

# A School Board Member's Insights

by Brenda Warren

Low literacy profoundly impacts the health and well-being of children and the adults they will become. It was that understanding that motivated me as a new school board member in 2004 to do whatever I could to improve how we taught reading in our district. What surprised me most was that there did not seem to be a sense of urgency concerning our unacceptable reading data. As a pediatrician, I was accustomed to the sense of urgency one experiences in an emergency room when a patient with a dire situation rolls in. Everyone has a critical role to play and works urgently, systematically, and calmly to diagnose the condition and care for the patient. Why can't we do that with reading difficulties?

I've always put children's well-being at the center of my work and knew that without the ability to read, many children endure inequities throughout their education and the rest of their lives. However, I soon realized I had a lot to learn before I would know enough about the science of reading (a vast body of scientifically-based reading research), Structured Literacy, and scientifically-based reading systems to understand what changes needed to be made to truly impact our district's reading proficiency trajectory. What I share here are my thoughts, observations, and lessons learned from 18 years of reading advocacy as a school board member and parent. I hope advocacy has become more straightforward now that (a) the science of reading is getting broad media coverage, (b) there are many more online resources for educators and parents, and (c) reading advocacy groups have helped to get science of reading bills passed through their legislatures.

This article addresses the following topics:

1. The limitations superintendents and school board members work under that make it tricky for them to directly change how reading is taught.
2. What superintendents and board members need to know and the most difficult acknowledgment they must make before significant changes can happen.
3. Suggestions for how a science of reading advocate might go about requesting change.

### What Makes it Difficult for Boards and Superintendents to Effect Change?

Public (but not private) school boards must follow open meeting laws that ensure taxpayers are informed of all official board business. These laws do not prohibit school board members from meeting in small groups with the superintendent or community members, but all board meetings with a quorum present (i.e., four members of a seven-member board) must be posted and held in a place accessible to the public.

There are a few considerations school boards should think through before making demands to change to a scientifically-based reading system.

1. **Manage criticism.** Too much criticism of a district's reading results at public school board meetings can lead to a loss of community trust in the district and demoralize educators (who are doing their best with what they have been taught). It is important for board members to challenge their superintendents to honestly consider that their reading data outcomes may be related to how reading instruction is implemented in the district. Challenging them in their office rather than in a public meeting is a better option, at least initially; private meetings allow for more frank discussions, avoid making district staff feel embarrassed, and diminish the superintendents' need to save face publicly.

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2. **Set expectations.** Merely putting expectations for improving student reading proficiency in a superintendent's job description without first requiring that person to be knowledgeable about the science of reading, Structured Literacy, and scientifically-based reading systems could lead that superintendent to advocate for time-consuming, expensive, and ultimately unsuccessful solutions. Board members themselves must be willing to learn about the science of reading, Structured Literacy, and scientifically-based reading systems alongside the superintendent so that they know how to set expectations, evaluate their superintendent's efforts toward changing to a scientifically-based reading system, and assess results. It is important to note that superintendents rarely have performance goals specifically related to literacy outcomes. Working together to establish such a goal would help motivate the superintendent to make literacy shifts based on the scientific evidence a priority.
3. **Utilize curriculum committees.** Open meeting laws affect the work of school boards, but not curriculum committees. Therefore, it is easier for a curriculum committee to develop a scientifically-based reading system outside of public scrutiny before bringing it to a public board meeting. If the board were to start talking in public meetings ahead of curriculum team planning, many in the district who are unfamiliar with the science of reading might start panicking about this undefined change and lobby

for business as usual. Those who are opposed to the science of reading based on their bias toward Balanced Literacy approaches might rally against the change as well. This unrest could attract the media who would not likely understand the issues involved, and their reporting might be sensationalized in order to create a captivating story. Events like these can be bad for a district because they could lead to board turnover or the firing or resignation of the superintendent, resulting in the dismantling of efforts made toward creating a scientifically-based reading system.

4. **Ensure knowledgeable curriculum leaders.** Choosing or creating a curriculum is not the job of a school board; curriculum committees do that work. However, the board/superintendent team can influence outcomes by ensuring that the members of the curriculum committee are highly knowledgeable about the science of reading, Structured Literacy, and scientifically-based reading systems by providing professional learning directly from a consultant or a train-the-trainer model. A consultant is superior to a train-the-trainer model for most districts because in committed Balanced Literacy districts, a train-the-trainer model is less likely to be successful. This is because people well-versed in Balanced Literacy will more likely make ineffective tweaks or "band-aid" attempts to patch the current ineffective approaches, rather than substantive changes in curriculum and instruction. Without a science of reading/Structured Literacy expert to provide the "why" and the professional knowledge about how the reading brain develops, Balanced Literacy experts' mental models are not likely to change. Additionally, without the guidance of science of reading/Structured Literacy experts, the committee will likely choose a curriculum that claims to be based upon the science of reading when it is not. The resources provided at the end of this article include The Reading League's Curriculum Evaluation Guidelines. These guidelines are helpful for superintendents, school boards, and curriculum leaders to review before establishing curriculum committees and beginning the curriculum selection process.
5. **Avoid initiative fatigue.** Having observed two large Balanced Literacy read-

ing curriculum adoptions, I understand very well how initiative fatigue and resistance develop. Therefore, it is absolutely critical that boards ensure their teachers, coaches, and principals have a strong science of reading/Structured Literacy foundation prior to making substantial changes in instruction, assessment, curriculum, and interventions. Continuous professional learning should be done prior to adopting any new curriculum so that all educators understand the reason for changing to a scientifically-based reading system. After the adoption, professional training on implementing the new curriculum in the classroom should continue. Doing professional learning well is important because a transformational change like this will be difficult for everyone. By “well,” I mean that it cannot be accomplished through a within-school effort, a “one and done” professional development overview, or the hiring of professional development providers who lack the expertise required. The knowledge must cover an overall understanding of where the science of reading comes from, its findings on how the brain learns to read, why children have difficulty learning to read, how to prevent/screen for reading difficulties, how to assess/remediate reading difficulties, how the English language system works, what this means for students who are English learners/emergent bilinguals, and more. Educators need a strong science of reading/Structured Literacy foundation upon which to build ongoing knowledge and an understanding of what instructional practices they will need to unlearn and relinquish. Professional learning before the adoption of a new program decreases both

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resistance to change and the tendency to fall back into familiar, but ineffective, practices. Furthermore, if the scientifically-based reading system is truly rooted in the science of reading, there will be less disruption and clamor for adoption of yet another new curriculum when new, incremental findings emerge from the science of reading research because educators will understand how to adjust their current efforts to align with the new findings.

6. **Lead with a long view.** Creating scientifically-based reading systems does not happen overnight, so school boards must ensure that their superintendent has the right literacy leadership team in place that is able to continue the scientifically-based reading system momentum even if the superintendent or board members were to leave. This team should be able to function without input or monitoring from the board and/or superintendent. Without a highly knowledgeable and effectively functioning team, it becomes too easy for districts to slide back to previously favored, seemingly easier-to-implement, ineffective approaches after a leadership transition.
7. **Understand the drawbacks of local control.** Local control ensures that school boards represent the interests of their communities. However, in the case of reading instruction, local control is often a disservice to students. There are 13,800 school districts in the U.S. If all of these function under local control, it would mean 13,800 curriculum teams are in-

dependently determining how to teach reading! Because most colleges and universities are not adequately teaching pre-service and in-service teachers about the science of reading/Structured Literacy, there are not yet enough science of reading/Structured Literacy experts to go around. This means that many districts will not succeed. To gain more science of reading experts, states should work to increase this number while capitalizing on those they already have by placing them in strategic positions to establish state Structured Literacy guidelines and coach district leaders who design and implement scientifically-based reading systems.

### The Critical Acknowledgement

Board members and superintendents usually trust their curriculum leaders because they have strong credentials, lots of experience, appear competent, and are passionate about teaching students to read. It is difficult for superintendents and school board members who lack knowledge about the science of reading to recognize and acknowledge that their curriculum leaders, principals, literacy coaches, and teachers may not have the knowledge and skills to change to a scientifically-based reading system. It is absolutely not the case that district staff lacks the desire to improve reading instruction; it is because, through no fault of their own, they were not taught about the science of reading or Structured Literacy in their colleges and universities. It is only natural that superintendents and school boards would trust their own educators. However, for the sake of their students, superintendents and board members must be able to recognize the lack of district science of reading/Structured Literacy experts and adopt a sense of urgency for their own learning so they can skillfully set the stage for change and become leaders for reading equity.

### What Do Superintendents Need to Know?

If a district has strong literacy curriculum leaders, coaches, and school-based administrators who are highly knowledgeable and experienced with the science of reading, Structured Literacy, and scientifically-based reading systems, superintendents do not need to know as much because they can rely on their district and school leaders to design and effectively lead transformation and sustainability efforts. However, in districts whose literacy leaders and principals are happy with their Balanced

Literacy instructional approaches and resist changing to Structured Literacy, the superintendents, with support from their board, must become the literacy leaders who initiate and lead change.

Since the vast majority of superintendents are not taught about the science of reading and Structured Literacy in their university programs, the best way for them to learn is to find someone who is an expert in these areas to guide their learning and coach them through leading a change to a scientifically-based reading system. Ideally, their learning would coincide with the learning that the school board undergoes so they all learn what changes are necessary and can lead the district toward Structured Literacy with the same goals. Leaders should also be present when the teachers and staff receive professional development to signal the importance and reflect the commitment the district has to the improvement of literacy outcomes.

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Effectively leading a transformational change to a scientifically-based reading system in a Balanced Literacy district requires that superintendents are knowledgeable enough about the science of reading and Structured Literacy to possess a deep understanding of the following:

- why change is needed
- what change is needed and how to effectively manage that change
- who to keep and/or hire as their literacy curriculum leader(s)
- what immediate and ongoing professional learning their reading teachers, principals, and literacy coaches need
- how to monitor implementation—what evidence to look for and what red flags might indicate the persistent use of ineffective approaches
- how to provide emotional support to staff who might become overwhelmed by the changes

Superintendents' confidence in their knowledge enables them to speak confidently to their staff and community and resist yielding to demands to abandon the Structured Literacy plan. Their confidence is especially important if the community and/or district staff directly complain to them and/or the board.

### **What Do School Board Members Need to Know?**

Because few board members have backgrounds in either Balanced Literacy or Structured Literacy, they are at the mercy of what district educators tell them about their reading curricula, interventions, MTSS systems, assessments, data, etc. With such limited knowledge, they often do not even know what questions to ask. Early in my tenure, I asked questions and received very defensive answers but did not know why—or even what answers I should expect. In a committed Balanced Literacy district, board members are often left in the dark about what possibilities exist for effective changes in instruction and curriculum that are based on the science of reading. Therefore, it is incumbent upon board members to learn about the science of reading and Structured Literacy to fully understand what changes should be made, what reading proficiency levels are possible, and then set appropriate expectations for the superintendent.

Board members (and superintendents) are expected to monitor and be accountable for student data. However, if they are unaware of what changes could ensure effective reading instruction for all students, they may be easily persuaded that the most recent tweaks to the curriculum or upcoming professional learning will set the district on the right path. They could also be convinced that poverty and trauma are what prevent children from learning to read and are the cause of poor reading outcome data, not ineffective instructional approaches. They may also think that academic growth rather than proficiency is all that can be expected of some students; district leaders often focus on student growth rather than proficiency because that's one metric their state uses to evaluate them.

### **What Actions Can Structured Literacy Advocates Take?**

1. If you are a school board member, meeting with your superintendent is a good place to start. Change will not happen with just one meeting, so patience and persistence are required. I would not recommend educating your fellow board

members without simultaneously educating the superintendent. A board that gets ahead of the superintendent with science of reading and Structured Literacy knowledge might set their superintendent up to fail by setting expectations that their superintendent does not have enough knowledge to successfully meet.

2. Open forums at school board meetings allow the public to speak to the board and superintendent. However, even a great persuasive speech may not convince them to do anything differently because they might be in the uncomfortable position of not knowing who to believe. Unless the board and superintendent are knowledgeable about the science of reading and Structured Literacy, their tendency is to believe their district's reading leaders rather than gathering more information and exploring solutions. Furthermore, there is limited opportunity for dialogue during open forums, so I encourage Structured Literacy advocates to set up individual meetings with school board members, beginning with those who seem most receptive. This allows for more time to explain reasons for advocating, ask pertinent questions about data and curriculum, and provide resources for them to learn more (see the following Recommended Resources list). Additionally, you can help board members understand that there are ways to improve reading instruction so that nearly all children can learn to read, and they should not accept poor reading data as inevitable (e.g., 80% of students should meet reliable reading proficiency levels based on Tier 1 classroom instruction). Changing board members' minds will likely not happen with just one meeting, and it becomes more difficult if the board has divided opinions. Therefore, gentle persistence is key to keeping the doors of communication open.
3. Advocates could lobby their state superintendent and school board associations to add the science of reading and Structured Literacy professional learning to their offerings. There are many topics board members and superintendents need to know aside from reading instruction, such as mission/vision/goal setting, effective governance, board/superintendent relationships, community leadership, political leadership, budgeting, writing policies, data accountability, etc.

It is no surprise that reading instruction is not a top priority for professional learning in these organizations even though it should be.

In conclusion, I encourage Structured Literacy advocates to persist despite the challenges described in this article. The health and well-being of our students is paramount because if students can't read, there is no equity. ■

### Recommended Resources

The following resources can be used to pique superintendents' and board members' interest in learning more about the science of reading and Structured Literacy:

**READ: *Structured Literacy and Typical Literacy Practices: Understanding Differences to Create Instructional Opportunities*, by Louise Spear-Swerling (2018)**

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322664158\\_Structured\\_Literacy\\_and\\_Typical\\_Literacy\\_Practices\\_Understanding\\_Differences\\_to\\_Create\\_Instructional\\_Opportunities/link/5cb36733299bf12097664cc7/download](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322664158_Structured_Literacy_and_Typical_Literacy_Practices_Understanding_Differences_to_Create_Instructional_Opportunities/link/5cb36733299bf12097664cc7/download)

**READ: *Science of Reading: Defining Guide* defines what the science of reading is and is not.**

<https://www.thereadingleague.org/what-is-the-science-of-reading/defining-guide-ebook/>

**READ: *The Reading League's Curriculum Evaluation Guidelines 2023* guide curriculum committees through the process of choosing an evidence-aligned curriculum.**

<https://www.thereadingleague.org/curriculum-evaluation-guidelines/>

**READ: *The Reading League Compass* provides reliable and understandable guidance for a variety of targeted stakeholders to ensure their decisions about reading instruction are aligned with the scientific evidence base.**

<https://www.thereadingleague.org/compass/>

**WATCH: *The Impact of Mississippi's Literacy-Based Promotion Act: Lessons Learned from the Front Lines***

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=33KbDS5Km5k>

**WATCH: *Digging Deeper Into the Science of Reading* is a video overview of scientifically-based reading systems by Stephanie Stollar.**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WO2YaLLDu00>

**LISTEN: *Hard Words* (2018 audio documentary) and *Sold a Story* (2023 podcast) by Emily Hanford lay out the historical accounts of reading instruction and how it went so wrong.**

<https://features.apmreports.org/reading/>



### Brenda Warren

Brenda Warren, M.D./Ph.D., was a pediatrician for seven years before becoming a stay-at-home mother to three boys, one of whom has dyslexia. As a school board member from 2004-2022, she became a passionate learner about scientifically-based reading research and Structured Literacy which led to earning a Ph.D. in Education Leadership in 2018. Her dissertation examined barriers preventing scientifically-based reading research from impacting classroom instruction. Brenda continues her advocacy work for Structured Literacy, scientifically-based reading systems, and reading equity for all children from her new home in Jericho, VT, and serves as president of The Reading League—Vermont chapter.

The Reading League Journal is the only peer-reviewed publication focused solely on the science of reading and designed to bridge research-to-practice.

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