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## **ANALYSIS: Schools are abandoning progressive curricula from teachers colleges**

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Recent reports show that school districts are ditching progressive curricula from teachers colleges and returning to best practices for reading.

The nationwide low reading proficiency for K-12 students is attributed, in part, to these curricula. Though *Campus Reform* has **identified** teachers colleges as sites of social justice and anti-racism, a popular approach to reading sold by teachers colleges failed to close achievement gaps.

The fallout from progressive curricula is widespread, with a headline from a Feb. 10 **episode** of *The Free Press*' podcast declaring, "65 Percent of Fourth Graders Can't Really Read."

The episode featured journalist **Emily Hanford**, whose extensive **investigation** for American Public Media (APM) examined why "there's a huge body of research on how kids learn to read," yet "many teachers didn't know about this research," according to a statement she shared with *Campus Reform*.

Hanford's podcast **series** *Sold a Story* suggests that there are two general approaches to teaching reading. One is **phonics**, or the relationship between letters and their sounds in spoken language.

The second approach treats children as natural-born readers who can learn mainly through exposure to books and includes strategies such as **asking** students to guess words based on pictures and other clues or repeatedly **presenting** the same words to help students commit them to memory.

“[W]hat reading scientists have clearly shown is that you can’t be a good reader without good phonics skills,” Hanford said.

Whether teachers adopt a curriculum that focuses on phonics can depend on their philosophy of educating children. “[T]here’s been a long sort of separation between people you would call progressives in terms of pedagogy,” **Neal McCluskey**, the director of the Cato Institute’s **Center for Educational Freedom**, told *Campus Reform*.

McCluskey continued to share “broad generalizations” of the differences between progressive and conservative pedagogy. Conservatives believe that, “by virtue of their experience,” adults are responsible for imparting knowledge and skills on students.

Meanwhile, the progressive approach is “student-centered,” which views a teacher as more of “a guide” or “coach.”

**Sujatha Hampton**, the Second Vice President and Education Chair of the Fairfax NAACP, similarly told *Campus Reform* that progressive approaches to reading come from a “philosophical desire to expose children to the richness of literature and to move away from what had been thought of as the drudgery and pain of institutional style education.”

“Professionals tried to make the emotional desire that children love school and books be enough to overcome the inconvenient reality that they weren’t able to actually read the words,” she continued. “Soon this became the way universities trained teachers.”

In 2021, the Fairfax NAACP sent a **letter** to the superintendent of Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) demanding a “switch to an evidence-based” approach to teaching reading.

“The NAACP point[ed] out that [FCPS] first promised to make ‘minority achievement’ a priority in 1984, yet the achievement gap in reading between black and white students has persisted,” **David Boaz**, a distinguished senior fellow at Cato, **wrote** in Jan. 2023.

Since the NAACP “lit a fire under the school district,” according to Boaz, *The Washington Post* **reported** that FCPS “gave all kindergarten through second-grade teachers scripted lesson plans featuring phonics.”

The NAACP letter did not mention a specific curriculum or teachers college, but FCPS used a similar approach to the infamous curriculum at the center of Hanford’s **investigation**.

Columbia University’s **Teachers College** curriculum is used by “as many as one in four elementary schools,” according to *Sold a Story*. In New York City—another district where schools are switching to phonics-heavy curricula—the public schools chancellor said that Columbia’s approach “contributed to poor reading outcomes,” according to a Feb. 14 **report** in *Chalkbeat*.

*Chalkbeat* continued to describe the extent of these schools’ poor reading outcomes, which show “large gaps between racial groups.” Reading proficiency is at two-thirds for “white and Asian American students” compared to “37% [for] Black and Latino children.”

These reports depict **New York City public schools**, **FCPS**, and even **Columbia** as joining the national consensus on how to teach reading.

“We are seeing action on this issue in a number of states—red states and blue states,” Hanford told *Campus Reform*. “Since *Sold a Story*, legislators in at least five states have introduced bills to encourage districts to select curriculum aligned with the science of reading.”

Despite the revelation that, for **decades**, teachers colleges sold a defective product, they still maintain what McCluskey called not “exactly a monopoly but nearly a monopoly on producing teachers.”

For an alternate pathway towards teacher certification, McCluskey suggested that school choice could reduce “rules and regulations,” including the **common requirement** that teachers complete an education program.

“And that’s really the key because you want a free market in K-12 education, regardless of [the] teacher pipeline.”

*Campus Reform* contacted all relevant parties listed for comment and will update this article accordingly.