Written Testimony to Congress: The Science of Reading
Expanded Statement – Chandra Roughton, Founder & CEO, Luminous Minds

Good morning, distinguished members of Congress, and thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Committee on Education and Workforce. It is a privilege to speak to you about one of the most urgent and consequential issues facing our education system: **how we teach children to read.**

My name is **Chandra Roughton**, and I am the Founder and CEO of **Luminous Minds**, an educational platform providing science-of-reading-aligned resources, professional development, and family engagement initiatives for schools, districts, and intervention programs across the country. Before founding Luminous Minds, I had the honor of serving in public education for over two decades—as a classroom teacher, instructional coach, principal, and curriculum leader—mostly in Title I schools. My life's work has always been literacy, and I am here today not just as an educator, but as an advocate for children who are depending on us to get this right.

Let me begin with a reality that is both heartbreaking and urgent. According to the most recent **National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data from 2022**, only **33% of fourth graders in the United States are reading at or above proficiency.** That means **two out of every three children**—67%—are not proficient readers. Unfortunately, this is not new. Since 1992, national reading scores have consistently hovered between 29% and 37%. Despite decades of reform efforts, the needle has not moved. In plain terms: more children in this country cannot read proficiently than can.

Here is the troubling reality: **we know what works—and yet, we have not consistently implemented it.**

The **Science of Reading** is not a trend or a theory. It is a **comprehensive body of research**, built over decades from fields such as neuroscience, cognitive psychology, and linguistics. It explains how the brain learns to read and what is required to teach reading effectively. Unlike speaking, which humans acquire naturally through exposure and interaction, reading is not a natural process. It requires **explicit, systematic instruction** that rewires the brain, connecting visual, auditory, and linguistic pathways to make meaning from print.

Research shows that only **5–10% of children will learn to read naturally without <u>any</u> formal instruction** (Lyon, 1997). In a classroom of 30 students, that's just 1 to 3 children. The remaining **90–95% need direct, structured teaching** to master foundational reading skills. The good news is that decades of multidisciplinary research confirm that **nearly all children—95% or more—<u>can</u> learn to read** when provided with high-quality, evidence-based instruction grounded in the Science of Reading (Torgesen, 2004). This is not about

ability; it is about *access*—to effective methods, well-prepared educators, and the right support systems.

The Science of Reading identifies **five essential components** that every child must master:

1. **Phonological Awareness** – recognizing and manipulating sounds within words.
2. **Phonics** – understanding sound-symbol relationships to decode words.
3. **Fluency** – reading with speed, accuracy, and expression.
4. **Vocabulary** – building robust word knowledge and academic language.
5. **Comprehension** – moving from learning to read, to reading to learn, across diverse texts.

When students are systematically taught these pillars, the pathway to reading proficiency is clear and achievable.

And yet, in too many classrooms across the country, I still observe instructional practices that do not align with this science. One of the most common is **balanced literacy**, which blends limited phonics instruction with strategies such as the **three-cueing system**. This method encourages children to guess unfamiliar words using:

- **Semantic cues** (meaning): *"The boy rode his ___ to school"* — a student might guess *bike* even if the word is *scooter*.
- **Syntactic cues** (grammar): *"She is ___ the book"* — a child might guess *reading* or *reads* based on what "sounds right," not what is printed.
- **Graphophonic cues** (visual/letter clues): *"The cat hid behind the fe___"* — a child might guess *fence* by looking at the first letters, rather than decoding.

This may feel intuitive, but research shows it is **ineffective**. Students taught to rely on guessing strategies often develop inaccurate habits and gaps that persist into adolescence. For example, a middle schooler using cueing strategies might interpret text as *"Germany invited Poland"* instead of *"Germany invaded Poland"*—a dangerous misinterpretation with profound consequences for comprehension. When children are encouraged to guess, they may appear fluent early on, but they miss the foundational skills needed to truly decode. These gaps compound over time, disproportionately harming struggling readers, English Learners, and students with dyslexia who most need explicit instruction.

Balanced literacy is built on the mistaken assumption that reading is a natural process. But neuroscience is clear: **the brain is not wired to read.** Without explicit, systematic instruction, many children never learn to decode with accuracy and confidence.

A Better Way

Contrast this with a classroom grounded in **structured literacy**: kindergartners explicitly learning letter-sound correspondence, practicing decoding with decodable texts, and building skills progressively until they can confidently read and understand grade-level material. I have witnessed the joy on a child's face when they realize they can read—not by guessing, but by applying skills they have been taught.

Encouragingly, more and more states are now banning the three-cueing method and requiring instruction aligned with the Science of Reading. This is an important step forward. But policy alone is not enough. States and local governments must also:

- Ensure teachers receive **comprehensive training and coaching** in structured literacy.
- Provide **high-quality, research-based instructional materials** to classrooms.
- Equip families with resources to support early literacy at home.
- Reform teacher preparation programs to ensure new educators enter the field prepared to teach reading effectively.

This is not a partisan issue. **It is a children's issue.** Literacy is the foundation of opportunity, equity, and civic participation. We have the research. We know what works. What we need now is the **will, the coordination, and the commitment** to act.

Every child in America deserves the chance to unlock the power of reading. And every teacher deserves the training and tools to make that possible. Together, we can end the literacy crisis and ensure that the next generation of students does not inherit the failures of the past but the promise of a brighter future.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I look forward to your questions and to working alongside you on **real, research-based solutions for our nation's children.**

References

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