# Massachusetts debates literacy education reform with diverse views on curricula and teaching methods



Discussions continue to intensify in Massachusetts over how best to approach literacy education, with a particular focus on the debate surrounding balanced literacy and the use of specific teaching curricula. Recent letters to The Boston Globe from educators and parents reveal a range of perspectives on the state's renewed efforts to reform literacy instruction.

Becca Burk, an elementary educator, writer, and literacy advocate from Leeds, Maine, expressed cautious support for a move towards evidence-based reading practices, while warning against oversimplifying the issue by dismissing balanced literacy outright. In her letter, Burk emphasised that balanced literacy, which integrates explicit phonics instruction alongside vocabulary development, comprehension, and engaging reading experiences, rests on research-supported practices beneficial to many learners. She cautioned against trends favouring programmes heavily dependent on screens, rigid workbooks, and scripted lessons, which often lack differentiation and a coherent instructional scope and sequence. According to Burk, such approaches risk narrowing instruction, undermining teacher expertise, and failing to prioritise student needs. "No program can succeed without time, support, and high-quality professional development," she highlighted, urging that literacy reform should centre on equipping, rather than blaming teachers, and foster professional learning and instructional flexibility.

Also contributing was Peter Cipparone, head of The Croft School in Jamaica Plain, who voiced concerns over a legislative bill mandating Massachusetts school districts to adopt from a limited set of literacy curricula. Cipparone reflected on his experience with the Units of Study series during his time as a fourth-grade teacher in New York in the mid-2010s. He described the series' reading workshop approach as effective and enriched by high-quality children's literature and book clubs. He noted that the curriculum's authors have since addressed earlier critiques by enhancing phonics instruction. Cipparone expressed apprehension that a mandate might force schools and districts to abandon materials that have proven successful for their students with appropriate adaptations. Warning against viewing literacy reform as a quest for quick fixes, he cautioned that relying on common textbooks might reduce interest and challenge for many pupils. He also raised practical concerns about the financial implications of repeatedly switching mandated materials if educational trends shift over time.

Addressing the foundational aspect of literacy, Greta Lee Splansky from Framingham emphasised the importance of early childhood language experiences in supporting reading development. She pointed out that exposure to songs, stories, and face-to-face conversations during infancy and toddlerhood helps children build spoken vocabulary and understand links between spoken and written words. Splansky advocated for incorporating support for parents, day-care providers, and preschool teachers to engage young children in extensive language-rich interactions during the critical first two years of life, suggesting that literacy reform initiatives should include programs to assist caregivers in this vital early vocabulary development.

Adding a personal perspective on phonics instruction, a contributor under the pseudonym Veritas 2 shared an account of successfully teaching their son to read 25 years ago using the Hooked on Phonics programme. They described the programme’s combination of printed flashcards and audio recordings of letter and phonics pronunciations as effective in helping their son learn to read, spell, and pronounce words correctly, despite his initial preference for leisure activities like watching TV or playing games.

These varied viewpoints highlight ongoing debates within Massachusetts and beyond about the best strategies to strengthen literacy education, balancing structured phonics instruction with broader approaches that consider student engagement, teacher expertise, and early childhood language development. As legislative discussions progress, stakeholders continue to weigh the benefits and drawbacks of curriculum mandates and instructional methodologies in striving to improve reading outcomes.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

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2. <https://www.boston25news.com/news/25-investigates/25-investigates-lawmakers-advocates-want-revamp-reading-instruction-mass-schools/ZKRNWX645BEMVEYWLXCODOZBOA/> - The article supports the idea that literacy reform is a pressing issue in Massachusetts, with proposals to revamp reading instruction and address issues like below-grade reading levels.
3. <https://www.cbsnews.com/pittsburgh/news/literacy-materials-dropped-by-many-schools-face-new-pressure-from-struggling-readers-parents-2/> - This piece mentions a lawsuit related to literacy materials in Massachusetts, adding to the broader context of literacy debates involving parents and educational policies.
4. <https://malegislature.gov/Bills/193/SD1751> - This legislation supports the push for high-quality comprehensive literacy instruction in Massachusetts schools, aligning with discussions about curriculum mandates and reform.
5. <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/the-science-of-reading-in-2024-5-state-initiatives-to-watch/2024/01> - The article discusses Gov. Maura Healey's proposed Literacy Launch program in Massachusetts, focusing on evidence-based reading instruction and professional development for teachers.
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7. <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2025/04/26/opinion/letters-to-the-editor-literacy-overhaul-proposed-mass/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data