

# Training focuses on the science of reading

Phonics to help decode words

By MEERAH POWELL  
Oregon Public Broadcasting

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.

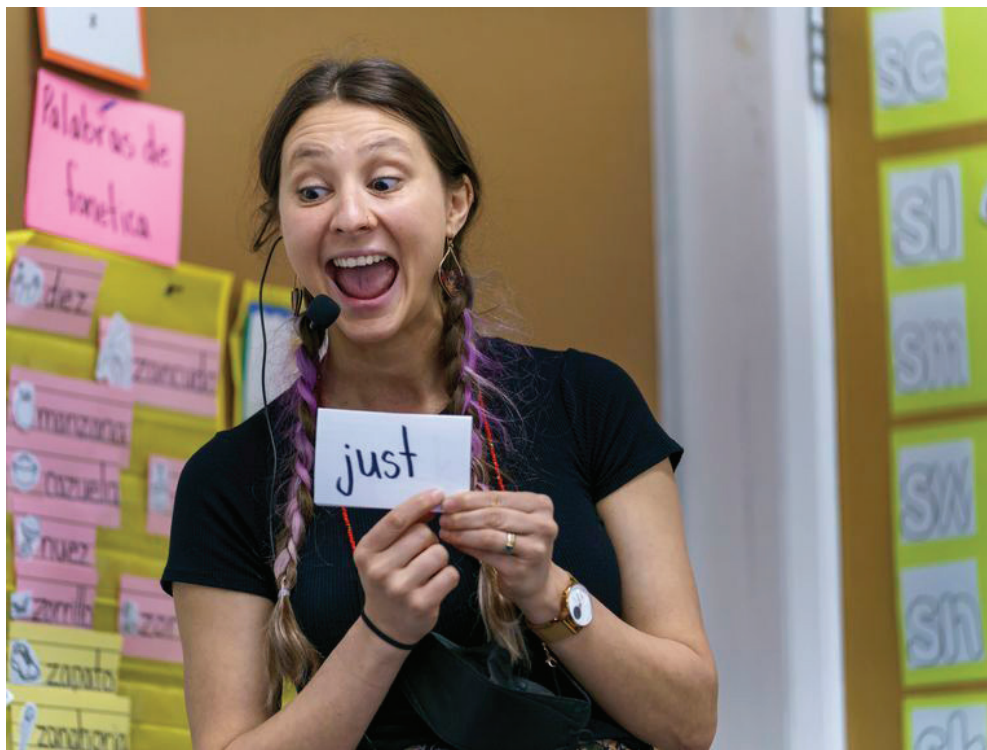
Walker said she started seeing major differences when using those new techniques in 2020 when she was still teaching online.

"It clicked. They're like, 'Oh, that's why you do that.' Or, 'Oh, that's what that means,'" Walker said, "which means that we had a big gap, and it wasn't because we didn't have amazing teachers; it was because we weren't teaching them what they needed."

Walker has now returned to the classroom, teaching English and Spanish to first graders at Lent Elementary in southeast Portland.

LETRS has gained popularity across the country, with some states pushing to have as many early elementary educators take the training as possible.

Although some Oregon school 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 spe-



Kristyna Wentz-Graff/Oregon Public Broadcasting

Coral Walker works on reading skills in her first grade class at Lent Elementary in southeast Portland.

cifically aimed at K-12 schools. Most of that money, known as Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief 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 relief funds toward a single literacy training program for teachers, like LETRS, but that individual districts can invest their funds in those types of programs if they so choose.

And some districts have.

Portland Public Schools, where Walker teaches, has said it is planning to use some of the one-time federal funds for LETRS. It has already offered the training to its educators in a partnership with Eastern Oregon University where teachers can get credit through the university toward a reading certificate.

Other districts in the Portland area, like Reynolds, are doing the same.

State Rep. Barbara Smith Warner, D-Portland, said she has advocated in recent legislative sessions for LETRS to be offered throughout Oregon — specifically at schools that serve students from lower-income families.

"If you have this program that literally, fundamentally is more effective at teaching kids how to read, and that is the key thing, why would you not give every teacher in every school for every kid the opportunity to do that?" Smith Warner said.

### The statewide push

Smith Warner asked 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 relief 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. 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 highest-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 that school districts could take this into their own hands and fund training for LETRS, but that's probably not a priority right now, with school 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 Department of Education is not

ready to leap into LETRS. In an email to Oregon Public Broadcasting, the department 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 the state has not allocated relief funds toward LETRS, it says it is dedicating \$4 million in relief 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 relief funds for LETRS training and those states have higher reading scores than Oregon does.

### More than just LETRS

The Department of Education acknowledged that the LETRS program is shown to improve what teachers understand about the science of reading.

"Teachers report an increase in their own self-awareness and capacity around teaching reading," the department said.

But, the department said, LETRS is not the end-all, be-all for improving the state's literacy rates.

"LETRS training should exist within a comprehensive literacy plan and framework that includes a focus on student belonging, high-quality and culturally responsive instructional materials, strong formative assessment practices, and family engagement," the Department of Education said.

The department said it is interested in the potential difference training like LETRS could make throughout the state, and said the state plans to study the effectiveness of LETRS, with results due in the fall of 2023.

Back at Lent Elementary, Walker said LETRS is a big time commitment. Although she gets extended pay to complete the training, it's on her own free time, outside of her days at school. She's also working on her own to use some of the strategies LETRS has taught her in English to adapt techniques to teaching in Spanish.

But, she said it's worth it, especially if there's statewide support for teachers to take it.

"I really do believe it does need to happen on a state level, not just Portland Public Schools, not just certain cities, but rather it needs to happen statewide too, to support all of our students," Walker said.

"We can't just sit here and continue doing something that we know doesn't work."



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