

# More Focus on Reading Fluency Needed, Study Suggests

BY KATHLEEN KENNEDY MANZO

A new examination of national assessment data suggests that students need more practice building reading fluency and more explicit instruction in comprehension strategies.

Students who can read text passages aloud accurately and fluently at an appropriate pace are more likely to understand what they are reading, both silently and orally, says the study of 4th graders who took the 2002 National Assessment of Educational Progress in reading.

Some 40 percent of the students included in the study had trouble with some aspect of an oral-reading task, however. The findings, released last month, show that while few of the students displayed difficulty in reading words accurately, many needed more instruction in advanced reading skills that enhance comprehension.

Called the 2002 NAEP Oral Reading Study, the research commissioned by the assessment's governing board found that more than half the 4th graders were able to reach high levels on three measures: accuracy, rate, and fluency. Although large proportions of students could read accurately and quickly, fewer, or 61 percent, were judged fluent. Fluency is defined as "an effortless, smooth, and coherent oral production of a given passage ... in terms of phrasing, adherence to the author's syntax, and expressiveness."

The findings correlate closely with the results of the 2005 NAEP reading test, on which 64 percent of 4th graders demonstrated at least "basic" skills. (See *Education Week*, Oct. 26, 2005.)

The results are also similar to the oral-reading study conducted as part of the national assessment in 1992, although they are not directly comparable because different passages were used.

## Short Shrift?

On the latest oral test, which was given to a 1,700-student subsample of the 140,000 4th graders who took the written test in 2002, the youngsters were asked to read aloud a relatively simple passage. They were first allowed two practice readings, then assessed for time and accuracy on the third reading.

"The key finding obviously is that a large number of kids would benefit from fluency instruction," said Timothy Shanahan, the director of the Center for Literacy at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

"It's the simultaneous accomplishment of these three things—getting words right, doing it quickly, and sounding meaningful—and kids clearly have to be doing some interpretation; that's important for overall comprehension," said Mr. Shanahan.

For too long, he said, teachers have given fluency instruction short shrift, assuming that once students learn to identify words

they naturally become more adept at reading them quickly and accurately.

More than fluency instruction, however, the results point to a need for greater attention to comprehension instruction, said Michael Kamil, a prominent researcher at Stanford University.

"I'm overinterpreting it here, but it says, 'Look folks, these kids need comprehension instruction. They don't need a lot of word instruction,'" said Mr. Kamil, who has argued that comprehension instruction has suffered in a climate that has primarily encour-

aged more basic-skills teaching in letter sounds and word-recognition strategies.

## Practices Questioned

The findings also show that students' rate of reading varies on a one-minute reading assessment compared with a lengthier task. Students were not asked to read the story quickly, but they were timed on how long it took them to read the entire passage, as well as how many words they read in the first 60 seconds. On average, students

read more quickly in the first minute.

Such data suggest that some current practices, such as a focus on basic skills and the widespread use of a one-minute reading assessment in schools participating in the federal Reading First program, may not be the most effective, according to Richard A. Allington, the president of the International Reading Association.

Mr. Allington, a professor of education at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, has been critical of the implementation of

the \$1 billion-a-year federal program authorized under the No Child Left Behind Act and of the intense focus on basic-skills instruction.

"One might wonder then why so much emphasis is being given to decoding in early-literacy programs and in so many reading-intervention plans. Fluency was a bigger problem," said Mr. Allington.

**edweek.org:** A link to "Fourth-Grade Students Reading Aloud: NAEP 2002 Special Study of Oral Reading" is online at [www.edweek.org/links](http://www.edweek.org/links).

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