

### What Helps Children Learn to Read?

Everyone has an idea about how best to teach reading to children. Some advocate a phonetic approach, teaching students to “sound out” words. Some advocate a “whole language” approach, teaching students to recognize words from their context. Others advocate a combination of these approaches—or something else entirely. These differing ideas would be unimportant if they were merely opinions. But in a nation that spends roughly a *trillion dollars* per year on education, differing approaches to teaching reading involve major political confrontations among groups with different special interests. A change in politics can cause a sudden change in school policies. For example, in 1998, the California legislature passed laws making public school funding contingent upon the school’s moving away from a whole language approach to reading.

The huge stakes involved in teaching reading demand statistics to measure the effectiveness of various approaches. Politically, at least, the most important educational statistics are those that come from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), often known more simply as “the Nation’s Report Card.” The NAEP is an ongoing survey of student achievement conducted by a government agency, the National Center for Education Statistics, with authorization and funding from the U.S. Congress.

The NAEP uses stratified random sampling (see Chapter 1) to choose representative samples of 4th-, 8th-, and 12th-grade students of varying ethnicity, family income, type of school attended, and so on. Students chosen for the samples are given tests designed to measure their academic achievement in a particular subject area, such as reading, mathematics, or history. Samples are chosen on both state and national levels. Overall, a few thousand students are chosen for each test. Results from NAEP tests inevitably make the newspaper, with articles touting improvements or decrying drops in test scores. They also have political impact. For example, California’s move away from whole language occurred after its rank on the NAEP tests was 45th among the 50 states.

But what really causes improvement in reading performance? Researchers begin by searching for correlations between reading performance and other factors. Sometimes the correlations are clear, but offer no direction for improving reading. For example, parental education is clearly correlated with reading achievement: Children with more highly educated parents tend to read more proficiently than those with uneducated parents. But this correlation doesn’t offer much guidance for the schools, since children cannot replace their parents. Other times the correlations may suggest ways to improve reading. For example, students who report reading more pages daily in school and for homework tend to score higher than students who read fewer pages. This suggests that schools should assign more reading.

Of course, the high stakes involved in education make education statistics particularly prone to misinterpretation or misuse. Consider just a few of the problems that make the NAEP reading tests difficult to interpret:

- They are “standardized tests” that are the same for all students tested and tend to be mostly multiple choice. Some people believe that such tests are inevitably biased and cannot truly measure reading ability.

