

Essex Year of Reading Roundtable

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EDUCATION
POLICY
INSTITUTE

Research Area:
Social Mobility and
Vulnerable Learners



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Introduction

The Education Policy Institute chaired a roundtable with headteachers, teachers, special educational needs coordinators, and local authority representatives from across Essex in March 2023, to discuss lessons learned during the Year of Reading and how to carry forward the positive legacy of the programme.

Below is a summary of the discussion with additional information provided in text boxes.

Essex Year of Reading

The Year of Reading comprised a number of initiatives, including evidence-based interventions to improve reading skills. The full list of programmes including descriptions is available [here](#).

The stated aim of the Year of Reading was for all primary schools to strive for 11-year-old children to attain a 'reading age' which matched their chronological age and for all secondary schools to push for pupils at 16+ to read in line with their age; as part of this, schools should track reading ages through primary and secondary.

Currently around three quarters of primary and secondary pupils in Essex meet the expected reading standard at key stage 2 and key stage 4 respectively, comparable to the national average.

There was consensus amongst attendees that the Year of Reading programmes targeted at improving reading skills had had a positive impact. Two of these programmes were the focus of discussions; these programmes and their impact are summarised below.

Year of Reading interventions

▪ Thinking Reading

School staff are coached to deliver this 1:1 reading intervention in secondary schools which uses a range of phonic, etymology and comprehension strategies to develop reading skills. This intervention is targeted at young people who have a reading age and a chronological age which are more than two years apart. Young people are identified through standardised testing, complete intervention testing and are then taught 1:1 for 30 minutes, three times per week. The young people remain on the programme until their reading age and comprehension age match.

The Task Force match-funded **six schools** to complete the training and delivery of the Thinking Reading intervention. Pupils were selected for the programme if they had at least a two-year gap between their chronological age and reading age. This was measured three times:

- The whole year group was screened using a package such as STAR;¹
- Pupils in the bottom 20 per cent were tested again using NGRT2 or other package;
- Pupils in the bottom 20 per cent were tested again using PROBE to place on the programme.
- The programme was then delivered and PROBE and NGRT2 are used again to check impact.

The Thinking Reading programme was cited by attendees as having a positive impact on reading ability; data from one school implementing the programme showed over five months of progress on average, per session, for young people.

- **Herts for Learning**

A total of **57 schools**, 45 primary and 12 secondary schools, implemented the programme; a total of 124 had initially expressed interest but dropped out due to Ofsted inspections, pandemic closures and

	Schools	Pupils	Dropout
KS2	45	311	10.6%
KS3	12	73	26.0%
Total	57	384	13.5%

staff turnover and absence. A total of 384 pupils enrolled in the programme (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Participants in the Herts for Learning programme

This is a small group reading intervention that focuses on improving reading comprehension through decoding fluency and prosody. The intervention lasts eight weeks and consists of two 30-minute sessions. The first session focusses on prosody – this allows the development of the inner-voice, the inner picture and brings decoding to fluency level. The young people then read the passage again three times before the next taught session. As decoding is fluent, the working memory has further capacity to focus on comprehension. Session two involves teaching and developing comprehension strategies and using these to answer questions.

It was reported by the Essex Education Task Force that following an eight-week intervention, 80 per cent of young people enrolled in the programme in Essex schools had made more than four months' progress and 77 per cent made more than 6 months' progress. The Task Force reported that at key stage 2, the average reading comprehension age increased by two years and two months, and the average reading fluency age increased by one year and two months, while at key stage 3, average comprehension age increased by one year and one month, and average fluency age increased by 10 months.

Barriers to implementation

There followed a discussion of the barriers to implementing interventions and improving pupil outcomes. These included:

- **Staffing pressures**

¹ STAR, NGRT and PROBE are commercial assessment packages used to assess reading ability. They vary in their outputs but typically provide data on norm referenced scores (allowing national and age cohort comparisons) and reading age. STAR is owned by Renaissance Learning, NGRT (New Group Reading Test) is owned by GL assessment and PROBE (Prose Reading Observation, Behaviour and Evaluation) is owned by Triune Initiatives.

It was noted that schools can be reluctant to release staff to be trained, and that school leaders need to be shown that releasing a teacher for a short period of time can have a long-term benefit for teaching reading skills in the school. The example of teachers doing the Herts for Learning training and cascading this training was mentioned.

▪ **Short-term incentives**

Attendees brought up examples of teachers participating in training prior to an Ofsted inspection, with the goal of improving inspection scores. There was concern that interventions were not being applied consistently by teachers, that children were not being assessed repeatedly to measure the impact of programmes, and that some teachers believe the programmes are very prescriptive and that if they deviate at all they will not be effective.

It was noted that a change in attitudes in secondary schools is happening, and they are getting better at ensuring interventions are targeted at the children most in need and are implemented in an ongoing way.

▪ **Proving the effectiveness of costly interventions**

Given the high cost of these programmes, there was concern around how to effectively communicate the benefits to headteachers, senior leadership teams, and the wider school community. As part of this, there was discussion of how best to support teachers and heads in making the case for implementing programmes. Attendees proposed using both data and stories to do so, including:

- emphasising the impact on young people – and not just that these programmes upskill teachers – and schools’ duty of care, and engendering a whole school approach to provide a solid start in reading and enhance children’s outcomes
- using internal data to show the impact of interventions on a range of important outcomes including self-esteem, school avoidance / attendance, exclusions, and behaviour; one example was cited of a headteacher being convinced of the benefit of the programme this way.
- showcasing the impact of not intervening by building the evidence base, including case studies comparing schools over time who do and don’t implement interventions, and the impact on pupil outcomes.
- using the ‘right’ measure to determine which pupils need support – there was broad support for the NGRT as the measure schools should be using.

▪ **A lack of focus on early intervention**

Attendees highlighted the need for early intervention and support as many pupils’ reading difficulties are already present by the time they reach secondary school. The need for support during transitions between years was mentioned, and an example given of children who struggle during the transition between year 2 and year 3 because they move from reading picture books to books containing only text.

Next steps for the Essex Education Task Force

There was some discussion of actions for the Task Force and schools in Essex to take forward, including:

- **Building the case** for implementing interventions using data on impact and long-term cost effectiveness, and for schools to continue to implement effective interventions once the Year of Reading funding runs out. To ensure that the YoR reading skills programmes are targeted effectively and reduce inequalities in education outcomes, the EETF should consider how to recruit schools which have a higher proportion of disadvantaged pupils and may have more significant budget or staff time constraints.
- Considering how to **scale up interventions while ensuring that effectiveness is maintained**.
- Implementing **standardised testing of reading ability** across Essex. There was general consensus that a measure of 'reading age' was the approach schools should use.

Roundtable attendees

Jon Andrews (Chair)	Head of Analysis – Education Policy Institute
Roy Blatchford	EETF Chair
Al Joseph	Researcher – Education Policy Institute
Daniel Gee	ECC, Education Strategy and Policy Consultant
Sharon Jenner	Head of Roding Valley School
Clare Kershaw	EETF, Director ECC Education Directorate
Vic Goddard	Head of Passmores Academy
Martin Solder	EETF, Voluntary Sector
Harriet Phelps-Knights	EETF, Primary School Sector
Sonia Barber	EETF, Reading Steering Group
Jody Gee	Head of Anglo-European School
Carole Herman	EETF, Secondary School Sector
Tony Taylor	EETF, Reading Steering Group
Andrew Sheldon	ECC Councillor, Deputy to Tony Ball
Justine McFarlane	EETF, Reading Steering Group
Rachel Pritchard	EETF, Reading Steering Group
Linda Robinson	EETF, Governance Sector
Anita Kemp	EETF, Head of Strategy Planning and Performance
Catherine Hutley	ECC Assistant Director of Education
Jonathan Boddam-Whetham	ECC, Senior Strategy Advisor
Tony Ball	EETF, ECC Cabinet Member
Ian Fisher	EETF, ECC Development Officer