

**SmartFocus** on supporting students who struggle to read

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# 4 steps to strengthen students' reading skills

**A LOOK AT HOW TEACHERS CAN  
HELP SUPPORT RELUCTANT  
AND STRUGGLING READERS IN  
GRADES 4 AND UP**



A large amount of time and resources are allocated to ensuring that students are reaching grade-level reading expectations year after year. Statistics show that many students are reading below grade level -- with other studies showing that interrupted school routines during the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the issue.



When all of these factors are taken into account, it's no surprise that [learning to read is a challenge for almost 40% of kids](#). Yet, the traditional window of “learning to read” often associated with grades K-3 is not the only time educators can make a positive impact on students’ reading success. Strengthening reading skills, building reading confidence and giving students the tools they need to improve reading comprehension in grades 4 and up can lead to continued academic and life gains.

So what are the best ways to support reading growth in students in grades 4 and up? This paper looks at a few tried-and-true methods of reaching readers throughout their K-12 careers.

## SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH READING NEEDS

Reading skills affect all areas of life and are essential for success. The good news is that there are several different approaches that help students make the reading gains they need.

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## When Kids Can't Read, revisited

There is no one way to help a struggling reader and, depending on the student, varied approaches may work best. That's the truth that the new, revised *When Kids Can't Read* by Kylee Beers addresses. Within its pages, teachers will find guidance around several different approaches that help students, including:

- Using context clues, word parts and phonics rules effectively.
- Inferring meaning and extending understanding.
- Developing confidence in abilities as a reader.
- Engaging thoughtfully with a text and with other readers. ■

### #1: ENCOURAGE MISTAKE-MAKING, STUDENT OWNERSHIP

Every educator knows that students' motivation drops when they face academic challenges.

According to the [Annie E. Casey Foundation](#), more than 6 million US children will experience negative personal, academic and social outcomes every year as a result of poor reading skills. This fact reiterates the importance of positive reinforcement and celebrating successes. Teachers can apply this to reading scenarios by:

- Empowering vulnerability and mistake-making. When students feel safe in trying new learning activities – and pushing their own limits – they take learning risks that can pay off. Feeling intimidated by learning to read, or strengthening reading skills, is a feeling many students experience, well beyond the early childhood years. Teachers who encourage imperfection will see greater reading gains in their classrooms. Moreover, a phenomenon called the [derring effect](#) shows that making mistakes can actually improve memory of the topic at hand.
- Giving students choice in reading materials. Students will want to learn more about subjects that interest them, so teachers should give them decision-making power in what they read. [Research finds](#) that self-selected reading is twice as powerful as teacher-selected reading when it comes to motivation and comprehension.
- Offering transparency. Giving students insight into their reading progress offers intrinsic, cyclical reinforcement of development and literacy growth. Students like to see themselves succeeding, so they are motivated to keep trying when they see their progress and success. Alternatively, knowing where they need more work or time on reading skills can ease a sense of frustration and help make a detailed plan.

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## #2: CONTINUE TO READ ALOUD

It's not just pre-K and younger students who benefit from read-aloud components to literacy. Older students can continue to glean the benefits of a read-aloud activity, including an increased vocabulary, strengthened active listening and greater enjoyment of reading.

Studies have found that:

- Reading aloud [reduces stress](#) and makes people feel more relaxed.
- Reading aloud [prompts conversations](#) that can help children deal with real-life situations.
- Reading aloud [reinforces new reading skills](#), fluency and vocabulary while nurturing children's social, emotional and mental health.

As students strengthen reading skills throughout their K-12 journey, they can become part of the read-aloud activity. Teachers can call on "guest readers," or even have students act out portions of stories, allowing them the chance to read aloud and interact with the material in front of them.

## #3: PROVIDE PERSONALIZED LEARNING PATHS FOR READING

A [study](#) from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation that analyzed 11,000 students found that great things can happen when teachers offer personalized learning experiences that meet each student's individual needs. The study found that:

- Learner profiles helped teachers better identify which learning options would best fit each student and gave greater insight into their individual paths.
- Students made significant gains in mathematics and reading over the course of two years of personalized learning paths developed from assessment data.
- The longer students experienced personalized learning practices, the greater their growth in achievement.

Tapping student assessment data and other insights, such as their progress in class, with the help of technology can assist teachers in developing personalized learning options for reading. Through adaptive, intuitive technology, data is obtained as students work to help identify who could benefit from additional reading support. This information can be shared with teachers, and even parents, to help create customized learning plans that address literacy gaps. This technology ensures that each student has a self-paced, personalized learning path.

It is crucial that all students who struggle with reading get the help and support they need for maximum literacy.

## #4: OFFER THE CORRECT LEVEL OF SCAFFOLDING

[The National Literacy Institute](#) says that students who face reading challenges also struggle socially and emotionally. Teachers can ease students into stronger reading independence through scaffolding or instructional techniques that guide students to deeper understanding and eventual learning independence. Sometimes referred to simply as “strategies,” this additional layer of support for struggling readers can reduce discouragement and frustration and help them develop confidence in their reading ability.

According to Kylene Beers, author of the extensively rewritten new edition of *When Kids Can't Read – What Teachers Can Do*, “Scaffolds, or strategies, bring our invisible thinking out to a visible level. Some scaffolds are teacher centered and those are activities kids will in all likelihood never do on their own ... Other scaffolds are for students to use on their own with any text.

“As we use those scaffolds, we see that students are improving what many have called reading skills: finding the main idea; recognizing details; sequencing events; distinguishing fact and opinion; comparing and contrasting; making cause-and-effect relationships,” Beers writes.

Teachers who incorporate educational scaffolding can provide successful levels of support, giving students the chance to ask questions and participate as they learn. The support levels are removed in small increments as the student no longer needs them, shifting more responsibility of the learning process to the student. Educational scaffolding helps teachers provide successful levels of support to students. As a result, students take ownership of their learning.

It is crucial that all students who struggle with reading get the help and support they need for maximum literacy. The extensively rewritten new edition of [When Kids Can't Read – What Teachers Can Do](#) by Kylene Beers is a guide for educators who teach students who struggle with reading. The guidebook offers easy-to-implement strategies in the areas of comprehension, engagement, fluency and vocabulary development.

Learn more about the new edition of *When Kids Can't Read – What Teachers Can Do* [Download a sample chapter from the book.](#) ■



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