



What the Evidence Tells Us About Learning to Read:  
*California Must Update its Approach to Ensure Teachers are Well Prepared*

In 1996, California developed a standardized test, the Reading Instruction Competence Assessment (RICA), to ensure prospective teachers were prepared to teach reading. For the reasons articulated below, RICA is not serving its intended purpose and the state should update its approach to ensure all teachers are prepared to teach reading to all students in a way that is aligned to current standards and research.

**RICA isn't working for students or teachers.**

- Despite more than 20 years of RICA testing, only 1/3 of California students scored proficient on the National Assessment of Educational Progress in 2019.
- RICA is not aligned to current ELA standards ([CTC, 2018](#)), and does not properly address the needs of English learners or students with special needs ([CTC, 2018](#)).
- Teachers who pass RICA do not produce higher student achievement than those who fail ([Buddin & Zamarro, 2009](#)). By contrast, scores on teacher performance assessments like the edTPA have been shown to significantly predict teachers' effectiveness in teaching reading ([Goldhaber, Cowan, & Theobald, 2017](#)).
- RICA contributes to the teacher shortage crisis in California, with 33% of all candidates who took RICA between 2012 and 2017 failing on their first attempt ([CTC, 2018](#)).
- RICA decreases teacher diversity, with a nearly 20% gap in the pass rates between White/Asian and Black/Latinx candidates ([CTC, 2018](#)).

**Reading instruction requires a range of knowledge and skills that extends well beyond what is tested on the RICA, which focuses primarily on decoding.**

- Phonetic decoding does not work with many words in English, which has a high percentage of irregular words that do not follow decoding rules ([Krashen, 2002](#)),

so additional strategies to make sense of words in context are necessary.

- Children’s learning needs vary depending on their out-of-school experiences and differences in cognitive skills like visual-spatial skills ([McCandliss, 2012](#)), executive functioning ([National Center for Education Research, 2017](#)), and language skills like comprehension and vocabulary ([Chang, 2020](#)).
- Children entering school with weak decoding skills benefit from direct phonics instruction in kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup> grade ([Connor et al., 2004](#); [Sonnenschein et al., 2010](#)), especially when it is connected to practice with authentic texts ([Rupley, Blair, & Nichols, 2009](#); [Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 1999](#)).
- Children who have mastered decoding skills should focus on meaning, comprehension, and time spent reading in class, which produces greater benefits than direct phonics instruction ([Connor et al., 2004](#); [National Reading Panel, 2000](#); [Sonnenschein et al., 2010](#)).

**RICA does not test bilingual approaches to teaching reading, yet these practices are effective for all students and can be used by all teachers.**

- Although decoding is necessary, it is not sufficient; English learners need support in developing oral language and vocabulary within the context of meaning-making activities. ([Castro, Paez, Dickinson, & Frede, 2011](#)).
- Bilingual approaches not only benefit English learners, but may also provide a reading advantage for children from English-only homes ([Berens, Kovelman, & Petitto, 2013](#)) and can also be used by all teachers ([Joseph & Evans, 2018](#)).
- A 2005 synthesis of experimental studies found that bilingual approaches to reading instruction are more effective than English-only approaches, especially when reading instruction occurs in English and the home language at different times of the school day ([Slavin & Cheung, 2004](#)).

**Students with dyslexia benefit from both phonics and whole language approaches to reading instruction, which is not tested on RICA.**

- Approximately 5% to 10% of children have dyslexia ([Siegel, 2006](#)), and 21-28% of children with dyslexia do not improve in reading after intensive phonics intervention ([Snowling & Hulme, 2011](#)).
- Both phonics and whole language approaches—like meaning-making strategies—improve higher level processes like verbal skills, word reading, and spelling ([Helland, Tjus, Hovden, Ofte, & Heimann, 2011](#)).
- Studies also indicate dyslexia is more related to cognitive skills like working memory ([Ramus, Marshall, Rosen & van der Lely, 2013](#)) and comorbid challenges with language, attention, hyperactivity, motor coordination ([Snowling, 2013](#)), and visual tracking ([Lawton, 2016](#))—not phonics.

Instead of RICA, California should strengthen reading instruction by requiring coursework in teacher education that reflects the growing science of reading and the state’s current ELA/ELD standards. In order to ensure candidates are prepared to teach reading, a performance assessment of ability to teach reading to diverse learners, including struggling readers, should be required within those courses.