

# Ohio Lawsuit Punches Back in Battle over How to Teach Reading

By Sarah Mervosh, *The New York Times*, Nov 3, 2023

Gov. Mike DeWine of Ohio set out to overhaul reading instruction in his state this year, thus making it join the growing list of states that require schools to follow the “science of reading” — an approach that emphasizes systematic, sound-it-out instruction, known as phonics, and the direct teaching of other skills, like vocabulary.

5 The movement, fueled by longstanding research, has sought to oust “balanced literacy,” which is meant to give teachers flexibility to meet students’ needs while promoting a love of reading. It may include some phonics, but also other strategies.

[...]But a recent lawsuit by the Reading Recovery Council of North America, an Ohio-based nonprofit that supports balanced literacy, is challenging the state’s new mandate — underscoring the financial and ideological forces at work in the national debate.

10 [...]Reading Recovery is an intervention program aimed at helping first graders in the bottom 20 percent of their class. The nonprofit partners with universities to train teachers and school district leaders in its methods. In the 2021-22 school year, the program reached about 23,500 students in more than 600 districts nationally.

15 The program owes much of its success in the United States to Gay Su Pinnell, a star of balanced literacy who is a professor emerita and a major donor at Ohio State University. Dr. Pinnell wrote one of the most lucrative and popular reading curriculums used in elementary schools.

But the trend toward the science of reading has put pressure on established players in education, who believe deeply in what they do and have fought to keep their foothold in the marketplace.

20 [...]“The practical matter is, we have to be able to keep our business going,” Dr. Molasso said in an interview. “But the stand is principled,” he said, adding, “We believe that what we do works, and we’ve got evidence to prove that it does work.”

25 [...]In daily one-on-one lessons, Reading Recovery students practice reading with coaching from a teacher. Phonics is included as needed, but it is not primary, said Dr. Molasso, who rejected what he called one-size-fits-all instruction. “We have a ‘whatever it takes’ philosophy. Sometimes that is phonics,” he said. “Sometimes it’s something else.”

Students may be taught to use context clues, including pictures, to discern a word’s meaning. The practice was banned in Ohio as part of the new mandate and has been criticized by science of reading advocates for taking students’ attention away from letters on the page.

30 [...]Reading Recovery cites studies that have found positive outcomes, including a large, federally funded study in 2016 by Henry May, an associate professor at the University of Delaware. But a follow-up study by Dr. May published this year [...]found that by third and fourth grade, Reading Recovery students were as much as a full grade level behind [other struggling readers who did not receive their intervention.]

35 [...]Timothy Shanahan, a professor emeritus at the University of Illinois at Chicago, who was not involved in the study and described it as high quality, said one theory for the negative results is that students were taught to rely on strategies that backfired as the material they were reading grew more advanced.

40 “Young children do start out trying to use various strategies,” he said. “If you show them a tube of toothpaste that says ‘Crest,’ they’ll guess that it says ‘toothpaste.’” But he added, “Learning to read entails giving up that strategy and focusing more on ‘How do I actually get the author’s word, and not just their general idea?’”