Effective reading instruction must incorporate the most current, scientifically based reading research, such as that reviewed in the National Reading Panel report (2000), as well as other highly regarded reports and research analyses (e.g., Gambrell, Morrow, & Pressley, 2007; Moats, 2000; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). These findings show clearly that for striving readers, the content of instruction must be rigorous and the presentation of that content must be direct, systematic and objective. These findings are reinforced by studies of effective reading teachers, which reveal that the classrooms of these teachers are “characterized by high academic engagement, excellent and positive classroom management, explicit teaching of skills, large amounts of reading and writing, and integration across the curriculum” (Cunningham, 2007, p. 176).

In addition to these sources, the recommendations in this paper are based on reports of research-based best practices for students who are English learners (ELs) (August & Shanahan, 2006).

Teaching Fundamental Skills in Middle School
The National Reading Panel report and other research summaries emphasized the five essential components of reading—phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. At the middle school grades, teachers often assume that their students have acquired the fundamental skills of phonemic awareness, phonics, decoding, and spelling in the primary grades. However, some striving readers in middle school need to begin with foundational skills and learn the entire sequence of phonics and decoding skills. Others need support in only a few of the fundamental skill areas.

Teachers may be surprised to realize this—as indicated by these recent comments from experienced teachers in Texas:

“I always thought that teaching phonemic awareness and phonics was something that teachers in the early grades worried about—maybe K through 2nd grade—not 7th grade teachers like me! As I learned more about the kinds of things I could do to help my striving readers, my students began to respond in positive ways. For the first time, I felt that they were making progress—and that I was making a difference.”

“By combining best practices for teaching phonemic awareness and phonics with those of second-language acquisition, for the first time in my 12-year career as a teacher, I began to see my striving readers thrive.”

Who are the students who need to begin at the beginning? Some students are new arrivals to our schools from countries that may have no written language or a non-Roman alphabet. Some have never been enrolled in school, and others have had interrupted schooling. Still others may have been in the U.S. school system, but have not yet learned basic blending and decoding skills or how to recognize words automatically.

If students are English learners, they need a complete language and literacy program that develops oral language, vocabulary, and the patterns and structures of English for use in oral and written communication as well as phonemic awareness, phonics, and decoding. In fact, oral language is the foundation of reading proficiency (e.g.,
Fitzgerald, 1995; Hiebert, Pearson, Taylor, Richardson, & Paris, 1998). Oral language is critical in the development of phonemic awareness because students who are able to recognize large numbers of spoken words can focus more easily on recognizing the individual sounds in those words (e.g., Goswami, 2003). In addition it provides support for students’ acquisition of the alphabetic principle: When readers have a large store of words in their oral vocabularies, they are better able to sound out, read, and understand these words when they see them in print (National Reading Panel, 2000).

Not all middle school striving readers, however, will need intensive instruction in all of the fundamental skills. Many students in the middle grades have acquired basic decoding skills but read with difficulty because they struggle with word analysis skills (especially with multisyllabic words) and fluency.

Therefore, teachers of striving readers at these grades should carefully diagnose student needs and provide direct, explicit, and systematic instruction that fills the gaps students have in phonemic awareness, phonics, decoding, and spelling, including the delivery of a complete sequence of the fundamentals, if necessary.

What Skills Make Up the Fundamentals?

**Phonemic Awareness and Phonics** The ability to hear, identify, and manipulate the individual sounds, or phonemes, in spoken words is known as phonemic awareness. Phonics refers to the understanding that a predictable relationship exists between phonemes and the spellings that represent those sounds in written language, or the alphabetic principle (National Reading Panel, 2000). Students’ levels of phonemic awareness and phonics skills both predict initial reading success and relate strongly to their reading success throughout the school years (e.g., Calfee, Lindamood, & Lindamood, 1975; Ehri & Nunes, 2002; Snow et al., 1998).

The research reviewed by the National Reading Panel (2000) indicates that the best method to ensure that readers develop both phonemic awareness and phonics knowledge is to provide them with direct, explicit, and systematic instruction. The basis for effective direct, explicit, systematic instruction is a carefully articulated and sequential progression of skills that begins with the most basic tasks and moves with appropriate pacing to more difficult tasks. This curriculum is best presented through consistent teaching routines that let students know up front what they are expected to do and learn in specific activities. The teacher clearly models the skills and provides ample structured and guided practice with immediate corrective feedback when needed.

**Decoding and Spelling** An essential part of phonics and decoding instruction is blending, in which students are explicitly taught how to blend sounds to decode words. Decoding should begin with simple 2- or 3-letter words and then move gradually to more complex words.

As students learn to decode sound/spellings to blend words, they must also learn and practice spelling, or encoding—the process of hearing sounds in words, relating the sounds to their spellings, and writing those spellings to form written words. This encoding process is an essential part of learning the alphabetic system and becoming proficient in its use.

**High Frequency Words** These are words that occur frequently in running text and have at least one spelling that is not phonetically regular. Students need to recognize these words automatically for fluent reading.

**What Is the Role of Decodable Texts?**

Decodable texts are passages in which a high percentage of words can be blended by applying the sound/spellings students have been taught. In addition, up to 10%–15% of the words in these texts may be previously taught high frequency words.

As students learn each new sound/spelling, they need ample opportunities to decode words with the new spelling in decodable text. Using a research-based instructional routine for teaching the decodable text gives students multiple experiences reading the text to build fluency and allows teachers to provide immediate corrective feedback.

**Applying the Research: Inside Language, Literacy, and Content**

**Placement** Proper placement into a program level is the first step in meeting students’ needs. The program’s Placement Test includes a Phonics Test and a Reading Level Lexile® test. Students first take the Phonics Test. If they do not show mastery of phonics and decoding skills, they are placed in either Level A or Level B of the program, depending on their performance. Here they will receive explicit, systematic instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics and decoding, spelling, and high frequency words throughout the instructional plan.

At these levels **Inside Language, Literacy, and Content** teaches phonemic awareness and phonics skills in a carefully ordered scope and sequence that reflects scientific research findings. This sequence features a strong emphasis at the beginning on blending CVC words with short vowels, and then moves gradually to more difficult skills, including digraphs, long vowels, inflected endings, r-controlled vowels, and multisyllabic words. All essential phonics skills are covered.

If students answer 80% or more of the items on the Phonics Test correctly, they will take the Reading Level Lexile® test to place them into Level C, D, or E of the program according to reading level. Studying the item analysis for the student’s performance on the Phonics Test,
however, is still helpful in identifying gaps in decoding, which teachers can fill by selecting appropriate lessons from the *Inside Phonics* kit.

**Instructional Routines** *Inside Language, Literacy, and Content* uses research-based reading routines to teach sound/spellings, blending, spelling, high frequency words, and the reading of decodable texts. These routines allow teachers to scaffold instruction, first making sure that students grasp the skill, and then gradually shifting and releasing responsibility for completing a task from themselves to students (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978).

For example, **Reading Routine 1: Introduce Sound Spellings** moves through four steps:

**Step 1. Develop Phonemic Awareness**
- The teacher models the target sound in a consistent word position (e.g., initial position); students produce the sound.
- The teacher models the sound in another (e.g., final) position; students produce the sound.
- Students listen and show hands to indicate whether they hear the sound and what position they hear it in.

**Step 2. Introduce the Sound/Spelling**
- The teacher introduces the sound with the Sound/Spelling Card; students repeat the sound.
- The teacher then uses the Sound/Spelling Card to introduce the spelling; students repeat the spelling.
- The teacher gives multiple examples of the sound/spelling in various positions as students say the sound and write the spelling in the air.

**Step 3. Blend Sound-by-Sound**
- The teacher writes the spelling of the first sound in a word and models the sound; students repeat. This is repeated for each sound up to the vowel.
- The teacher writes the vowel, and then models blending the sounds through the vowel; then students blend the sounds.
- The teacher repeats the process for any additional spellings in the word.
- The teacher models blending the complete word; students blend and read the word.

**Step 4. Spell Sound-by-Sound**
- The teacher says the word; students repeat it.
- The teacher guides students in segmenting the sounds in the word and matching each sound to its Sound/Spelling Card. Students say each spelling and then write it.
- The teacher writes the correct spelling on the board; students check their spelling and correct it if necessary.

_Example Routine Image_ (Teaching Routine 1: Introduce Sound Spellings)

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**Phonics and decoding phonics lessons follow consistent instructional routines based on principles of direct, explicit instruction.**
This instructional routine includes the essentials of exemplary phonics instruction: direct, explicit teaching of sound-spellings and the application of this phonics knowledge to blend the sounds together (Shanahan, 2002).

Similarly, high frequency word instruction follows a consistent research-based routine including these steps:

**Step 1. Review of previously taught words**

**Step 2. Introduce new words**
- Look at the word
- Listen to the word
- Listen to the word in a sentence
- Say the word
- Spell the word
- Say the word again

**Step 3. Practice reading the words**

**Step 4. Practice spelling the words**

After they are taught using this routine, students read texts on their own to develop automaticity in recognizing these high frequency words. The words are then reviewed regularly throughout the instructional plan.

**Applying Skills and Developing Automaticity**

Student books include decodable text selections that are designed to apply phonics, decoding, and high frequency word skills immediately after instruction. These texts are engaging and age appropriate for middle school readers. They are taught using a consistent routine in which students read the text four times, first using whisper reading, then partner reading, then group reading, and finally choral reading with the whole group. Teachers monitor during each reading and provide corrective feedback and other support, including discussion of hard words, teaching text features and genre, summarizing, and practice with phrasing. After several practice sessions, students do a timed reading of the text. The teacher notes misreads and calculates words correct per minute. Students graph their performance and set a personal goal for improvement in subsequent timed readings.

These repeated readings provide essential practice for students in applying phonics and high frequency word skills and in developing automaticity and fluency—a key step on the path to becoming proficient readers.

**Conclusion**

Some middle school students need intensive intervention in the complete sequence of decoding skills, and others have gaps in their knowledge that need to be filled. *Inside Language, Literacy, and Content* provides, through careful placement, appropriate instruction for all students.