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Phonics and Mississippi Reading Test Scores.

Emily Hanford proclaims that “There Is a Right Way to Teach Reading, and Mississippi Knows It” (Dec. 5): According to Hanford, Mississippi’s grade 4 reading scores increased on a national reading test (the NAEP) because in 2013 the state started training teachers to use more phonics in teaching reading.

Hanford does not mention that Mississippi’s “Literacy-Based Promotion Act” provided “intensive reading instruction and intervention” only for students identified as having reading problems. Yet, reading scores for good readers improved just as much as scores of poor readers, even though good readers were not targeted by the new law.

The new law also forced third graders who did not show satisfactory improvement to repeat third grade. This produces the illusion of improvement in the fourth grade: As Peter Greene (Forbes, Nov. 2) noted, it's like holding back all the short third graders and then bragging about how tall fourth grades have become: It is possible that there was no actual gain.

This does not, of course, explain why good readers also improved. Perhaps they improved for the same reason scores in Mississippi have gone up in general since 1998, with significant increases between 2005 and 2008 without a phonics-intensive Literacy Act.

The phonics explanation is not as simple as Hansford suggests it is.

Stephen Krashen

Original article: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/05/opinion/mississippi-schools-naep.html>