



The Joy of Reading Doesn't Just Happen—But Districts Can Make It Far More Likely

By Lynne Kulich, Ph.D.



Most educators and leaders agree on the goal: **students who can read well and want to read often.**

But in many schools, the challenge extends beyond helping students “crack the code.” It also includes sustaining the habits, confidence, and motivation that turn reading into a lifelong skill.

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That’s where the joy of reading matters – not as a nice-to-have, but as a meaningful driver of volume, stamina, and long-term growth.

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Reading is both a skill and an experience

In general, reading is a multidimensional process with two important purposes.

- **Efferent reading** is focused on extracting information – reading to learn, understand, and apply knowledge.
- **Aesthetic reading** is focused on the experience – reading to feel, connect, reflect, and engage.

In an ideal system, students develop both. They can read to learn, and they also experience reading as something worth returning to. But even the best-stocked, most accessible library won’t be enough without a foundation strong enough to support fluency, comprehension, and confidence.



What it takes to create joyful, capable readers

Many systems still treat reading achievement and reading engagement as separate goals, when in reality, one depends on the other. Without strong instruction, reading feels difficult. Without volume and engagement, growth stalls.

When students struggle to read fluently, reading rarely feels joyful. And even students who can read may not choose to, especially when distractions and competing demands are constant.

To build students who read widely and willingly, districts must support three core conditions:

1. Evidence-based instruction that builds automaticity and comprehension

We know reading is not natural. We know it must be taught. That's why explicit, systematic instruction remains essential, particularly in the early grades.

Learning to recognize written words by linking phonemes to graphemes is a critical first step toward automaticity (Ehri, 1995). Strong decoding instruction supports the foundation described in the Simple View of Reading: reading comprehension depends on both **decoding** and **language comprehension** (Gough & Tunmer, 1986).



The problem is, decoding alone isn't enough. Students still need intentional support to build:

- vocabulary and oral language
- background knowledge
- comprehension strategies
- opportunities to discuss and make meaning from text

As Seidenberg (2017) emphasizes, children’s spoken language knowledge strongly predicts early reading success. It’s only when districts invest in both sides of the equation – decoding and [language comprehension](#) – that they build readers who can access complex texts and learn from them.

2. Habits and access that increase time spent reading

Like any skill, reading improves through consistent practice. Just as skilled reading depends on both decoding and language comprehension.

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Building a reading habit rests on two equally important pillars: access and opportunity.

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Independent reading is valuable, but instructional time must remain protected for the highest-impact practices: phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension instruction, and meaningful discussion (Shanahan, 2016). At the same time, students need access to books and time to read outside of direct instruction, at school and at home.

The point becomes even more pressing when we recognize that over the past two decades, reading for pleasure has declined significantly (Sonke & Fancourt et al., 2025). For many students, the issue isn’t willingness – it’s that reading no longer fits naturally into their daily routines.

Districts can address this by ensuring:

- consistent access to high-interest texts
- structured routines that support independent reading
- encouragement that makes reading feel attainable (not like another assignment)





3. Less scrolling, more “time in text”

Students need time in text to build vocabulary, knowledge, and the mental schemas that support comprehension. Books and rich nonfiction texts build knowledge in sustained, connected ways – something short-form content rarely replicates.

When students spend most of their free time scrolling, they may be consuming information, but they are not building the same reading stamina or background knowledge that long-form reading develops.

It makes sense that many states and districts are now exploring more practical, common-sense device policies. The goal is not to remove technology (an impossible scenario anyway), but to protect students’ attention and learning time. It’s the kind of message that should be on banners:

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Less time in tech. More time in text.

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What district leaders can do now

District leaders don’t need a new initiative to improve reading outcomes. What they need instead is a stronger, more coherent system.

Consider these practical, high-impact moves that support both achievement and engagement:

- **Protect Tier 1 instructional time** for explicit reading instruction and structured practice
- **Strengthen coherence** across classrooms so students receive consistent foundational instruction

- **Build language comprehension intentionally** through knowledge-building texts, vocabulary, and discussion
- **Increase access to texts** that students can read successfully and want to read repeatedly
- **Monitor growth and participation** using data that teachers can act on, not just reports that sit unused
- **Support healthy reading routines** by reducing distractions and protecting attention

When these conditions are in place, joy becomes far more likely. It emerges organically – not through mandates (students aren’t told that reading is fun) – but because reading becomes possible and rewarding to every learner.

Where you’ll find the “reading class”

If these conditions sound familiar, the question becomes: how do you implement them consistently across classrooms and schools?

[Reading Eggs](#), our engaging, evidence-based reading program grounded in [the Science of Reading](#), is designed to support explicit, systematic instruction so students develop the skills to decode automatically and comprehend increasingly complex text – and it does so in as little as 20 minutes of weekly use, giving students better outcomes while reducing screen time. Through assessments and reporting, educators can identify where students are struggling and respond with targeted instruction and practice.

And because joy is fueled partly by access and volume, students can explore a broad collection of over 4,000 fiction and nonfiction texts for every reading level (including hundreds of decodable readers) that support reading stamina, curiosity, and knowledge-building.



The real gift of reading

Early in my career, I taught first grade. One parent shared something I have never forgotten: although she had graduated high school, she had only learned to read the year before. When she finished her first novel, she cried. She wasn't sad, she just had never experienced what it felt like to live inside a story.

"I never expected to cry," she told me.
"No one ever told me that could happen."

That is the true gift of reading.

When districts invest in strong instruction, consistent routines, and meaningful access to text, students gain far more than a mechanical skill. They gain a lifelong source of knowledge, connection, and possibility. Let's ensure every student has that opportunity.





About the author

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A national literacy leader, keynote speaker and best-selling author, Dr. Lynne Kulich partners with districts, states and organizations to translate the science of reading into practical, classroom-ready instruction. Her work focuses on high-quality core instruction, data-driven intervention and building systems that support sustainable literacy outcomes for all students.

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