From Success to Setback: The Rise and Fall of Reading Initiatives in Texas and California

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In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Texas and California implemented ambitious statewide-reading initiatives to address declining literacy rates. Both initiatives—the Texas Reading Initiative and California's late-1990s Reading Initiative—were rooted in evidence-based practices and demonstrated promising results. Despite the improvements in many school districts, however, these initiatives were abandoned. This paper explores the reasons for their discontinuation and highlights lessons that can inform future literacy reforms.

The Texas Reading Initiative

The Texas Reading Initiative, launched in 1996 under Governor George W. Bush and supported by members of the business community, aimed to ensure that all Texas children could read at or above grade level by third grade. The program emphasized:

- **Research-Based Instruction:** Specifically, [12 essential research-based components of beginning reading instruction](#).
- **Teacher Training:** Comprehensive professional development to equip educators with evidence-based reading strategies.
- **Early Intervention:** Targeted early support for struggling readers through additional resources and remediation.
- **Assessment and Accountability:** Regular monitoring of student progress to evaluate the effectiveness of instruction.

The initiative led to significant improvements in reading scores, particularly for low-income and minority students. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) showed that Texas students outperformed national averages in some grades and subjects during the program's peak years (Hoff, 2006; Klein et al., 2000; Wicks & McKenzie, 2023).

The California Reading Initiative

California's late-1990s Reading Initiative arose in response to a literacy crisis exacerbated when the California Department of Education endorsed whole-language instruction in the late 1980s. By 1994, California's reading scores ranked near the bottom nationally, prompting the state to adopt a more research-aligned approach to literacy instruction, emphasizing phonics alongside comprehension strategies, and to pour money into a reading initiative focused on kindergarten through grade 3 (Anderson & Helfand, 1998; Fuller et al., 2007). Key components of the research-aligned approach included:

- **Phonics Instruction:** Incorporation of systematic phonics to help students decode words effectively, which research (Ehri et al., 2001) confirms leads to measurable improvements in early literacy skills.
- **Teacher Professional Development:** Training educators in research-based reading practices (Duke & Pearson, 2002; Pearson & Liben, n.d.).
- **Curriculum Reforms:** Mandating the use of instructional materials aligned with a new state framework that included phonics instruction.
- **Assessment and Standards:** Setting clear benchmarks for reading proficiency at each grade level.

The initiative yielded early improvements in reading scores in a number of school districts, reversing some of the previous declines and restoring confidence in the state's literacy framework (Fuller et al., 2007).

Why the Initiatives Were Abandoned

Despite their early successes, both the Texas and California reading initiatives were ultimately discontinued due to a combination of political, economic, and systemic factors.

- **Political Turnover and Shifting Priorities:** In both states, the programs were closely tied to specific political leaders: Governor George W. Bush in Texas and Governor Pete Wilson in California. When new administrations took office, priorities shifted to broader

education reforms, such as standardized testing and class-size reductions, sidelining targeted literacy efforts (Fuller et al., 2007).

- **Budgetary Constraints:** Economic downturns in the early 2000s forced cuts to education budgets. Professional development, instructional materials, and intervention programs—critical components of both initiatives—were among the first to be defunded (McNeil, 2008; Wood, 2002).
- **Ideological Divides:** The emphasis on phonics-based instruction sparked controversy. Critics argued that the programs lacked flexibility and marginalized other teaching methods. In California, this tension reignited debates over the whole-language approach, while in Texas, local districts pushed back against state mandates (Coles, 2000).
- **Implementation Challenges:** Both initiatives faced difficulties in scaling up. In Texas, rural schools struggled to access high-quality teacher training, while in California, disparities in resources and infrastructure hindered consistent implementation. These gaps undermined the programs' effectiveness and contributed to waning support (Darling-Hammond, 2010).
- **Failure to Institutionalize Reforms:** Neither program was fully embedded into the broader education system. When funding and political backing declined, the initiatives lacked the structural support needed to sustain their progress (Finn et al., 2006).

Lessons for Future Literacy Reforms

The lessons from the Texas and California reading initiatives highlight the importance of robust systems and practices that ensure long-term sustainability in education reforms that benefit all students, especially those who were most likely to have difficulties learning how to read. Incorporating research-based practices and phased implementation into a knowledge management system can strengthen and sustain successful initiatives.

1. **Develop and Implement a Knowledge Management System (KMS).**
   A KMS collects, organizes, and disseminates evidence-based resources to guide practice and decision-making (Al-Kadi, 2020 Such a system can standardize literacy practices, enhance professional development, and facilitate accountability. By integrating

knowledge management (KM) principles, educational systems can ensure consistency and sustainability across districts and schools (Santhose & Lawrence, 2023).

2. **Adopt a Phased Implementation Approach..**

   Implementing reforms gradually allows for refinement and adjustment at each stage, reducing risks associated with large-scale rollouts. Research emphasizes that phased implementation ensures that stakeholders can adapt to changes without becoming overwhelmed, leading to higher adoption rates and improved outcomes (Fixsen et al., 2020; Implementation Science Collaborative, 2023).

   - **Pilot Programs:** Starting with smaller, controlled implementations helps identify challenges and opportunities for improvement before scaling up (APQC, 2025).
   - **Scalable Frameworks:** Gradual expansion ensures that infrastructure, resources, and training can keep pace with reform demands (Bryk et al., 2015).
   - **Feedback Loops:** Regular evaluation and feedback during each phase enhance the ability to make data-driven adjustments (Fixsen et al., 2020).

3. **Strengthen Educator Training.**

   Teacher preparation programs must emphasize evidence-based methods, particularly in literacy (Carnine, 1991). KM practices, such as systematic knowledge sharing and application, can equip educators to implement reforms effectively and reduce resistance to change. Phased implementation also allows for incremental professional development, ensuring teachers gain confidence and proficiency in new methods over time (Fixsen et al., 2020).

4. **Institutionalize Reforms Through Policy and Infrastructure.**

   Embedding successful initiatives into state and district policies is essential for protecting them from political and economic shifts (Finn et al., 2006). A comprehensive approach that incorporates KM systems could possibly result in the integration of evidence-based practices into the fabric of education systems, making them resilient to external disruptions (UNESCO, 2022; Winstead, 2024).

5. **Foster Collaboration Across Stakeholders.**

   Collaboration among educators, policymakers, researchers, and funders ensures reforms are practical and aligned with the latest research. KM tools can facilitate communication

and cooperation by providing stakeholders with centralized, accessible data and evidence (Santhose & Lawrence, 2023).

6. **Address Ideological Divides Through Consensus-Building.**

   Bridging gaps between educational philosophies requires focusing on evidence rather than entrenched beliefs. KM frameworks can consolidate research findings and publicize successes, fostering broader consensus (see Campbell et al., 2017; Lin, 2023).

Conclusion

The Texas and California reading initiatives illustrate both the promise and challenges of large-scale education reforms that depend on legislation. Their initial success in improving literacy rates highlights the transformative potential of evidence-based practices, targeted teacher training, and robust assessment mechanisms. However, their eventual discontinuation underscores the critical importance of coming up with a more enduring way to institutionalize the guidance and guide rails provided by evidence-based policies and practices. In the fields of aviation, medicine, accounting, and even plumbing, this institutionalization takes the form of evidence-based professions. Institutionalization of evidence-based policies and practices in education must come about by transforming the field of education into a research-based profession to ensure the sustainability and adaptability of effective reforms in the future—after the legislation that brought about the original reforms has been abandoned, defunded, or ignored.

The Evidence Advocacy Center (EAC) is an almost entirely volunteer nonprofit composed of over 100 nationally recognized experts serving on the executive committee, the evidence advisory panel, and the nine teams representing the major components of the education system. The EAC has developed tools for phased implementation as part of its knowledge management system (KMS). This KMS offers a clear pathway to ensure that research-based policies and practices will endure and will continue to be implemented. The EAC believes its menus provide important, accessible resources needed for supporting the creation of a research-based education profession.

When research-based practices and policies serve as the foundation for a genuine education profession, these policies and practices will become institutionalized. Fostering collaboration among educators, policymakers, and researchers will help reforms to be resilient to political and economic fluctuations.

Ultimately, bridging ideological divides and focusing on consensus-driven approaches rooted in evidence will be essential for building an evidence-based education profession. By addressing systemic barriers and drawing on the lessons of past initiatives such as those in Texas and California, future evidence-based literacy efforts can achieve both immediate impact—for example, through legislation—as well as the sustained progress that will accompany the transformation of the field of education into a research-based profession.

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