



# *iRead* Professional Paper

Using *iRead* With K-2 English Language Arts Programs

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High-quality reading instruction in the primary grades represents one of America's most critical educational needs for the 21st century. Research suggests that students who start out with difficulties reading have a hard time catching up later (Adams & Alexander, 2012; Hernandez, 2012; Shepherd & Marzola, 2011). Houghton Mifflin Harcourt's (HMH) *iRead* program is a digital reading program for Grades K-2 that is designed to ensure mastery of all foundational reading skills of the Common Core State Standards, and other rigorous state standards, in order to help close the achievement gap before it begins.

*iRead* offers an essential component of a complete early literacy program, focused on providing intensive, individualized instruction in foundational skills. As such, it can be integrated with a wide variety of English Language Arts (ELA) instructional programs currently in use in K-2 classrooms. This professional paper describes:

- The critical importance of foundational reading skills
- The place of foundational skills in K-2 reading programs
- Teaching foundational reading skills: best practices
- How *iRead* meets the challenge
- How to integrate *iRead* as part of the K-2 ELA program

## The Critical Importance of Foundational Reading Skills

Reading is a multidimensional activity. In order to help students get a good start on reading, the best reading programs in the critical K-2 grades cover a range of reading-related skills and instructional objectives—including foundational decoding-related skills, which represent an essential part of learning to read (Adams, 1990; Dewitz & Wolskee, 2012; Pressley, Rochrig, Bogner, Raphael, & Dolezal, 2002; Slavin, Lake, Chambers, Cheung, & Davis, 2009).

The critical importance of foundational reading skills is reflected in the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts, and other rigorous state standards, which—in addition to the reading standards for literature and informational texts—also include foundational skills, with a focus in Grades K-2 on print concepts, phonological awareness, phonics and word recognition, and fluency (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers [NGA, CCSSO], 2010).

A large body of research and expert opinion confirms that problems with foundational skills and decoding represent a major barrier for many students in learning to read (Torgesen, 2002). According to Pressley (2006), “the most typical difficulty experienced by beginning readers is in learning to recognize words—to decode” (p. 71). Furthermore, problems with developing automatic word recognition can help prevent students from understanding what they’re reading—with additional consequences down the road. As Pressley (2006) further explains, “Because reading is difficult and comprehension uncertain for poor decoders, their knowledge base does not expand as dependably through reading. . . . That is, there are strong associations between decoding skills and the knowledge gained through the reading of a text” (p. 71). In short, early difficulties with decoding and foundational reading skills can cast a long shadow on students’ future reading and learning.

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\*In 2015, HMH acquired Scholastic Education, including *iRead*.

Fortunately, research and expert opinion provide evidence that intensive, systematic, and explicit instruction can help prevent or correct foundational reading difficulties for most students. For example, Dewitz and Wolskee (2012) argue that explicit phonemic awareness and phonics instruction can help to make up for the lack of “preschool and rich language experiences at home” (p. 48). According to Pressley et al. (2002), a substantial body of research verifies that “intensive synthetic phonics-type instruction can improve the word recognition skills of children who have difficulties with beginning reading” (p. 8). Such instruction is more effective if it comes early, so that students can stay on track with reading (Honig, 2001; Torgesen, 2002).

Key characteristics of effective instruction that can help prevent reading difficulties in K–2 students include a systematic and explicit approach, extensive practice, and tailoring of instruction to the specific needs and prior knowledge of individual students. According to the authors of *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*:

**Children who are having difficulty learning to read do not, as a rule, require qualitatively different instruction from children who are “getting it.” Instead, they more often need application of the same principles by someone who can apply them expertly to individual children who are having difficulty for one reason or another (National Research Council, 1998, p. 12).**

In particular, Strickland (2011) clarifies that “the intensity of instruction on any. . . skill or strategy should be based on need,” as documented through the results of ongoing assessments (p. 49). This should include “a great deal of practice in reading words—words in isolation and in texts” (Pressley, 2006, p. 181). While explicit and systematic foundational skills instruction has value for all students, students at risk for reading difficulties in particular benefit from “reading instruction that is more intensive, more explicit, and more supportive than can be provided in a classroom of 20 to 30 children” (Torgesen, 2002, p. 13).

## The Place of Foundational Skills in K-2 Reading Programs

### Basal Reading Programs

Most up-to-date basal reading programs at the K–2 levels feature a foundational skills component, including phonics, phonemic awareness, and other aspects of decoding instruction. However, this does not mean these programs are designed to provide the kind of intensive, personalized instruction that can help prevent reading difficulties—by focusing on each student’s specific areas of need while avoiding devoting unnecessary time to skills the student has already developed.

A large majority (86.3%) of educators in Grades K–2 reported use of a basal reading program in 2011–2012 (Resnick, 2012). However, adaptation of these programs to meet local needs was widespread. Almost half (47.2%) of the K–2 educators who used a basal reading program reported that they pick and choose parts of it to use as needed (Resnick, 2012). Asked what they would add to or change in their basal reading program to improve it, 28.4% of K–2 educators selected more phonics and phonemic awareness, while 25.2% selected more resources for struggling readers. In addition, 37.9% of K–2 educators selected more resources to support Response to Intervention (RTI) (Resnick, 2012). In short, a substantial percentage of K–2 educators felt that the resources provided with their basal reading program were not optimal for teaching phonics and phonemic awareness and/or for meeting the needs of struggling readers.

## Guided Reading

Many K-2 teachers use a guided reading approach with their basal reading program or as an instructional and independent resource (Resnick, 2012). Guided reading programs involve assessing individual students' current instructional reading level, providing texts that are appropriate to students' reading levels, and working with students in small groups to help them develop their decoding and comprehension of the texts they read—with the goal of helping individual students learn how to read increasingly complex texts (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). Specifically, guided reading offers “an instructional context for supporting each reader's development of effective strategies for processing novel texts at increasingly challenging levels of difficulty” (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, p. 25).

Proponents of guided reading acknowledge that explicit and systematic phonics and word study represent an important part of early reading instruction (Fountas & Pinnell, 2010). Within this context, guided reading provides exposure to letters and sounds, and opportunities to read a range of text types, as well as varied and more challenging texts.

## Reading Workshop

Another approach to reading instruction that shares many characteristics of guided reading is the reading workshop, which has been most extensively developed by the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project (e.g., Calkins, 2001). In this approach, teachers explicitly teach and model reading comprehension strategies. Students apply these strategies while reading and discussing books in small groups, as well as while independently reading books they have chosen that are appropriate to their reading levels. Typical activities in the reading workshop include independent reading, minilessons about comprehension strategies, conferring and coaching with students, and guided reading groups with additional strategy lessons (Calkins, 2001). The reading workshop approach is often combined with a writing workshop approach, including having students write about what they have read (see Calkins, 1994).

While reading workshop programs incorporate word work and acknowledge the importance of phonemic awareness and phonics skills, such programs could benefit from using a strong foundational reading program with explicit, systematic, and intensive instruction in foundational skill in conjunction with the reading workshop.

## Teaching Foundational Reading Skills: Best Practices

Whatever the instructional approach, most K-2 classrooms share characteristics that make it difficult to teach foundational reading skills effectively and efficiently in ways that can help prevent reading problems. Some of these challenges are described below.

### Effective Foundational Instruction Is Differentiated

In order to address students' real needs without wasting instructional time and losing their interest, instruction in foundational skills needs to be differentiated based on individual students' needs (Dewitz & Wolskee, 2012; Strickland, 2011; Torgesen, 2002). As special education researcher Ted Hasselbring (2012) notes, “Teaching a group of students with. . . divergent needs [with respect to foundational reading skills] is almost impossible, even for the best instructors” (para. 3).

### Effective Foundational Instruction Is Guided by Assessment Data

In order to be effective, intensive instruction in foundational skills is informed by up-to-date, focused information on specific areas where individual students need additional instruction. However, as Dewitz and Jones (2013) note, “Basal programs cannot differentiate instruction because doing so would require data about the performance of individual students” (p. 397). Even if the basal program provides diagnostic assessment resources for foundational skills, initial individual assessments should be constantly updated in order to guide ongoing instruction. Use of standard assessment resources for this purpose requires a substantial investment of teacher and student time.

## Effective Intensive Foundational Instruction Is Integrated With Reading of Connected Texts

Resources for intensive foundational instruction that are provided to supplement the basal reading program may not be fully integrated with connected text that students read. And yet according to instructional experts, in order for students to learn effectively how to read, explicit and systematic decoding instruction needs to be integrated with opportunities to read meaningful, connected text as part of a coherent instructional approach (Adams, 1990; Dehaene, 2009; Moats, 2012; Pressley et al., 2002; Strickland, 2011).

## A Well-Managed Literacy Block Is Balanced Between Foundational Reading Skills and Other Literacy Domains

Time spent by teachers in closely monitoring student performance in foundational skills, reteaching, and providing intensive practice as needed takes away from other things teachers do best—such as modeling comprehension strategies, integrating reading with content-area instruction, supporting the reading-writing connection, and building appreciation for reading (Adams & Alexander, 2012).

Basal programs and other approaches to reading may include resources for teaching foundational skills intensively, such as practice books, flip charts, letter cards and/or tiles, word cards and lists, and writing boards. Typically, these are designed for teacher use with individuals or small groups of students—an approach that is often challenging given the many competing demands on teacher time. Teachers may also lack the expertise to carry out phonics instruction effectively (Pressley, 2006).

# How *iRead* Meets the Challenge

*iRead* technology meets the challenge of providing effective foundational reading instruction through a combination of explicit and systematic instruction for all students, ongoing embedded assessment to identify areas of need, and adaptive tailoring of instruction so that individual students receive more intensive teaching and practice with skills where they need more work. Instruction is differentiated for each student in pacing, amount of practice, and instructional content.

*iRead* provides explicit and systematic instruction in phonemic and phonological awareness, the alphabet, phonics, sight words, syllabication, morphology and syntax, and spelling, as called for by research and expert opinion in early reading<sup>1</sup>.

## Individualized Placement and Progression

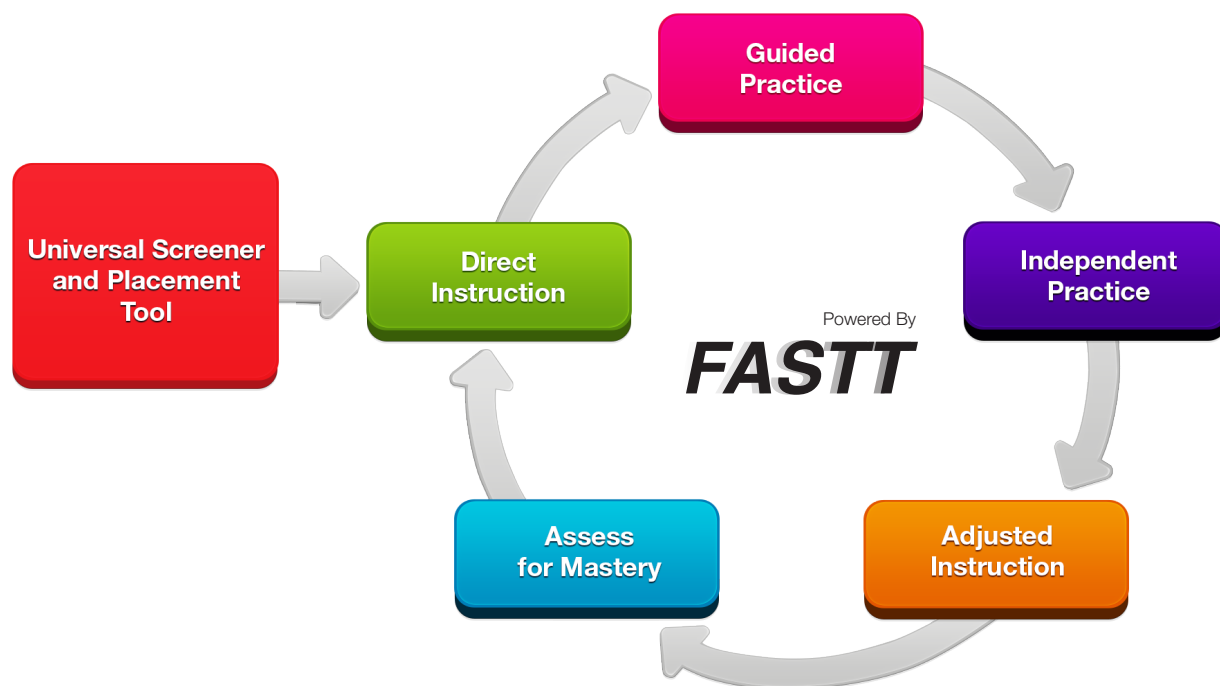
At the beginning of the school year, *iRead*'s Screener assessment evaluates each student's foundational reading skills and then places the student in the appropriate unit of instruction. To ensure mastery, students are placed either at grade level or below grade-level at one of several entry points, based on the student's performance on the Screener. More advanced students begin *iRead* on grade-level rather than above grade-level to ensure that all children have a common base of knowledge.

Students move through the software at their own pace. Although all students receive practice in all topic areas, students who are more advanced have the opportunity to FastTrack through content by demonstrating mastery. Conversely, students who require additional practice may repeat topics multiple times, with new content, before moving on to the next series.

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<sup>1</sup>For more information about how *iRead*'s instructional design matches the best research and expert opinion in early literacy instruction, see the *iRead* Research Foundation Paper, available from the *iRead* website, <http://hnhco.com/iread>.

FastTrack assessments at the beginning of each series of lessons identify students whose level of prior knowledge and proficiency permits them to move through the series more quickly. These students may skip guided practice activities and proceed directly to more challenging activities that involve encoding, vocabulary, and reading connected text. Less-proficient students engage in these same activities after receiving the guided practice they need.



## Ensuring Mastery: Adaptive Feedback and Embedded Support

*iRead* provides intensive practice with feedback to ensure that students develop foundational skills to the point where the act of decoding becomes automatic, accurate, and quick, using the research-supported FASTT model (Fluency and Automaticity through Systematic Teaching with Technology).

Instruction and practice with foundational skills are closely integrated with reading appropriate connected texts featuring a high proportion of decodable words, as called for by research and expert opinion in developing students' early literacy skills. These texts provide opportunities for students to apply what they are learning.

If students' responses indicate they are not yet at the mastery stage, they receive additional cycles of instruction and more opportunities to practice, as well as activities that mix both new and repeated content so that the lesson continues to be fresh and engaging. Students receive customized support for persistent areas of difficulty. Throughout *iRead*, the corrective, adaptive feedback is tailored to individual student errors—providing help that is always encouraging, never gets tired, and never loses patience.



## Supporting the Needs of All Students

While *iRead* is designed to be used with all students, the program is uniquely suited to support students with special education needs and English language learners (ELL). For example, *iRead* includes individualized, adaptive pacing, as well as instructional scaffolds and supports for students who require additional assistance, including visual, auditory, tactile, and kinesthetic means. Designed with guidance from CAST (Center for Applied Special Technology, 2011), *iRead* is aligned with Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles, providing multiple means of representation, expression, and engagement (Rose & Meyer, 2002), which can benefit students with and without special education needs.

In addition, the *iRead* program provides numerous supports to meet the needs of English language learners. For example, the program includes photographs, animations, videos, and audio support to develop vocabulary, comprehension, conceptual understanding, and contextual knowledge. Articulation support is provided through articulation videos that model correct pronunciation of all 44 sounds of English.

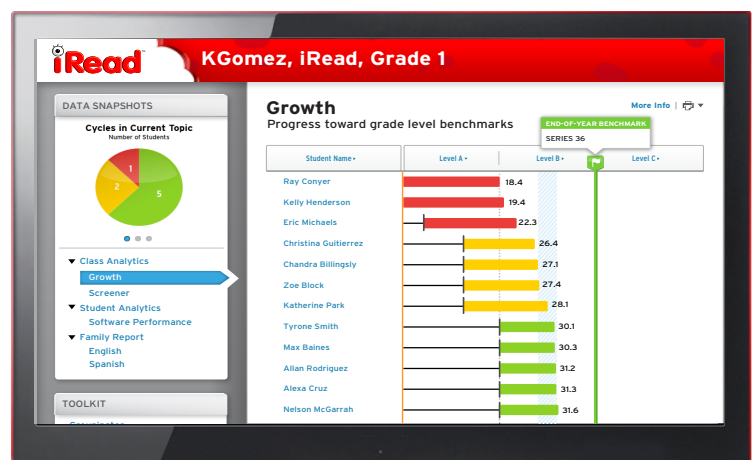
The program also provides vivid examples and images, giving native Spanish-speaking students at various stages of English language acquisition access to academic vocabulary and everyday vocabulary words—to ensure meaning and develop cultural knowledge. Spanish translations and/or cognates for all target vocabulary words help Spanish speakers connect new words to known words in Spanish. The eBooks also provide Spanish language previews as well as fluent read-alouds that model accuracy and expression.

## Support for Teachers: Analytics and Resources

*iRead* also provides resources for teachers to provide differentiated small-group instruction. HMH's Groupinator®, an algorithmic grouping tool, recommends instructional groups based on where students are in the program's scope and sequence. *iRead* includes over 200 online lesson plans, which expand on small-group instructional routines modeled in the Professional Guide and offer instructional routines aimed at specific learning targets. Direct links from the Groupinator provide handy access to select small-group Interactive Learning Tools—including *iRead* direct instruction videos, images, audio models, and activities—that are tailored to the appropriate skill level for each group.

*iRead* provides clear, actionable student performance analytics, readily accessible from SAM Central. Individual results can be downloaded for offline analysis or for emailing to parents, literacy coaches, and/or other intervention specialists. *iRead* includes a variety of analytics, such as the Growth Analytic, which provides an overview of the class's progress through *iRead*'s Scope and Sequence; the Student Software Performance Analytic, which provides extensive in-depth analysis of the students' performance on the software; and the Family Report, which provides an overview of the student's performance on *iRead*, including areas mastered and areas that require further growth.

By handling the time-consuming yet important details of ongoing assessment, teaching and reteaching, and extensive practice and feedback with foundational skills, *iRead* frees teachers to focus their time, efforts, and instructional expertise in other areas.



Growth Analytics

# Integrating *iRead* as Part of the K-2 ELA Program

## Can *iRead* be used with all of my students?

*iRead* is designed for use with all of your students to ensure that they have a solid grounding in foundational skills. The Screener assessment places students where they need to be in the instructional sequence. Students will move quickly through skills where they have a solid prior grounding, and take more time as needed on skills where they need more work.

## How much time do students use the *iRead* instructional software?

Students use the *iRead* instructional software for a minimum of 20 minutes a day, three to five days a week. In addition, teachers may engage students in targeted whole-class and small-group lessons designed to support students' developing literacy skills.

## Can *iRead* be used as part of a Learning Center's approach?

Yes. Some students can work in *iRead* on computers, while other students are engaged in different reading-related activities. The *iRead* Professional Guide includes Learning Center ideas that promote foundational skills development through the use of games and manipulatives. Additionally, many of the Learning Center Activities available on the SAM Central website encourage physical interaction with *iRead* printables, such as game boards, picture cards, and word tiles. Interactive Learning Tools are also available for teacher-directed small-group instruction.

## Can *iRead* be used with our basal program?

Yes. *iRead* is designed for use with all basal or core programs. The *iRead* instructional software can be used to provide explicit and systematic instruction and practice in foundational reading skills during the small-group instruction or Work Stations portion of the day.

## Can *iRead* be used with a guided reading approach?

Yes. *iRead* can be used to provide explicit and systematic instruction and practice in foundational reading skills, while guided reading lessons provide additional practice and instructional support reading and comprehending texts at the students' appropriate level, as well as reading increasingly challenging texts. Students' use of the *iRead* instructional software can be seamlessly included into learning centers or guided reading rotations. In addition, guided reading's small group instruction can be informed by *iRead*'s individual student performance analytics, available on SAM Central.

## Can *iRead* be used with a reading workshop approach?

Yes. *iRead* can provide the strong base in foundational reading skills that students need in order to succeed in reading the texts they have selected and applying comprehension skills in a reading workshop setting. At the same time, *iRead*'s adaptive approach to foundational skills instruction is well suited for a reading workshop model, as it frees teachers to model comprehension strategies and guide students in applying those strategies to texts they read. The *iRead* instructional software can be easily incorporated into small-group rotations.

## How can we use *iRead*'s small-group resources as part of our classroom ELA program?

The *iRead* Professional Guide models instructional routines for use in small groups. Online lesson plans expand on these suggestions in the context of specific learning targets. Additionally, HMH's Groupinator offers suggestions for flexible reading groups based on where students are in the program's Scope and Sequence.



## How Does *iRead* Support Response to Intervention?

*iRead* is well suited to meet the research-based recommendations for Response to Intervention (RTI). First, the *iRead* Screener assesses students' foundational early literacy skills and determines the appropriate placement within the instructional sequence based on individual performance data. Second, *iRead* provides Tier 1 RTI support through "differentiated reading instruction for all students based on assessments of students' current reading level" (Gersten, et al., 2009, p. 6). Differentiation occurs both within the instructional software and through the use of *iRead* differentiated small-group lessons.

For students demonstrating risk for future reading difficulties, *iRead* can provide Tier 2 support. Specifically, students performing below grade-level can spend additional time on the instructional software, which provides intensive, systematic, and focused support on the specific areas where the student is struggling. In addition, teachers can use the *iRead* analytics feature to monitor student progress and performance on the instructional software and embedded assessments. Tier 2 support is also provided through the use of the Groupinator, which produces recommendations and resources for differentiated small-group instruction, based on *iRead*'s formative assessment data, for students with specific skill challenges.

Tier 3 RTI support is also available for Tier 2 students who do not make adequate progress with *iRead*. Students identified as needing Tier 3 support should spend the greatest amount of time on the instructional software. *iRead* analytics and the Groupinator provide the necessary supports and resources for individualized targeted Tier 3 interventions.

## What resources are available to help us integrate *iRead* with our ELA program?

The Planning and Preparation section of the *iRead* Professional Guide provides specific scheduling suggestions for use with a variety of programs, together with more general suggestions for how to use *iRead* in multiple environments, such as pull-out programs, media centers/libraries, learning labs, and home use. In addition, HMH Implementation Consultants can help schools explore implementation options and recommend customizable solutions.

## Conclusion

HMH's *iRead* program utilizes the best research-based design to provide K-2 students with the kind of solid grounding in foundational skills that can prevent future reading difficulties, filling the gaps in many common reading programs. At the same time, its automated adaptive features help to ease the burden of intensive differentiated instruction on overworked teachers—freeing them to focus on other aspects of instruction. Whatever reading program is currently being used in the K-2 classroom, *iRead* has a vital role to play as an essential component in early literacy instruction.



***iRead* Classroom**

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