

## EDUCATION

# Advocates say reading training for Oregon teachers a smart investment

Federal pandemic relief money could pay for phonetic-based training

By MEERAH POWELL  
Oregon Public Broadcasting

SALEM — Like many primary teachers, Coral Walker has worked closely with students who struggle to learn how to read.

“I love reading. Reading is really the reason I became a teacher,” Walker said. “But I learned how to read fairly quickly and easily and I never understood how to teach it to kids, and I felt really frustrated knowing that I had some kids that consistently struggled.”

According to the most recent data from the Oregon Department of Education, only 46.5% of third graders were proficient in reading in the 2018-19 school year. That proficiency rate is even lower for students from low-income households.

As the state has received an influx of federal pandemic relief funding, literacy advocates are pushing for change. At the same time, there’s a growing consensus that students could benefit significantly if more teachers in the state went through a training program focused on the science of reading.

That’s what Walker is doing. She is completing the second half of a two-year training called LETRS — Language Essential for Teachers of Reading and Spelling. It’s primarily online, with videos, activities and teaching guides.

She said LETRS has helped her understand the logic behind language as well as different strategies to teach students. The training uses phonics to help children decode words, rather than just exposing them to books and texts to pick up reading on their own, which Walker said was the way she was initially taught to teach reading.

Walker said she started seeing major differences when using those new techniques in 2020 when she was still teaching online.

“It clicked. They’re like, ‘Oh, that’s why you do that.’ Or, ‘Oh, that’s what that means.’” she said. “We had a big gap, and it wasn’t because we didn’t have amazing teachers; it was because we weren’t teaching (students) what they needed.”

Walker has now returned to the classroom, teaching English and Spanish to first graders at Lent K-8 in Southeast Portland.

LETRS has gained popularity across the country, with some states pushing to have as many



Dr. Ronda Fritz, an associate professor at Eastern Oregon University, runs the school's Reading Clinic for both EOU students preparing to be teachers and those already in classrooms. The clinic is training teachers across four counties in Eastern Oregon — Baker, Morrow, Umatilla and Union — on the science of reading.



Coral Walker works on reading skills in her first grade class at Lent Elementary in Southeast Portland, March 29, 2022. Walker uses teaching strategies she's learned in a two-year training called LETRS — Language Essential for Teachers of Reading and Spelling, which she says has helped her understand the logic behind the language.

early elementary educators take the training as possible.

Although some Oregon districts have funded the training on their own, state leaders have not invested in LETRS more broadly even though educators, advocates and a state lawmaker have pushed for it — especially as Oregon has received more than \$1 billion in federal COVID-19 aid funding specifically aimed at K-12 schools. Most of that money, known as Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds, has been allocated to individual school districts, and much of it has not been spent yet.

The state department of education says it has not allocated any of its ESSER funds toward a single literacy training program for teachers, like LETRS, but that individual districts can invest their ESSER funds in those types of programs if they so choose.

## The statewide push

Oregon Rep. Barbara Smith Warner, D-Portland, asked Oregon lawmakers this past legislative session to dedicate more than \$20 million to train teachers on the science of reading. She proposed the money for the teacher training effort could come from the federal ESSER funds — and some of it could go to Eastern Oregon University to expand its partnerships offering college credit to teachers who do the LETRS training.

Smith Warner’s ask was backed by advocacy groups like Oregon Kids Read, but ultimately it was not included in the budget.

“People are nervous about change,” she said, and she says she understands that hesitation but argued, “this is an opportunity to make a really foundational shift in our ability to teach our kids to read.”

Smith Warner had hoped the state would cover the costs of

LETRS training for Oregon’s high-need schools and districts.

“Teacher training is one of the most ideal uses of one-time funding because once you train that teacher they’re always going to have that,” Smith Warner said.

She said Oregon school districts could take this into their own hands and fund training for LETRS, but that’s probably just not a priority right now, with schools still in what she calls “survival mode.”

So, Smith Warner says it makes sense for the state to step up.

“It is something that the state can and should do because it is our job to kind of take that burden off of (school districts) and look a little further,” she said.

But the Oregon Department of Education is not ready to leap into LETRS. In an email to OPB, ODE pointed to a 2009 study that showed LETRS increased teacher knowledge but did not increase the reading test scores of students.

The department noted that Massachusetts, the state with the highest reading scores according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, does not use LETRS statewide.

Even though ODE has not allocated ESSER funds toward LETRS, it says it is dedicating \$4 million in ESSER funds to a “K-5 literacy investment,” which includes revision of Oregon’s K-5 literacy framework, professional development for educators and support for school libraries.

Other states such as Utah and Kansas have dedicated ESSER funds for LETRS training and those states have higher reading scores than Oregon does.

## Wolf killed in Eastern Oregon, officials seek public’s help

Baker City Herald

RICHLAND — Oregon State Police’s Fish and Wildlife Division is asking the public for information about the killing of a wolf near Richland last month.

Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife employees reported to OSP on Friday, March 25, that a wolf wearing a tracking collar was likely dead.

The collars have a feature that sends a signal if they haven’t moved for a significant period of time, suggesting the wolf is dead.

OSP troopers found the dead wolf about 1-1/2 miles east of New Bridge and 2 miles north of Richland.

The wolf, a year-old male, died around March 12-13, according to a press release from OSP.

The release did not say how the wolf died and OSP’s public information office said the agency will not be releasing the manner of death. During the past couple years, OSP has investigated cases where wolves were either shot or poisoned.

The Oregon Wildlife Coalition, a group of wildlife conservation groups, is offering a \$11,500 reward for information that leads to an arrest or citation in connection with the most recent wolf killing.

## Baker County commissioners approve drought disaster declaration

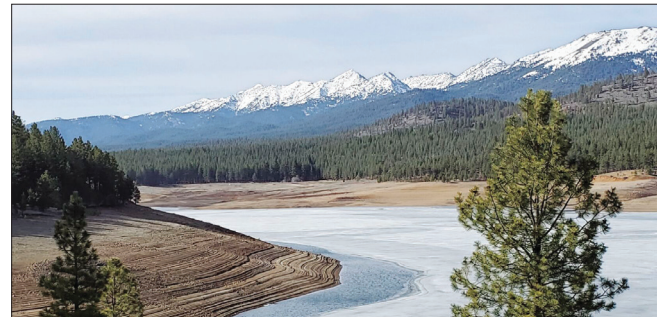
Baker City Herald

BAKER CITY — Baker County commissioners on Wednesday, April 6, approved a resolution declaring a drought disaster in the county and asking Gov. Kate Brown and federal officials to follow suit.

Commissioners passed the resolution one day shy of one year since they approved a nearly identical document, on April 7, 2021.

State and federal drought declarations could make county property owners eligible for financial aid and other assistance, and give state water regulators more flexibility in allocating water.

According to the U.S. Drought Monitor, 84% of Baker County is in extreme drought, the second most severe in a four-level rating system, behind only exceptional drought.



Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald, File

Phillips Reservoir still had a thin ice layer on Friday, March 25, 2022. The ice has since melted, but the reservoir remains severely depleted by drought, holding just 10% of its capacity in early April 2022.

## Grande Ronde Hospital & Clinics proudly welcomes Andrew Oh, MD—Neurologist



“Some of us seem to face more than our fair share of life’s challenges. Having a neurological condition is certainly a challenge, but having a neurological condition is also more common than you might think. Worldwide about 1 in 6 persons suffer from at least one neurological disorder. Although I’m a specialist, I specialize in problems that are widespread among us.

My goal as your neurologist will be to find the underlying cause of the neurological symptoms that bother you, and do whatever possible to ameliorate their effects. Not all neurological conditions are treatable but I always focus on trying to find the treatable ones and minimizing their effects.”

**Dr. Oh’s Professional interests:** Migraine, dizziness and vertigo, general neurology, neuroimaging.

**Dr. Oh’s Personal interests:** Family time, dogs, cats, and tinkering in the shed.

Please help us welcome Dr. Oh and his Family to our Community!!



GRH.org — 700 Sunset Drive — 541.963.1919

GRH Neurology Clinic

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