WHITE PAPER

Reading More Changes Everything:

The Research Behind Reading Volume and Student Success

OCTOBER 2026

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The simple act of reading is one of the strongest predictors of academic success. Decades of research demonstrate that students who spend more time reading develop stronger vocabularies, broader background knowledge, greater reading stamina, deeper comprehension, and increased motivation to read (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998; Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2021; Shanahan, 2025). Reading volume shapes not only how well students read, but also how effectively they learn, think, and engage with the world around them.

Yet many students are reading less than previous generations. They are spending less time engaged in sustained reading—completing fewer whole books—and losing valuable opportunities to build the knowledge and literacy skills that develop through regular reading (Horowitch, 2024; Scholastic, 2023). Increasingly, researchers and commentators suggest this trend reflects a broader literacy challenge. In a 2026 *Atlantic* cover story, Rose Horowitch points not only to declining reading proficiency among young people, but also to a shift away from sustained engagement with longer texts. In schools, she notes, the increased use of short passages and excerpts in place of whole books has reduced opportunities for students to develop the stamina and experience that extended reading requires.

RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT:

Students develop expertise by applying the skills they learn during sustained engagement with meaningful texts.

— Frey & Fisher, 2018; Hiebert & Reutzel, 2010; Shanahan, 2025

Over the past two decades, educators have transformed how reading is taught. Evidence-based instruction grounded in the Science of Reading has strengthened foundational skills, expanded the use of high-quality instructional materials, and deepened educators' understanding of how students learn to read. These changes have been both necessary and important. Increasingly, however, researchers are asking a complementary question: Are students spending enough time actually reading? While effective instruction is essential, instruction alone cannot create proficient readers. Students develop expertise by applying the skills they learn during sustained engagement with meaningful texts (Frey & Fisher, 2018; Hiebert & Reutzel, 2010; Shanahan, 2025).

Learning to read requires explicit instruction. Becoming a proficient reader requires sustained opportunities to read. Every page students read strengthens fluency, expands vocabulary, reinforces comprehension, and builds the knowledge that makes future reading easier and more meaningful (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998; Liben & Liben, 2024). As students read more, they encounter more words, more ideas, and more opportunities to develop the knowledge and confidence that support success across every subject area.

Reading volume has emerged as one of the strongest predictors of literacy development and long-term academic success. Schools can intentionally create more opportunities for students to engage in meaningful reading throughout the day, which builds the habits, knowledge, and confidence that prepare them for success in school and beyond. Because ultimately, reading more changes everything.

> *While effective instruction is essential, instruction alone cannot create proficient readers.*

Reading Is the Practice That Builds Readers

Reading is unique among academic skills because it develops through practice. Explicit instruction provides students with the knowledge and strategies needed to read successfully, but reading itself is the mechanism through which those skills become automatic, flexible, and enduring. Just as musicians become accomplished by playing music and athletes improve through repeated practice, students become stronger readers by reading. Every opportunity to engage with meaningful text reinforces what students have learned and prepares them to tackle increasingly complex reading experiences (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998; Shanahan, 2025).

Researchers have consistently identified reading volume as one of the strongest predictors of literacy development because it provides students with repeated opportunities to apply and refine their skills. Unlike isolated exercises or brief passages, sustained reading requires students to integrate decoding, vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, and critical thinking simultaneously. It is through this repeated application—not instruction alone—that reading proficiency develops over time (Frey & Fisher, 2018; Hiebert & Reutzel, 2010). Students who read just 20 minutes each day are exposed to approximately 1.8 million words each year—dramatically increasing their opportunities to build vocabulary, background knowledge, and reading proficiency (Anderson et al., 1988; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998).

This distinction is more than semantic. Schools rightly devote significant attention to improving reading instruction, yet the research suggests that instruction and practice are inseparable. Effective instruction teaches students how to read. Sustained opportunities to read allow students to consolidate those skills, build independence, and become increasingly proficient readers (Shanahan, 2025; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998). Yet even within a 90-minute literacy block, students may spend only seven to ten minutes actually reading independently (Haggen, 2026).

Are Students Reading Enough?

> **RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT:**
> Despite growing investments in evidence-based literacy instruction, many students are spending less time engaged in sustained reading than previous generations.
>
> *— Horowitch, 2024; Scholastic, 2023; Liben & Liben, 2024*

Research increasingly suggests that students are not spending adequate time reading.

Compared with previous generations, today's learners have fewer opportunities to engage in sustained reading. Within schools, reading experiences have often become fragmented into shorter passages, excerpts, and isolated instructional activities. Outside the classroom, digital media and competing demands continue to reduce the amount of time many children spend reading independently for enjoyment (Horowitch, 2024; Scholastic, 2023).

This shift has occurred gradually and, in many cases, unintentionally. As educators strengthened explicit instruction and expanded the use of evidence-based practices, instructional time became increasingly focused on teaching discrete skills and analyzing shorter texts. These instructional improvements have been valuable and necessary. At the same time, however, many students now have fewer opportunities to remain immersed in extended reading experiences that allow them to consolidate those skills through practice (Liben & Liben, 2024; Lemov, 2025).

These concerns increasingly extend beyond literacy classrooms. As Horowitch (2026) observes, fewer opportunities for sustained reading may also limit students' ability to engage deeply with complex ideas and longer texts—a challenge that schools are uniquely positioned to address. Reading proficiency depends on both effective instruction and sufficient practice. When either is diminished, students' literacy growth is limited.

Researchers increasingly describe sustained reading as an essential complement to explicit literacy instruction. While foundational skills provide students with the tools to read, regular engagement with connected texts gives them opportunities to strengthen those skills, build reading stamina, and develop increasingly sophisticated comprehension over time (Shanahan, 2025; Frey & Fisher, 2018; Hiebert & Reutzel, 2010).

> *“Reading proficiency depends on both effective instruction and sufficient practice. When either is diminished, students' literacy growth is limited.*

Schools have made tremendous progress in improving how reading is taught. The next challenge may be ensuring students have enough opportunities to apply those skills through meaningful, sustained reading. Because the question is not only how we teach students to read. It is also whether students have enough opportunities to become independent readers.

Why Reading Volume Changes Everything

RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT:

> Reading volume does more than improve reading skills—it expands knowledge, strengthens comprehension, builds academic language, and prepares students for future learning.

— Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998; Liben & Liben, 2024; Shanahan, 2025

Reading volume is powerful because every reading experience builds upon the one before it. Each text introduces students to new vocabulary, unfamiliar concepts, different perspectives, and increasingly sophisticated language. Over time, these experiences accumulate, expanding students' knowledge of the world while strengthening the literacy skills needed to understand increasingly complex texts (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998; Liben & Liben, 2024).

This relationship between reading and knowledge is particularly important. Comprehension depends not only on students' ability to decode words but also on what they already know. Every book, article, and informational text students read contributes to the background knowledge that makes future reading more meaningful and more accessible. Students who read widely therefore develop an expanding foundation for learning across science, social studies, mathematics, the arts, and every other academic discipline (Liben & Liben, 2024; Hirsch, 2006).

Reading volume also strengthens the habits that characterize successful readers. Students who regularly engage in sustained reading build stamina, confidence, and persistence. They become increasingly comfortable navigating longer and more complex texts, applying comprehension strategies independently, and reading for extended periods of time. These habits are essential not only for academic success but also for college, careers, and lifelong learning (Hiebert & Reutzel, 2010; Frey & Fisher, 2018).

Additionally, the benefits of reading volume are cumulative. Cunningham and Stanovich (1998) described how students who read more continually expand their vocabulary and knowledge, making future reading easier and more rewarding. As reading becomes easier, students often choose to read more, creating a positive cycle of growth. Conversely, students with limited opportunities to read may experience the opposite pattern, encountering fewer opportunities to strengthen their literacy skills over time.

RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT:

Students who read more continually expand their vocabulary and knowledge, making future reading easier and more rewarding.

— Cunningham and Stanovich, 1998

Reading volume therefore influences much more than reading achievement. It shapes students' capacity to learn. Every opportunity to read contributes not only to stronger literacy skills but also to the knowledge, curiosity, and confidence that prepare students to succeed throughout school and beyond.

Research consistently associates increased reading volume with:

- Stronger vocabulary and academic language (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998)
- Greater background knowledge and conceptual understanding (Liben & Liben, 2024)
- Improved comprehension of increasingly complex texts (Shanahan, 2025)
- Increased reading stamina and confidence (Hiebert & Reutzel, 2010)
- Higher levels of motivation and engagement with reading (Brown et al., 2017; Roberts et al., 2024)

These benefits extend beyond academic achievement. Sustained reading cultivates habits of attention, reflection, empathy, and perspective-taking that are increasingly valuable in a world dominated by fragmented digital content. As Jen Benka (2026) argues in *TIME*, books ask readers to slow down, wrestle with complex ideas, and experience lives and viewpoints beyond their own. These experiences strengthen not only literacy but also the intellectual curiosity, critical thinking, and human understanding that prepare students to participate thoughtfully in school, work, and civic life.

Reading volume does not simply improve literacy. It expands what students know, how they think, and how they learn. For schools seeking to strengthen student outcomes, increasing reading volume is not an additional initiative—it is an investment that supports learning across every grade level and every subject area.

Creating More Opportunities to Read

The research is remarkably consistent. Students become stronger readers by reading more. Yet increasing reading volume is not simply about asking students to read longer or assigning more books. It is about intentionally creating the conditions in which meaningful reading becomes a consistent part of every student's day.

Schools cannot control every factor that influences how much students read. They cannot determine whether every student chooses to read at home or predict the reading experiences students bring with them to school. They can, however, intentionally create more opportunities for students to read throughout the school day and beyond. Every additional opportunity to engage with meaningful text strengthens the habits, knowledge, and confidence that support lifelong literacy.

One practical approach to creating more reading opportunities is **Scholastic's 20-20-20 Framework.** The framework recommends setting aside 20 minutes for students to read, three times a day: 20 minutes during the literacy block, 20 minutes across the school day such as during science and social studies, and 20 minutes at home. Rather than adding another hour to an already crowded school day, the 20-20-20 Framework distributes meaningful reading across three complementary contexts, making increased reading volume an achievable part of students' daily lives (Haggen, 2026).

During the Literacy Block

The literacy block should provide students with both explicit instruction and meaningful opportunities to apply their learning through sustained reading. When students have time to practice with engaging, appropriately challenging texts, they strengthen fluency, comprehension, and independence while building the habits of successful readers (Frey & Fisher, 2018; Shanahan, 2025).

Across the School Day

Reading should not be confined to English language arts. Science, social studies, and other content areas provide authentic opportunities for students to build knowledge while increasing reading volume. As students engage with disciplinary texts, they simultaneously strengthen literacy skills and deepen their understanding of academic content (Liben & Liben, 2024).

At Home

Reading proficiency is built through both high-quality instruction and sustained opportunities to engage with meaningful texts. Research examining teacher effectiveness and curriculum suggests that improvements in classroom instruction often produce larger gains in mathematics than in reading (Chetty et al., 2014; Hanushek et al., 1998; Slavin et al., 2009). These findings reinforce an important reality: while schools provide the essential foundation for literacy, reading development depends on continued engagement with text beyond dedicated instructional time. Students also need abundant opportunities to read independently beyond the literacy block and beyond the school day if they are to develop the fluency, knowledge, stamina, and identity of lifelong readers.

Together, these opportunities transform reading from an instructional activity into a daily habit. They create the conditions in which reading volume can flourish—not as an isolated initiative, but as an integral part of every student's learning experience.

Conclusion

Reading instruction has never been more important. Thanks to decades of research, educators have a far deeper understanding of how students learn to read and how to teach reading effectively. But effective instruction alone is not enough.

Students do not become proficient readers through instruction alone. They become proficient readers through sustained opportunities to read.

One of the most powerful ways schools can strengthen literacy outcomes is also one of the most achievable: intentionally creating more opportunities for students to engage in meaningful reading. Every opportunity to read is an opportunity to strengthen vocabulary, expand knowledge, deepen comprehension, and build confidence. Over time, those opportunities accumulate, shaping not only stronger readers but stronger learners.

Schools cannot control every factor that influences literacy achievement. They can, however, create more opportunities for students to read—during the literacy block, across the school day, and at home.

When schools create more opportunities to read, they create more opportunities for every student to succeed.

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