Explicit, Systematic Instruction and the Well-Being of Struggling Readers

By Doug Carnine, Ph.D.

Professor Emeritus, University of Oregon

President, Choose Kindness Foundation

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A Brief for Policymakers and Educators
Explicit, systematic instruction is essential for the well-being of struggling readers because it gives them the best chance to experience success rather than repeated failure. That matters not only for reading achievement, but also for confidence, motivation, behavior, mental health, and long-term life outcomes.

What Explicit, Systematic Instruction Means

Explicit Instruction

Students are directly taught:

- **What the skill is**
- **How to do it**
- **When to apply it**
- **What correct performance looks like**

Systematic Instruction

Skills are taught in an intentional sequence:

- **Prerequisite skills before advanced skills**
- **Easier tasks before harder ones**
- **Cumulative review to support retention**
- **Enough guided practice to build mastery**

This kind of instruction is especially important in reading, where struggling students often do not infer key patterns on their own.

Why It Matters for Struggling Readers

I. It Reduces Confusion and Frustration

When instruction is vague, inconsistent, or left to discovery, struggling readers are more likely to fall behind. Explicit, systematic instruction reduces that burden by making learning clearer and more predictable.

This helps students experience:

- **Less confusion**

- **Fewer repeated errors**
- **More successful practice**
- **Lower frustration**

II. It Builds Real Reading Competence

Struggling readers often need direct instruction in:

Phonemic Awareness

Phonics

Decoding

Word Recognition

Fluency

Vocabulary

Comprehension

Without clear and sequenced teaching in these areas, many students develop weak or compensating habits rather than strong reading skills.

III. It Protects Confidence and Self-respect

Repeated reading failure often becomes personal. Students may begin to believe:

- **"I'm not good at school"**
- **"I'm behind everyone else"**
- **"No matter what I do, it won't work."**
- **Instruction that produces visible progress helps replace those beliefs with:**
- **"I can improve."**
- **"Effort helps."**
- **"I am capable of learning."**

IV. It Reduces Shame, Anxiety, and Avoidance

Reading difficulty can lead to:

- **Fear of reading aloud**
- **Embarrassment in class**
- **School avoidance**
- **Acting out to hide weakness**
- **Withdrawal and low participation**

Effective instruction reduces these risks by helping students experience competence instead of chronic failure.

V. It Increases Motivation

Students are more motivated when they can see that effort leads to growth. Explicit, systematic instruction supports motivation because it:

- **Makes progress more visible**
- **Gives students achievable steps**
- **Improves accuracy and fluency**
- **Helps success occur more often**

VI. It Is Especially Important for Vulnerable Populations

This includes:

- **Students with dyslexia**
- **Students with other reading disabilities**
- **Students from low-income backgrounds**
- **Multilingual learners**
- **Students in under-resourced schools**

For these students, ineffective reading instruction is not a minor setback. It often compounds inequity.

Why This is a Well-Being Issue

Reading is not only an academic skill. It is tied to broader well-being.

When students do not learn to read well, the consequences may include:

- **reduced academic access across subjects**
- **lower confidence**
- **greater emotional stress**
- **behavior problems**
- **social isolation**
- **reduced graduation likelihood**
- **weaker long-term economic opportunity**

When students do learn to read well, the benefits include:

- **stronger self-efficacy**
- **better school engagement**
- **improved emotional stability**
- **greater independence**
- **more hope about the future**

For that reason, explicit, systematic reading instruction should be understood as both an instructional necessity and a student well-being priority.

Implications for Policymakers

Policymakers should ensure that reading policy, funding, and accountability systems support:

- evidence-based early literacy instruction
- explicit and systematic teaching of foundational reading skills

- strong preparation for teachers in reading development and intervention
- early identification and support for struggling readers
- implementation support for schools and districts

If policy requires better reading outcomes, it must also support the kinds of instruction most likely to produce them.

Implications for Educators and School Leaders

Educators and leaders should prioritize:

- clear instructional routines
- cumulative sequencing of reading skills
- regular practice and review
- frequent checks for understanding
- prompt correction of errors
- reading interventions that are structured and evidence-based

Supportive school cultures matter, but struggling readers also need instruction that is precise enough to help them succeed.

Bottom Line

Explicit, systematic instruction matters for the well-being of struggling readers because it turns reading from a source of failure, shame, and confusion into a pathway toward competence, confidence, and hope.

In one sentence

For struggling readers, explicit and systematic instruction is not just good teaching; it is a form of educational protection.

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About the Author(s)

Doug Carnine, Professor Emeritus at the University of Oregon and President of the Eugene-based nonprofit Choose Kindness Foundation, has spent his career helping people thrive. His early work focused on improving outcomes for children who too often struggle in school, especially children in poverty, English learners, and students with disabilities. His scholarly work has been cited in more than 5,000 books and journals worldwide.

He later led national efforts to strengthen the use of evidence in education and received a presidential appointment, confirmed by the U.S. Senate, to the National Institute for Literacy Advisory Board. He also received the Council for Exceptional Children's Lifetime Achievement Award.

Today, through the Choose Kindness Foundation, he works to strengthen well-being in workplaces, schools, prisons, and nonprofits across the United States. This work was honored in a private meeting with His Holiness the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, India.

About the ALLIED Hub

The ALLIED Hub at Drexel University unites research, practice, leadership, community engagement, and policy to support transformational literacy outcomes. Through advocacy, leadership, learning, implementation, education policy, and data, the Hub helps stakeholders make evidence-informed decisions and build effective, coherent, and sustainable literacy systems.