exceeding, those expectations.** This attitude can change the way we teach, and thus the way students learn.

In a way, this pillar provides the foundation, and motivation, for the other three. When we believe in every student's capacity to succeed, we make sure every student has powerful tools for learning, rich content, and complex text. In other words, we provide high-quality instructional material that is based on reading science.

When you believe all students can achieve, you also believe in measuring that achievement: to calibrate their learning day to day and celebrate their strides small and large. Here we circle back to student mindset, as here we see the importance of access to both formative and summative data. Using in-the-moment checks as a basis for judging progress—rather than just one big test at the end of the year—shows students that they are all equally capable of improvement, and success.

We feel it in our hearts and the science bears it out: educational equity is not just the right thing to do. It's the way all kids learn best—and the way toward a better future.



We believe that educators and students alike benefit from equity-based instruction. Our program shows it, and our all-green ratings from EdReports.org for all three of our core curricula in ELA and science confirm it: **at Amplify, building high-quality equity-based curricula is our priority.**

Want to see how equity-based literacy instruction can transform your classroom?

Request a sample of Amplify CKLA by emailing CKLA@amplify.com or calling (800) 832-1969. Bring the world to your kids today!

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