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Thank you to Chairman Aderholt and Ranking Member DeLauro for the opportunity to speak before this Subcommittee. My name is Holly Lane, and I am a professor of education at the University of Florida and the director of the UF Literacy Institute, better known as UFLI¹. I am also the lead author of *UFLI Foundations*, a very widely used phonics program. I am honored to speak with you all about the science of reading.

As I am sure you know, learning to read is a child's most important accomplishment in elementary school. Reading proficiency is linked to academic, social, and economic outcomes². Unfortunately, children who do not learn to read well during the primary grades typically struggle in reading throughout school³. Poor reading achievement has long been a national concern. In fact, only 31% of fourth graders and 30% of eighth graders reached proficient levels of reading on the 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress⁴. This means that more than two-thirds of children in the United States are *not* reading proficiently.

Unfortunately, once poor reading trajectories are established, they are very difficult to change⁵, and early gaps tend to widen over time⁶. The long-term effects of reading difficulties can be devastating. Reading failure often leads to grade retention, dropout, and limited employment opportunities⁷. Identifying effective methods for early reading instruction and intervention for struggling students is critical.

This is where the science of reading comes in. The term “science of reading” means different things to different people, so allow me to explain what I mean when I use the term. The science of reading is the accumulated body of evidence from various fields of study that helps us understand what reading is, how people learn to do it, and how it is most effectively taught.

Research from neuroscience has helped us understand how the brain learns to read. Linguists have uncovered which aspects of language need to be developed for proficient reading. Research from cognitive and developmental psychology has shed light on how learning happens and the conditions that promote it, while education research has identified effective instructional methods and ways to support program implementation. Together, the contributions of evidence from these fields and others constitute what has become known as the science of reading.

One of the theoretical frameworks that has been particularly important to the science of reading is the “simple view of reading” (SVR)⁸. To be clear, the SVR does not suggest that reading is a simple process. It is a simple way of understanding a very complex process. In short, the SVR posits that reading comprehension is the product of word recognition and linguistic comprehension. That is, in order to read and comprehend text, one must be able to read the words on the page, *and* one must be able to understand the language used in the text. It sounds simple, but both parts of this equation have many components. Word recognition skills include the capacity to attend to individual sounds in words, the understanding that letters and letter combinations are written representations of those sounds, the ability to decode and encode words, and the automaticity with these skills to perform them without conscious effort. Language skills include knowledge of word meanings, understanding of how words work together in sentences, and background knowledge of the world so the reader can connect new knowledge to it. Word recognition skills and language proficiency must be fully developed to optimize reading comprehension. Although the SVR does not encompass every aspect of reading, numerous studies have demonstrated that this theory accounts for most of the variance in reading proficiency⁹.

We know how important reading is, we have this definition of the science of reading, and we have a strong theoretical understanding of how reading develops and how it can be effectively taught. So, what is the problem? Why are we seeing such poor reading outcomes?

These are complex questions, but I will attempt to address some of what I see as the core problems we face.

The first problem is teacher preparation. Many, many teachers enter the classroom ill-prepared to teach reading. This may be because their teacher preparation program taught them outdated and ineffective methods¹⁰. It may also be that they entered the field without attending a teacher preparation program at all. Or, finally, it may be because their ongoing professional learning about reading has focused on the latest fads rather than on evidence-based practices. With few standard expectations for what a reading teacher needs to know and be able to do, we run the risk of having schools full of teachers with widely varying knowledge and skills, who have differing understandings of key concepts and no real shared language.

A related problem is the lack of reading expertise among education leaders¹¹. School leaders are expected to be experts in all areas of instruction—not just reading. At the same time, they need to be experts in school finance, personnel management, transportation, behavior management, and communication, among many other things. No one can be expected to have this many areas of expertise, so each leader tends to prioritize the areas they know well. When they lack deep knowledge about reading, which is often the case and typically results in other issues taking priority over reading in their schools.

Another key problem is the quality of the tools provided to teachers. Few reading programs have any systematic, rigorous evaluation before they are sold to schools. Of those that have been studied, there are many with poor student outcomes. Many programs are marketed as being “aligned with the science of reading,” but there are no safeguards in place to ensure that they actually are. There is no equivalent of the Food and Drug Administration to evaluate reading programs to ensure that they are effective, or at least to ensure that they are not harmful. This leaves schools and districts susceptible to every snake oil salesman that comes along with the

newest shiny thing¹². The processes used by states and districts to vet programs for approval tend to ignore efficacy data—or the lack thereof. The processes are more likely to focus on superficial elements that have little impact on student achievement. Also, approval processes almost never consider program usability in any substantive way. So, even when a program does have data demonstrating efficacy under controlled study conditions, it may not be effective in real classrooms.

Ultimately, most of the problems with reading today are related to these two issues: teacher and leader expertise and the quality of their instructional tools. I imagine that at least one reason for my invitation to speak to this Subcommittee is that I have led a successful effort to address these problems. Our work at UFLI initially focused on using the science of reading to develop high quality reading teacher preparation. We considered what knowledge and skills teachers needed to teach all children¹³. We developed and tested methods for preparing teachers to teach reading and to provide intervention for students who struggle to learn to read. Later, we supported other teacher educators as they adopted these practices¹⁴.

More recently, my team and I used the science of reading to develop a phonics program that is both effective and user-friendly for teachers. *UFLI Foundations* started at one school in north Florida, and after seeing remarkable results in that school, we tested it in a district-wide pilot study. The district-wide results were even more remarkable¹⁵. Only after these two years of piloting did we publish the program for use elsewhere. Since its release in 2022, the program has been adopted in more than 600,000 classrooms in at least 110 countries. We see tremendous gains wherever *UFLI Foundations* is implemented as designed. It is important to note that the program was built upon a long legacy of rigorous research. We relied on the science of reading, and it worked. Most of the research was funded by the Department of Education, the National

Institutes of Health, and the National Science Foundation, so thank you for this support of reading research.

To improve reading instruction and, ultimately, student reading outcomes, we must improve both educator preparation and instructional materials. We must ensure that teachers and leaders get high quality preparation in reading. A relatively new organization called the Evidence Advocacy Center (EAC) has taken up this mission¹⁶. The EAC's founder, Dr. Douglas Carnine, said, "Professions grounded in evidence don't revert to disproven practices. Education does. It lurches on a pendulum, swinging back and forth between approaches already tested and found wanting."¹⁷ He identified five pillars that evidence-based professions are built upon: a shared knowledge base, research-aligned preparation, licensure requirements focused on competence, meaningful accreditation processes, and accountability for adherence to evidence in practice. We must also ensure that the tools provided to educators are effective. Educators in the field need guidance and protection from snake oil salesmen. My understanding is that the Institute of Education Sciences' What Works Clearinghouse¹⁸ was created to serve in this role, but it has fallen short. It is an excellent resource, but it is difficult for practitioners to use, and its limited funding has not allowed it to be comprehensive enough or to keep up with the field. Other resources have attempted to fill this gap but have also fallen short.

There are certainly bright spots in the reading world—schools, districts, and states that have beaten the odds and made remarkable gains in reading. Their efforts have focused largely on the two issues I have discussed: developing educator expertise and implementing high-quality instructional tools. We need to learn from these examples and replicate their efforts to ensure reading success for all children. We need to follow the science we have, and we need to continue to add to the science through ongoing, rigorous research efforts.

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