

Why England's Reading Scores Are Soaring While the U.S. Lags Behind

There's been increasing alarm in recent years as many Americans have realized that their children [don't know much](#) in the areas of history, civics, geography, and writing. In retrospect, it appears that the emphasis placed on the core subjects of reading and math by various education laws such as No Child Left Behind may be the main culprit in this problem.

But we can at least rejoice in our successes. Surely this focus on core subjects has boosted student ability in those areas, right?

Unfortunately, the answer is no, at least when it comes to international comparisons of reading. The newly released PIRLS exam, which measures reading skills of fourth graders worldwide, ranks the U.S. in [fifteenth place](#). This ranking leaves the U.S. lagging behind the normal high achievers such as China and Finland, and also behind countries such as Poland, Latvia, and Bulgaria. It has also fallen behind its closely-related friend and ally, England.

That last one is particularly interesting, for as the [graphs](#) below demonstrate, England is enjoying a comfortable surge in reading over the last ten years, while U.S. reading scores have fluctuated wildly over the same period and are currently experiencing decline.



England is [touting this victory](#) as proof that a return to instruction methods such as phonics has been a success.

That may be so. But I also find it interesting how both

England and the United States describe their approaches toward reading instruction and curriculum. In the PIRLS report, [England declares](#) that their aim with reading instruction is to help students:

- *Read easily, fluently and with good understanding*
- *Develop the habit of reading widely and often, for both pleasure and information*
- *Acquire a wide vocabulary, an understanding of grammar and knowledge of linguistic conventions for reading, writing, and spoken language*
- *Appreciate England's rich and varied literary heritage*
- *Write clearly, accurately, and coherently, adapting language and style for a range of contexts, purposes, and audiences*
- *Use discussion in order to learn; elaborate and explain clearly understanding and ideas*
- *Be competent in the art of speaking and listening, making formal presentations, demonstrating to others, and participating in debate*

By contrast, the U.S. outlines its [reading goals](#) for students as follows:

- *Key Ideas and Details—Students must make logical inferences from text; cite specific textual evidence; determine central themes; and analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas interact over the course of a text*
- *Craft and Structure—Students must interpret words and phrases as they are used in texts, analyze the structure of texts, and assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of the text*
- *Integration of Knowledge and Ideas—Students must integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, evaluate arguments and specific*

claims in a text, and analyze two or more texts to compare themes

- *Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity—Students must read and understand both literary and informational texts independently*

If you got a bit lost and glazed over while reading the U.S. goals, then you're not alone. That fact, however, seems to raise an important question: Is the U.S. trying too hard?

Think about it. The English goals for reading are straightforward and simple: Read smoothly and easily. Enjoy the process. Expand knowledge of words and sentence structure. Be familiar with classic books. Express ideas from books through written and spoken words. Basic stuff, right?

The U.S., however, seems to take a laborious approach to reading instruction. Their goals of analyzing, inferring, integrating, evaluating arguments, and looking for themes sound impressive and are likely good. But let's remember that this is for fourth graders. At that age, students just need to have the love and enjoyment of good books fostered in them. Once that takes place, comprehension, analyzing, and discussion follow naturally, for as the PIRLS assessment noted, "positive attitudes" toward reading are "associated with higher reading achievement."

Having read a number of modern curriculum manuals and guides in recent years, I have to say that the U.S. reading goals listed above are not an outlier. It's as if the education system seeks to make their goals as impressive and complicated as possible, and then continues to pass that complication on to the children in the classroom. This can't be a helpful thing for students struggling to learn.

Are we so concerned about maintaining an intelligent, expert façade in the American education system that we kill our children's interest in reading through elaborate processes and

methods and evaluations? If so, maybe we need to take a page from England's book, simplify reading instruction, and focus on helping children to love books and the written words they contain.