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Acknowledgements

The development of the Iowa Comprehensive State Literacy Plan highlights the critical role of internal collaboration within and across divisions, along with the strategic engagement of external partners and experts. By aligning our efforts internally and incorporating insights from external stakeholders, we have taken a comprehensive approach to crafting a literacy plan that addresses the needs of all learners. Through participation in key national meetings, strategic planning for the Comprehensive Literacy State Development (CLSD) grant, and continuous refinement with input from both internal teams and external experts, we have ensured the creation of a robust and effective literacy plan.

Executive Summary

Iowa's Comprehensive State Literacy Plan (CSLP) provides a strategic, evidence-based approach to achieving literacy proficiency for all students from birth through grade 12. The plan equips students with the essential literacy skills needed for academic success, career readiness, and lifelong learning. By enhancing educator preparedness, fostering family and community engagement, and aligning resources, the plan supports measurable improvements in literacy instruction statewide.

The CSLP's primary goal is to ensure that all students demonstrate literacy proficiency and growth in reading, writing, and language development. Upon graduation, students will possess the literacy skills necessary for college or career success. The plan ensures high-quality literacy instruction begins early, promoting strong kindergarten readiness and continued academic success.

Literacy is broadly defined in the plan as the integration of speaking, listening, reading, writing, and multimodal communication. The plan emphasizes evidence-based instruction across critical literacy components such as phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. It supports personalized instruction for struggling readers, particularly in the early grades, while eliminating outdated instructional practices, such as the three-cueing system, in favor of direct, explicit instruction aligned with the Science of Reading (SoR).

Iowa has implemented key legislative measures to support its literacy goals, including the Seal of Biliteracy, which recognizes students proficient in multiple languages. Personalized reading plans are mandated for students not reading proficiently from kindergarten through sixth grade. Furthermore, Iowa's institutions of higher education are revising literacy coursework to align with the latest SoR research, better preparing future educators.

Recent initiatives have also bolstered Iowa's commitment to literacy development. Over $9 million has been allocated for LETRS® professional learning, deepening educators' understanding of the SoR. Revised English Language Arts standards, adopted in 2024, offer students greater access to grade-level texts. Additionally, the IDE's 2024 Summer Reading Grant provides up to $2 million in competitive grants for evidence-based summer reading programs. AI-powered tutoring programs, like the EPS Reading Assistant featuring Amira, is available at no cost to Iowa's elementary schools, with $3,000,000 allocated, providing up to 200,000 licenses.

The Iowa CSLP focuses on literacy informed leadership, helping Local Education Agencies (LEAs) develop a comprehensive MTSS framework, ensuring ongoing professional learning and support for teachers, helping LEAs develop strong family partnerships and community engagement strategies. The plan also focuses on developing strong early childhood education through partnerships with Early Childhood Iowa, preschool providers, and early childhood caregivers. In addition, there is an emphasis on creating partnerships between LEAs and postsecondary institutions to advance college and career readiness for students and develop courses for preservice educators at higher education institutions that are aligned with scientifically based reading and literacy research.

Iowa's CSLP reflects the state's dedication to literacy achievement for all students. It provides a structured and collaborative approach to ensure access to quality literacy instruction and resources, fostering academic and future success for all learners.

Introduction

The Iowa Comprehensive State Literacy Plan is designed to ensure that every child in Iowa achieves literacy proficiency by the end of third grade. Recognizing that literacy is the foundation for all learning, the plan outlines a strategic, evidence-based approach to support literacy development from birth through high school. It focuses on equipping educators, engaging families, and aligning resources to create a coherent system that addresses the needs of all students. By fostering a culture of literacy, Iowa is committed to preparing students for lifelong learning and success.

Purposes of the Iowa Comprehensive State Literacy Plan

The Iowa Comprehensive State Literacy Plan:

- Provides a clear, evidence-based framework for effective literacy instruction from birth through grade 12, ensuring all students experience excellent instruction.
- Aligns stakeholders, including schools, communities, and families, to create a cohesive approach to literacy education.
- Supports ongoing professional learning and technical guidance for educators, promoting best practices and evidence-based methods.
- Implements Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) for early identification, differentiated instruction, and targeted interventions.
- Fosters partnerships to extend literacy support beyond the classroom, creating a culture of lifelong learning.
- Utilizes continuous assessment to guide decisions and adapt to changing needs.

Goals

The Iowa Comprehensive State Literacy Plan is designed to ensure that all students develop the literacy skills necessary for academic success, career readiness, and lifelong learning. The plan outlines a series of interconnected goals aimed at fostering high-quality instruction, effective interventions, and meaningful collaboration among educators, families, and communities. These goals emphasize the importance of proficiency and growth in reading, writing, and language development for all students, beginning with strong early childhood literacy foundations and extending through high school graduation and beyond.

Through a focus on well-trained educators, evidence-based practices, and family and community partnerships, this plan seeks to create a cohesive literacy framework. By leveraging Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) and aligning resources to meet the needs of all learners, Iowa aims to empower every student to thrive in an increasingly complex and information-rich world.

1. All students are proficient and showing growth in all assessed areas of reading, writing, and language development.
2. Every student graduates from high school with the literacy skills that prepare them for multiple pathways to postsecondary success.
3. Early childhood programs provide high-quality early literacy instruction to support kindergarten readiness.
4. Every school has effective, qualified, and well-trained leaders and teachers who provide quality literacy instruction across grades K–12.

5. Every learning community effectively uses Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) to provide evidence-based interventions and supports, building upon high-quality universal instruction that improves students' literacy outcomes.
6. Every learning community effectively partners with families and community members to develop stakeholders' literacy knowledge and collectively improve literacy outcomes for all students.

Defining Literacy

Literacy is the comprehensive integration of speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills that enables individuals to effectively communicate, engage in learning, and adapt across various domains throughout their lives. Proficiency in vocabulary development, receptive and expressive language use, phonological awareness, knowledge of print concepts, and reading comprehension are all essential components. Beyond traditional textual literacy, it also includes multimodal literacy—the ability to understand and produce meaning through a variety of communication modes, including verbal language, written text, visual images, audio elements, and digital media. A multifaceted approach to literacy empowers individuals to navigate, interpret, and create meaning from various forms of communication, facilitating continuous learning and adaptation in personal, social, and professional contexts in a rapidly changing world.

Why it Matters

Literacy is more than just the ability to read and write; it is a cornerstone of personal and societal development that influences a wide range of outcomes. From individual health and economic prosperity to social cohesion and civic engagement, literacy plays a critical role in shaping the well-being of citizens and the overall health of a nation. As societies become increasingly complex and information-dense, the ability to critically consume information is vital. The Iowa Comprehensive State Literacy Plan is essential for supporting the multifaceted benefits of literacy achievement, emphasizing the importance of fostering well-informed, critical thinkers in our communities.

Health Benefits

Literacy directly impacts health outcomes, with numerous studies demonstrating that higher literacy levels correlate with better health. Literate individuals are more likely to understand medical instructions, navigate the healthcare system, and engage in preventive health behaviors. A report by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2018) found that individuals with low health literacy are less likely to use preventive services and more likely to be hospitalized, leading to higher healthcare costs and poorer health outcomes.

Health literacy, a subset of literacy, is particularly crucial as it involves understanding and acting on health information. Nutbeam (2000) describes health literacy as a critical determinant of health, noting that it enables individuals to make informed decisions about their health, understand risk factors, and adhere to treatment regimens. Furthermore, health literacy contributes to the management of chronic diseases, which are increasingly prevalent in many countries. Individuals with higher literacy levels are better equipped to understand their conditions and treatment options, leading to better disease management and improved quality of life (Berkman et al., 2011).

Economic Benefits

The economic benefits of literacy are profound and well-documented. Literacy is a key driver of economic growth, as it enhances the skills and productivity of the workforce. A literate population is more likely to engage in skilled labor, leading to higher wages and improved economic opportunities. The World Bank (2018) highlights that literacy is a critical component of human capital that is essential for economic development. Countries with higher literacy rates tend to have higher levels of economic growth and lower poverty rates.

Literacy is especially crucial in breaking the cycle of poverty. Early reading success and high school graduation are pivotal milestones that can significantly alter the trajectory of students living in poverty. The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2013) emphasized that students who achieve these milestones gain access to more significant earning potential in their future careers. In the context of Iowa, improving literacy levels can have a transformative effect on both individual livelihoods and the broader state economy. Rothwell (2020) highlights that an increase in literacy among citizens would not only enhance their quality of life but also bolster the state's economic health. Higher literacy rates lead to a more skilled and capable workforce, driving economic growth and ensuring that more citizens can participate fully in economic opportunities.

At the individual level, literacy is strongly linked to income and employment prospects. Individuals with higher literacy levels are more likely to secure stable employment and earn higher wages. For example, a study by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2013) found that adults with higher literacy skills earned significantly more than those with lower literacy skills, even after controlling for other factors such as education and experience.

Moreover, literacy contributes to financial literacy, which is increasingly important in a complex global economy. Financial literacy enables individuals to make informed decisions about savings, investments, and debt management, leading to greater financial stability and wealth accumulation. Lusardi and Mitchell (2014) argue that financial literacy is critical for economic decision-making and that improving literacy rates can reduce financial disparities and promote economic well-being.

Literacy also contributes to social mobility, allowing individuals to break out of cycles of poverty and disadvantage. A study by Chetty et al. (2014) found that higher literacy levels are associated with greater social mobility, particularly in societies with a strong emphasis on education and meritocracy. Literacy empowers individuals to pursue higher education and access better job opportunities, leading to improved social and economic outcomes.

Improved Critical Literacy and Civic Engagement

Critical literacy, a concept that goes beyond basic reading and writing skills, involves analyzing and questioning the underlying messages and assumptions in texts. Critical literacy empowers individuals to challenge misinformation, recognize bias, and engage in informed debates. As Freire (1970) argues, literacy is not just about acquiring technical skills but about developing the capacity to think critically and act as agents of change in society.

The rise of digital media has further highlighted the importance of critical information consumption. With the proliferation of misinformation, it is increasingly important for citizens to be able to assess the reliability of online content. A study by Wineburg et al. (2016) found that even highly educated individuals often struggle to evaluate the credibility of online information, underscoring the need for stronger literacy education that emphasizes critical thinking and digital literacy.

In an era of information overload, the ability to critically consume information is more important than ever. Literacy enables individuals to evaluate the credibility of sources, discern fact from fiction, and make informed decisions. This is particularly important in the context of democratic participation, where citizens must be able to navigate complex political landscapes and make informed choices at the ballot box.

Literacy fosters social cohesion and enables individuals to participate more fully in society. Literate individuals are better equipped to engage in social and civic activities, such as voting, volunteering, and community organizing. This engagement is essential for the functioning of democratic societies, as it ensures that citizens can make informed decisions and hold their leaders accountable.

Advancing Social Progress Through Literacy

Literacy is essential for reducing social inequalities and fostering a more just society. A literate population is more likely to support policies that promote social justice, such as environmental sustainability and access to social services. Educated individuals are more inclined to advocate for fair policies and engage in initiatives that address these challenges (UNESCO, 2017).

Access to education and literacy programs plays a vital role in bridging social divides, especially for marginalized communities. Targeted literacy programs can significantly improve economic and social outcomes. For instance, programs aimed at women and girls have demonstrated substantial benefits, including improved health, higher incomes, and increased participation in decision-making processes, as highlighted by UNESCO (2015). Similarly, literacy initiatives designed for minority communities can enhance social integration and economic opportunities by addressing their specific needs.

In today's fast-changing world, literacy is the cornerstone of lifelong learning. It enables individuals to continuously acquire new skills and knowledge, which are critical for adapting to technological and economic shifts. Lifelong learning is also key to tackling 21st-century challenges. As the World Economic Forum (2020) emphasizes, continuous learning and skills development are essential for individual success and competitiveness in a rapidly evolving world.

Overall

Literacy is a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of both personal and societal well-being. Its impact extends far beyond individual achievement, influencing public health, economic prosperity, social cohesion, and active civic participation. In an increasingly complex and information-rich world, the ability to critically evaluate information is essential. By fostering literacy and critical thinking skills, we empower individuals to navigate modern challenges and become informed citizens who contribute to a just and sustainable society.

Investing in literacy is not just about enhancing individual potential—it is an investment in the collective future of Iowa's people and economy. To build a thriving society, Iowa's policymakers, educators, and communities must collaborate to provide universal access to high-quality literacy education.

State of Literacy in Iowa

Adult Literacy

Out of the 50 states, Iowa ranks number 10 in adult literacy, with 85.1% of adults proficient or above in literacy. In addition, 14.8% of Iowa's adults are without a high school diploma (Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy, 2019). Nine out of 10 students who did not complete high school were struggling readers in 3rd grade (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011).

The state of Iowa has prioritized addressing these gaps through various Adult Education and Literacy (AEL) programs. Supported by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), these initiatives focus on improving basic literacy and numeracy skills, English language acquisition, and preparing adult learners for postsecondary education and the workforce.

Overall, while Iowa's adult literacy rate is commendable, the state continues to address the specific needs of its adult learners, particularly those facing barriers to education and employment. These efforts are crucial for maintaining and improving literacy rates across all demographics in the state.

Student Achievement Data

According to the Iowa Department of Education's (Department) *2024 Iowa School Performance Profiles State Summary*, (2024a) Iowa is experiencing shifts in its student demographics, which have significant implications for literacy outcomes. For the 2023–2024 school year, students of color comprise 28.5% of

public school K–12 enrollment, students eligible for the free or reduced-priced lunch (FRL) program have increased to 41.8%, the number of English learners (ELs) has increased to 7.4%, and students with disabilities equals 13.6%.

Table 1: Student Demographic Changes from 2018–2024

Student Sub Category	2018	2024
Students of Color	24.3%	28.5%
English Learners	6.1%	7.4%
Students Eligible for the FRL Program	40.5%	41.8%
Students with Disabilities	12.3%	13.6%

While Iowa, on average, performs well in reading achievement compared to other states, there are significant discrepancies for students of color, students eligible for FRL programs, students with disabilities, migratory students, and ELs. Statewide, 72.8% of Iowa's students are proficient in English Language Arts (ELA) as measured by Iowa's 2024 Statewide Assessment of Student Progress (ISASP). Comparably, 35% of ELs and 58.8% of students eligible for the FRL program achieved proficient levels.

In addition, 77.8% of White students tested proficient in ELA, as compared to 45.6% of Black/African American students, 58.7% of Hispanic/Latinx students, 59.3% of Native American Students, 40.2% of Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students, 67.1% of multi-Racial students. These differences in achievement demonstrate inequities across schools and classrooms in Iowa. Asian students outperformed all racial groups, with 79.25% scoring proficient.

During the 2023–2024 testing session, 60.15% of students with disabilities had a reading goal indicated on their individual education plan, and overall, 27.6% of students with disabilities demonstrated proficiency in ELA. Migratory students often face disrupted education and also need to catch up to their peers, with only 28.4% achieving proficiency. Table 2: Percent of Students Proficient or Above in ISASP ELA, Spring 2024 by Student Group and Grade provides an overview of the discrepancies in performance for students eligible for the FRL program, students with disabilities, and ELs, from grades 3–11 (Department, 2024b)

Table 2: Students Proficient or Above in ISASP ELA, Spring 2024 by Student Group and Grade (Department, 2024b)

Grade Level	All Students	Free and Reduced Lunch	Students With Disabilities	English Learner
3	64	49	24	23
4	73	58	30	26
5	69	53	23	18
6	77	59	31	21
7	77	62	31	22
8	77	63	32	22
9	74	59	28	15
10	73	58	25	15
11	70	54	20	13

Graduation Rates

Iowa's 87.5% four-year graduation rate for the class of 2023 is consistent with the national standard and its neighboring states (Department, 2024c). Minnesota, Nebraska, and South Dakota recently reported 2023 graduation rates below Iowa's, at 83.3%, 87.2%, and 84.1%, respectively. Illinois' reported class of 2023 graduation rate was 87.6%. Among neighboring states, only Missouri and Wisconsin reported class of 2023 graduation rates meaningfully above Iowa's, at 89.9% and 90.5%, respectively.

In Iowa, there are disparities in graduation rates for the 2023-2024 school year across different subgroups, as outlined in Table 3: Graduation Rates by Percentage and Student Subcategory. The table also notes the difference in percentage points between the subgroup's graduation rate and that of the rate for all students (88.3%).

Table 3: Four-Year Cohort Graduation Rates by Percentage and Student Group, 2023–2024 School Year (Department, 2024d)

Student Sub Category	23–24	Difference
All Students	88.3%	
Students with Disabilities	70.3%	-18
English Learners	73.4%	-14.9
Students Eligible for the FRL Program	80.2%	-8.1
American Indian or Alaskan Native	67.9%	-20.4
Asian	88.5%	+0.2
Black or African American	75.8%	-12.5
Hispanic/Latinx	81%	-7.3
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	68.9%	-19.4
Two or More Races	81.5%	-6.8
White	91.2%	+2.9

As outlined in Table 3, there are significant differences in graduation rates between all students and students with disabilities (-18%), ELs (-14.9%), students eligible for the FRL program (-8.1%), and students of color. Reading proficiency in the early grades can be directly linked to graduation rates (Annie E Casey Foundation, 2011). This data underscores the importance of literacy proficiency, particularly by third grade, in ensuring on-time graduation, especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

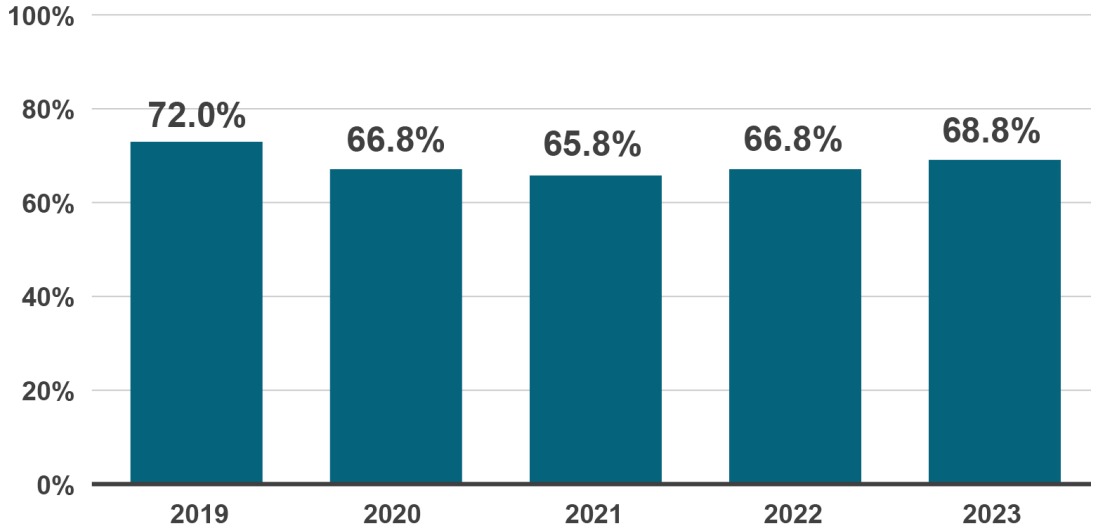
Early Reading Success

Early literacy skills developed in preschool and kindergarten—such as phonemic awareness, oral vocabulary, print knowledge, and letter-sound correspondence—are among the strongest predictors of later reading success and overall academic achievement (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2008; Snow et al., 1998). These foundational skills provide the necessary groundwork for decoding, comprehension, and fluent reading, enabling children to transition more effectively into formal reading instruction (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2009). When nurtured early, these skills support lifelong literacy and learning by establishing the cognitive and linguistic structures essential for reading proficiency. According to the 2023 Early Childhood Iowa Annual Report (2024) less than 72% of kindergartners from 2019–2023 have met the fall benchmark for early literacy skills based on the universal screener (see the following chart, Early Childhood Iowa, p. 4).

Early Literacy Skills

Percent of kindergartners meeting the Fall Benchmark for the approved universal screening measure.

Source: Early Childhood Iowa (Kindergarten Assessment Tables)



Early reading success and high school graduation are pivotal milestones that can provide students from low-income families with more significant earning potential. All of Iowa's students can perform at high levels. Yet, our educational systems are not meeting the needs of all students and providing them with the education they need to be successful. Therefore, the Iowa Comprehensive State Literacy Plan aims to ensure that all students are reading proficiently by grade three and are meeting grade-level expectations through Grade 12 to enhance graduation rates and lifelong success. Improving the literacy levels of Iowa's residents can significantly impact their economic well-being and the state's overall economic health.

Post-Secondary Readiness

Students who attend colleges or universities and are not yet ready for college-level course work may often be placed or selected to take remedial classes (called "developmental courses") in order to become more prepared for the advanced coursework. These courses do not count towards a degree and are often taken prior to, or often concurrently with, other college-level courses. According to the State of Iowa Postsecondary Readiness Report (2024), from 2020–2022, 3.1% of Iowa HS graduates who enrolled in an Iowa public college took a remedial class within one year of high school graduation (p. 2). This report does not include data on students who attended community colleges or other postsecondary institutions outside of Iowa. Table 4 provides an overview of the variance between subgroups and their need to take a remedial English course in their first year of college.

Table 4: Iowa Public HS Graduates Who Enrolled in an Iowa Public College and Took a Remedial English Class Within 1 Year of HS Graduation, Classes of 2020–2022 (State of Iowa, 2024)

Student Sub Category	2020–22
All Students	3.1%
White	2.4%
Asian	2.2%
Black or African American	12.8%
Hispanic/Latino	4.9%
Eligible for the FRL Program	5.8%
Not-FRL	1.8%

Overall

Overall, there is a critical need to address persistent disparities in literacy achievement and educational outcomes across the state. Despite Iowa's overall strong performance in reading and graduation rates, significant gaps remain for students with disabilities, English Learners (ELs), students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRL) programs, and students of color. Early literacy benchmarks reveal concerning trends, with fewer than 72% of kindergarteners meeting key benchmarks over the past five years (Early Childhood Iowa, 2024), while disparities in postsecondary readiness highlight ongoing challenges for historically underserved groups. These inequities emphasize the importance of comprehensive literacy initiatives that support all students from early childhood through high school and beyond. The findings serve as a call to action for targeted interventions, robust support systems, and sustained efforts to ensure that every Iowa student has the opportunity to achieve academic success and lifelong literacy.

Iowa Literacy Legislation

Iowa has made significant strides in advancing literacy education in recent years, culminating in several key legislative actions.

Statewide Literacy Plan

House File (H.F.) 2545, an Act relating to education, requires a statewide literacy plan to increase student proficiency using systematic and sequential approaches to teaching phonetic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and text comprehension. The statewide literacy plan shall address standards for practitioner preparation programs under HF 2545, established under section 256.16, that promote evidence-based reading instruction and practical application. These standards should be direct, systematic, explicit, responsive, and consist of phonetic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and text comprehension. Such standards shall not include instruction or practical application that is designed to teach students using the instructional model commonly known as the three-cueing system.

Personalized Reading Plans and Parent Empowerment

On May 7, 2024, Governor Reynolds signed HF 2618, which requires personalized reading plans for students in kindergarten through sixth grade who are not reading proficiently. (Please see the Department's Model Personalized Reading Plan.)

HF 2618 also requires a school district to provide written notice to the parent(s)/guardian(s) of a student in kindergarten through grade 6 who is not reading proficiently, including the option for the parent(s)/guardian(s) to elect to retain the student at grade-level. A school district is required to retain the student at grade level for the subsequent school year upon parent(s)/guardian(s) request.

Educator Preparation

HF 2618 also requires a higher education institution with a practitioner preparation program accredited by the State Board of Education to assess the foundational reading knowledge of teacher candidates utilizing the Foundations of Reading Assessment for a variety of K–12 and PK–8 endorsements. To promote transparency and accountability, each higher education institution with an accredited practitioner preparation program must report on the aggregate number of teacher candidates that scored above, at, and below the passing score established by the Department of Education by August 1 annually. The institution must also report on services and opportunities to retake the assessment.

HF 2545 also requires standards for practitioner preparation programs that promote evidence-based reading instruction and practical applications that are direct, systematic, explicit, responsive, and that consist of phonetic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and text comprehension. Such standards shall not include instruction or practical application that is designed to teach students using the instructional model commonly known as the three-cueing system.

Universal Screening Grades K–3

Iowa's comprehensive approach to literacy is further supported by policies outlined in Iowa Code sections 279.60 and 279.68, which require universal screening for kindergarten through grade three students and continuing for any student persistently at-risk until the student is reading at grade level. This early intervention strategy, legislated in 2012, ensures that students receive at least 90 minutes of research-based reading instruction daily if they are persistently at risk. Additionally, parents are kept informed and provided with strategies to support their child's reading development at home.

Overall, these legislative efforts reflect Iowa's unwavering commitment to advancing literacy for all students, ensuring that every child has the opportunity to achieve reading proficiency and succeed academically.

Seal of Biliteracy

The introduction of the Seal of Biliteracy, which recognizes students who achieve proficiency in two or more languages by high school graduation, also marked an important milestone. Governor Kim Reynolds signed Senate File 475 into law during the 2018 legislative session, setting the stage for further reforms aimed at strengthening literacy across the state of Iowa. The biliteracy seal is important because using more than one language is a critical 21st-century skill (Iowa Seal of Biliteracy Guidance, n.d.).

The biliteracy seal recognizes language as a valuable resource and highlights the importance of multiple languages and cultural identity. It prepares students with essential skills for success in the global workforce and provides evidence of their world language proficiency to employers, higher education institutions, and scholarship providers.

Recent Iowa Department of Education Efforts to Improve Literacy

Statewide LETRS® Professional Learning

The Department has invested more than $9 million in the critical work of equipping educators with knowledge of the Science of Reading to improve literacy outcomes for all students through providing LETRS® professional learning to up to 6,600 educators at no cost. In May 2024, the Department expanded this work to include LETRS® for Early Childhood Educators, focusing on administrators and teachers providing Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program, Shared Visions Preschool Program, and/or Early Childhood Special Education. In June 2024, the Department included middle school teachers of special education, or who provide literacy interventions, and higher education faculty who teach literacy courses and prepare teacher candidates in Iowa practitioner preparation programs.

Revised Iowa Academic Standards Aligned with the Science of Reading

On June 20, 2024, the Iowa State Board of Education (ISBE) adopted revised Iowa Academic Standards in English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects (Department, 2024e) aligned with the Science of Reading and focused on increasing access to grade-level text and cognitive rigor. Iowa's English Language Arts standards were first adopted in 2010 with minimal revisions in 2016 and no substantive revision since their initial adoption. These revised standards were supported by a robust public consultation process that included:

- A first review committee of educators, administrators, and content experts, especially those with backgrounds in the Science of Reading, to review the state's ELA standards and provide suggestions for revisions.
- Statewide public comment and listening sessions to collect feedback on the first revised ELA standards draft supported by the first review committee.
- A second review committee of educators, content specialists, administrators, families, industry and community partners, and representatives from higher education institutions to support the second revised ELA standards draft following the standards public comment process.

The second revised ELA standards draft was then presented to the ISBE for a first reading in May 2024, providing another opportunity for public comment and a fourth public input step. The ISBE then adopted revised ELA standards on June 20, 2024. Moving forward, the Department will support the ISBE in substantively reviewing and revising each set of standards at least every five years. The Department is now providing standards overview and implementation of professional learning on the revised ELA standards for elementary, middle, and high school educators and administrators throughout the summer and school year 2024–2025.

ELA High-Quality Instructional Materials

The Iowa Department of Administrative Services (DAS) published a request for proposals on behalf of the Iowa Department of Education for K–12 literacy instructional materials. The Department also supported the purchase and district-wide implementation of evidence-based curriculum and high-quality instructional materials in school districts with Extended Comprehensive Support and Improvement (E-CSI) schools, which are identified as CSI for three or more years. Please refer to the Department Literacy page for more information (Department, 2024g).

Evidence-Based Summer Reading Programs

In Summer 2024, the Department launched a new Summer Reading Grant that will provide up to $2 million in competitive grants to support schools in creating, expanding, and sustaining evidence-based summer reading programs. These grants support school districts as they address summer learning loss with the goal of advancing student achievement and narrowing and closing achievement gaps. Schools serving students most in need were given priority consideration, including schools identified for additional support and improvement to meet the requirements of the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which is based on the overall performance of all students or a subgroup of students, such as students with disabilities or students who are acquiring English.

Evidence-Based Digital Literacy Program

The Department has selected EPS Learning, featuring Amira, to provide an innovative, online literacy program called EPS Reading Assistant to Iowa schools at no cost, with up to 200,000 licenses. Firmly grounded in the Science of Reading, the reading assistant delivers personalized reading practice and in-the-moment tutoring. It uses safe, effective artificial intelligence (AI) to listen, assess, and tutor students in foundational reading skills, based on each student's zone of proximal development. As students read aloud, a digital avatar named Amira listens, assesses, and intervenes when they struggle, providing corrective feedback and encouraging support. The program's initial roll-out as a tool for summer school literacy programs will extend access for all students through the 2024–25 school year.

Decodable Books

The Department made a statewide investment of over $3.5 million to provide every first grade student with two Just Right Reader decodable book packs with ten books each. Students will take home and keep the book packs, reinforcing classroom instruction. In addition to all first-grade students, kindergarten through second grade students in need of support who attended a Department-funded high-quality summer reading program or a Learning Beyond the Bell out-of-school program this year will also receive decodable book packs to further advance their reading gains. In total, more than 100,000 book packs containing over one million books have been sent to all public and accredited nonpublic schools across Iowa.

Grounded in the Science of Reading, the decodable book packs are sequential, progressively introducing more complex skills, and are available at multiple reading levels. Each decodable book includes a QR code with access to video lessons for active family engagement. Information about Just Right Reader can be found on the Just Right Reader Iowa Hub. Please refer to the Department Literacy page for more information (Department, 2024g).

Institutions of Higher Education: Literacy Coursework

Iowa's institutions of higher education are in the process of a comprehensive review to recommend revisions addressing practitioner preparation standards to transition literacy coursework and practical applications to align with the Science of Reading (SoR). While the work has begun, critical steps remain to bring additional institutions and coursework into alignment. As noted earlier, recent legislation has outlined the expectation that all institutions of higher education promote evidence-based reading instruction and practical applications that promote preparation in the SoR. In 2023, through an initial review of curriculum exhibits and syllabi submitted by institutions, 74% of IHEs expose future educators to the SoR, and 30% (8) of the institutions that prepare K–8 educators are aligned with the SoR. The next steps for the Department in reviewing the educator preparation programs include a program self study and evaluation followed by peer and Department reviews of the curriculum, using a tool developed or adopted by the Department; code revision to disallow non-evidence-based practices; and the development of resources and training to update textbooks, syllabi, and curriculum for 100%

literacy curricular alignment with the SoR. A SoR Summit for IHEs has been drafted to accomplish curriculum updates. This activity will be part of the state-level grant funds and will be outlined later in the narrative. Please refer to the Department's Education Preparation Programs Resources for the Iowa Literacy Educator Preparation Workbook. (Department, 2024f)

Literacy Plan Goals & Logic Model

Iowa Comprehensive State Literacy Plan Goals

Iowa's Comprehensive State Literacy Plan focuses on ensuring that all students develop strong literacy skills, starting from early childhood and continuing through high school graduation. The plan emphasizes high-quality instruction, proficient and growing literacy abilities, and readiness for college and career opportunities. It highlights the need for well-trained educators, effective use of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), and strong partnerships between schools, families, and communities to improve literacy outcomes across the state.

The state of Iowa will ensure…

1. All students are proficient and showing growth in all assessed areas of reading, writing, and language development.
2. Every student graduates from high school with the literacy skills that prepare them for multiple pathways to postsecondary success.
3. Early childhood programs provide high-quality early literacy instruction to support kindergarten readiness.
4. Every school has effective, qualified, and well-trained leaders and teachers who provide evidence-based literacy instruction across grades K–12.
5. Every learning community effectively uses Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) to provide evidence-based interventions and supports, building upon high-quality universal instruction that improves students' literacy outcomes.
6. Every learning community effectively partners with families and community members to develop stakeholders' literacy knowledge and collectively improve literacy outcomes for all students.

Importance of Literacy Goals for Student Success

Goal 1: All students are proficient and showing growth in all assessed areas of reading, writing, and language development.

Proficiency in reading, writing, and language development is the foundation for academic achievement and lifelong success. Students who reach proficiency demonstrate the ability to comprehend, analyze, and communicate effectively across all subject areas, preparing them to tackle increasingly complex texts and tasks as they progress in their education. Equally important is continuous growth, which ensures that all students, regardless of their starting point, make steady progress in their literacy skills. This focus on growth is critical for closing achievement gaps and addressing the needs of all learners, including those with language barriers, learning disabilities, or socioeconomic challenges. Achieving this goal gives every student the tools needed to thrive academically and socially.

Goal 2: Every student graduates from high school with the literacy skills that prepare them for multiple pathways to postsecondary success.

Achieving high levels of literacy is fundamental for students' success in any postsecondary pathway, including college, technical training, and the workforce. Strong literacy skills allow students to

understand complex texts, communicate effectively through writing, and engage in critical thinking and problem-solving. These skills also support lifelong learning, enabling graduates to adapt to the changing demands of the workforce. In addition, students with solid literacy skills are better positioned to contribute meaningfully to their communities, including engaging in civic activities like voting and volunteering. This goal emphasizes the importance of equipping students not only for academic and career success but also for active, informed participation in society, preparing them for both professional achievement and personal fulfillment.

Goal 3: Early childhood programs provide high-quality early literacy instruction to support kindergarten readiness.

Early childhood is a critical time for literacy development, with skills such as vocabulary, phonological awareness, and print knowledge serving as strong predictors of future reading and writing success. High-quality early literacy instruction ensures that all children, regardless of their background, enter kindergarten equipped with the foundational skills necessary to succeed. This goal is especially important for addressing disparities in access to literacy-rich environments, particularly for children from disadvantaged families. Early exposure to engaging literacy experiences also nurtures a lifelong love of reading and learning, laying the groundwork for future academic and social success.

Goal 4: Every school has effective, qualified, and well-trained leaders and teachers who provide quality literacy instruction across grades K–12.

The effectiveness of literacy instruction depends on the expertise and preparation of educators. Teachers must possess a deep understanding of literacy development and evidence-based practices to deliver instruction that meets the needs of all students. Leaders play a crucial role by fostering a school culture that prioritizes literacy and supports professional growth through ongoing training and collaboration. This goal highlights the importance of investing in teacher preparation, professional learning, and leadership to ensure that all students receive high-quality literacy instruction. By empowering educators and leaders, schools can create an environment where literacy thrives and students excel.

Goal 5: Every learning community effectively uses Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) to provide evidence-based interventions and supports, building upon high-quality universal instruction that improves students' literacy outcomes.

MTSS is a comprehensive, data-driven framework designed to address the needs of all students, from kindergarten through high school. By providing differentiated instruction and targeted interventions at multiple levels of support, MTSS ensures that students receive the right kind of help at the right time, based on their specific needs. This system supports early identification and intervention for struggling readers and writers, helping them reach proficiency. The approach fosters collaboration among educators, specialists, and families, creating a unified, school-wide network of support that spans all grade levels. MTSS is essential for closing achievement gaps, particularly for students with disabilities, English language learners, and those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. This goal highlights the importance of a responsive, evidence-based system that promotes continuous literacy growth and success for every student across all grade levels.

Goal 6: Every learning community effectively partners with families and community members to develop stakeholders' literacy knowledge and collectively improve literacy outcomes for all students.

Families and communities are integral to students' literacy success, providing critical support that extends beyond the classroom. When schools engage families in literacy education and provide resources to strengthen at-home learning, they create a unified approach to literacy development. Community partnerships further enhance these efforts by offering additional resources, such as library programs, tutoring, and cultural experiences, that enrich students' literacy journeys. This goal

emphasizes the importance of fostering strong relationships with families and communities to ensure that all students feel valued and supported. By working together, schools and their stakeholders can create a shared responsibility for improving literacy outcomes and building stronger learning communities.

Overall

Each of these goals is vital to ensuring that all students in Iowa achieve literacy proficiency and are prepared for success in school, careers, and life. Together, these goals form a comprehensive framework that closes achievement gaps and prepares students for a rapidly changing world. By focusing on high-quality literacy instruction, strong leadership, family and community partnerships, and evidence-based interventions, Iowa can empower every student to become a confident, capable reader and writer. These efforts benefit individual learners and contribute to the state's economic, social, and cultural vitality.

Alignment with Iowa State Board of Education Goals and Outcomes

The Iowa Comprehensive State Literacy Plan (CSLP) is aligned with the Iowa State Board of Education's (BOE) overarching goals (Department, n.d.), particularly in promoting equity in education by closing achievement and opportunity gaps, as well as ensuring high-quality teachers and leaders in



Vision: *Building an excellent education system that empowers all students to achieve their full potential*

Mission: *Ensuring all students experience a world-class education*

every classroom and school. These goals are foundational to the vision of building an excellent education system that empowers all students to achieve their full potential and ensures that all students experience a world-class education. The CSLP outlines specific strategies and goals that directly support these broader educational objectives.

Alignment with BOE Goal 2: Promoting Equity by Closing Achievement and Opportunity Gaps

The Comprehensive State Literacy Plan (CSLP) prioritizes student proficiency and growth in literacy, ensuring all learners make measurable progress regardless of starting points. It emphasizes preparing

students for postsecondary success through high-quality instruction and early childhood education, which prevent gaps from forming.

The CSLP emphasizes well-trained educators, evidence-based instruction, and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) that address all students' needs. Engaging families and communities further strengthens literacy outcomes, extending support beyond the classroom. By integrating these strategies, the CSLP provides a pathway for all students to thrive academically and socially.

Alignment with BOE Goal 3: Ensuring High-Quality Educators and Leaders

The Iowa Comprehensive State Literacy Plan (CSLP) emphasizes evidence-based literacy instruction and teacher preparation to ensure high-quality educators and leaders in every classroom. Grounded in the Science of Reading, the CSLP equips educators with proven strategies to teach foundational literacy skills effectively, leading to improved student outcomes. By prioritizing literacy training in teacher preparation programs, educators are well-prepared to meet students' needs, differentiate instruction, and implement world-class teaching standards.

The CSLP supports teacher recruitment and retention by fostering a supportive environment with ongoing professional learning. Educators trained in evidence-based literacy methods are more confident and successful in their roles, reducing burnout and increasing job satisfaction. Effective literacy instruction creates a positive cycle of student success and teacher engagement, motivating teachers to continue improving their skills and remain in the profession. These efforts strengthen the state's education system and ensure that all students receive a world-class education.

Key Partnerships

The work to improve literacy achievement for students across Iowa leverages a robust network of partnerships to drive systemic improvements in literacy outcomes for all students. These partnerships form the foundation of the initiative, ensuring alignment with evidence-based practices and creating a coordinated effort across the state to promote literacy development from birth through grade 12.

These Key Partnerships include organizations critical to early childhood, higher education, and specialized education initiatives. Early Childhood Iowa (ECI) is a statewide initiative housed within the Iowa Department of Health and Human Services that unites public and private agencies, organizations, and stakeholders under one common vision, "Every child, beginning at birth, will be healthy and successful." IA-CLSD LEA subgrantees will partner with ECI local boards as they develop their Local Literacy Plans to support literacy for children from birth to age 5. The Iowa Reading Research Center (IRRC) provides evidence-based resources and professional learning to guide literacy efforts. The Iowa Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (IACTE) supports the alignment of teacher preparation programs with the Science of Reading (SoR), equipping future educators with the skills to implement high-quality literacy practices. The IMPACT Consortium addresses the unique needs of migratory students and their families. The Divisions of Special Education and Higher Education also ensure that literacy instruction is aligned with the latest research.

Iowa benefits from the statewide literacy leadership networks, including the Iowa Department of Education's Literacy Team, the Statewide Literacy Leadership Team, the Iowa State Dyslexia Board, and the IRRC Advisory Council. These entities have helped provide feedback on the Iowa CSLP and provide guidance on the implementation of the plan to ensure it is grounded in the SoR and responsive to Iowa's student populations. Literacy experts within these networks provide critical guidance to support the direction of professional learning, alignment with evidence-based practices, and the adoption of implementation of high-quality instructional materials.

Together, these partnerships ensure a cohesive and impactful approach to literacy and access to high-quality instruction and resources for all Iowa learners, especially those in disadvantaged or

underserved communities. By aligning efforts across early childhood, K–12, and higher education systems, the Iowa CSLP aims to create lasting improvements in literacy outcomes statewide.

Iowa Comprehensive State Literacy Plan Outcomes



Short Term Outcomes 1–3 Years

- School districts develop Literacy Leadership Teams (LLTs) with key leadership of building principals.
- School districts complete comprehensive needs assessment around literacy aligned with the Self Assessment of MTSS Implementation (SAMI).
- School districts develop high-quality local literacy plans aligned with the Iowa Comprehensive State Literacy Plan and include Evidence-Based Practices.
- School districts adopt High-Quality Instructional Materials (HQIMs)
- School districts develop coherent and comprehensive MTSS around literacy for all students and tiers of instruction, which include data-driven decision-making.
- Leaders and practitioners engage in high-quality, job embedded professional learning to increase knowledge and skills around the Science of Reading and comprehensive literacy.

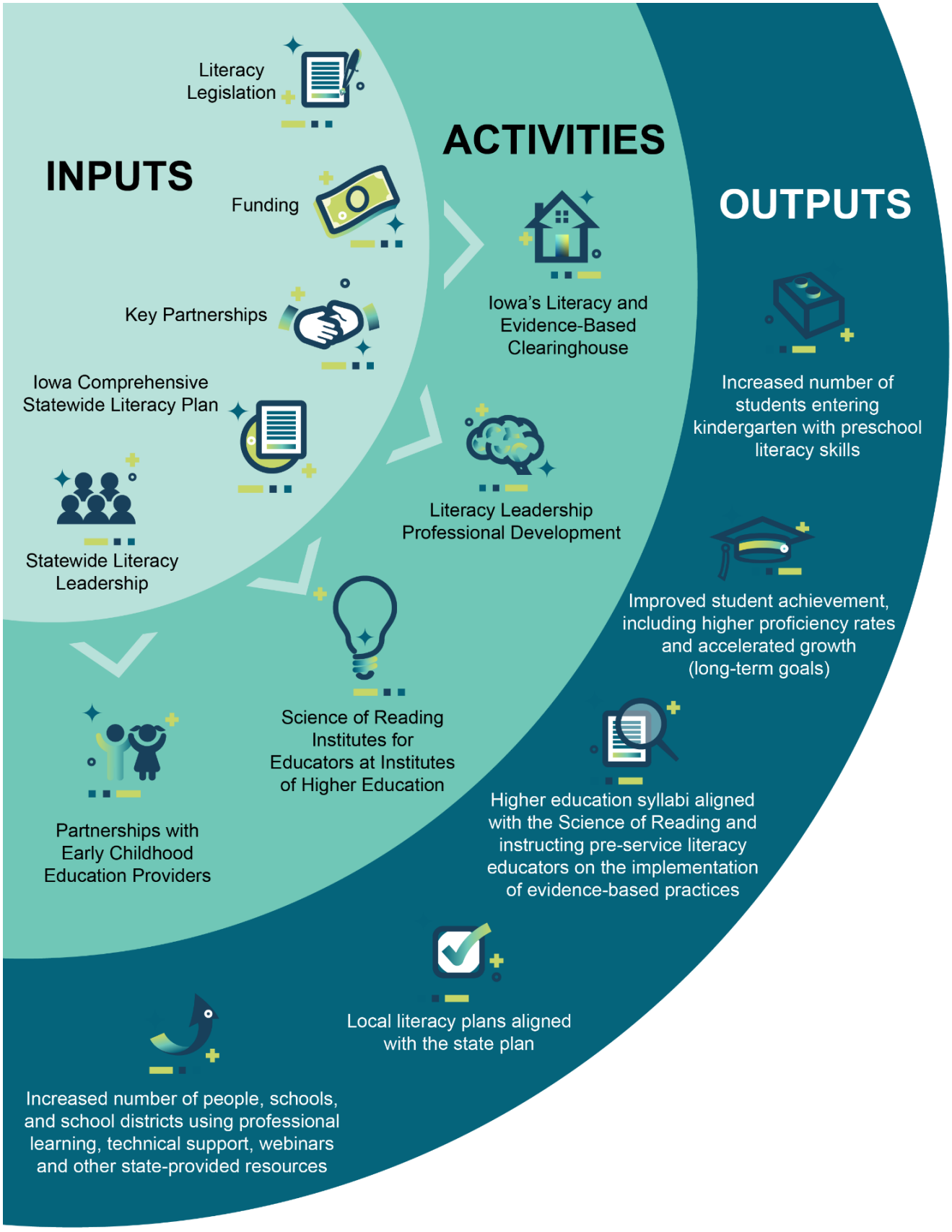
Long Term Outcomes 6–8 Years

- Achievement gaps in literacy close to within 10% for all educationally disadvantaged student groups based on Iowa state assessment data.
- Achievement for all students increases by 5% on Iowa Statewide Assessment of Student Progress (ISASP) reading and writing assessments.

Mid Term Outcomes 4–5 Years

- Leaders and practitioners continue to engage in high-quality, job-embedded professional learning to increase knowledge and skills around the Science of Reading and comprehensive literacy and refine their instructional practices through collaborative systems and structures.
- School districts and educators implement HQIMs with integrity and integrate evidence-based literacy practices aligned with their local literacy plans.
- Proficiency across the five components of reading and the skill of writing increase for all student populations, and narrow and close achievement gaps experienced by the most for educationally disadvantaged students.
- Student growth in literacy, based on assessment data (fall to spring), increases from year to year for all educationally disadvantaged student groups.

Logic Model


INPUTS
Literacy Legislation
Funding
Key Partnerships
Iowa Comprehensive Statewide Literacy Plan
Statewide Literacy Leadership
Partnerships with Early Childhood Education Providers
ACTIVITIES
Iowa's Literacy and Evidence-Based Clearinghouse
Literacy Leadership Professional Development
Science of Reading Institutes for Educators at Institutes of Higher Education
Higher education syllabi aligned with the Science of Reading and instructing pre-service literacy educators on the implementation of evidence-based practices
Local literacy plans aligned with the state plan
Increased number of people, schools, and school districts using professional learning, technical support, webinars and other state-provided resources
OUTPUTS
Increased number of students entering kindergarten with preschool literacy skills
Improved student achievement, including higher proficiency rates and accelerated growth (long-term goals)

Scientifically Based Reading Instruction

Reading: The Science and the Brain

In recent years, scientific research has shed light on how our brains learn to read, providing valuable insights for parents, educators, and anyone interested in improving literacy. Reading is a complex skill that our brains have adapted to handle, involving multiple brain regions working together. Understanding these processes can help us support children as they learn to read and address challenges like dyslexia more effectively.

Humans are not born to read—it's a skill we learn (Seidenberg, 2017; Wolf, 2007). Our brains were not originally designed for reading; instead, they have adapted existing brain circuits to take on this task. This concept, known as neuronal recycling, was introduced by cognitive neuroscientist Dr. Stanislas Dehaene. Essentially, the brain repurposes areas that were originally used for other functions, like recognizing objects and processing spoken language, to recognize letters and words (Dehaene, 2009, 2013; Dehaene & Cohen, 2011; Dehaene et al., 2015). This adaptation is what allows us to turn written symbols into meaningful language.

One of the most important discoveries in reading research is the identification of the Visual Word Form Area (VWFA), located in the brain's left occipitotemporal cortex. This area is crucial for recognizing written words and letters. As children learn to read, this part of the brain becomes specialized in processing the visual aspects of written language, enabling them to quickly recognize words, which is essential for fluent reading (Dehaene, 2009, 2013; Dehaene & Cohen, 2011; Dehaene et al., 2015).

Reading involves several interconnected processes in the brain. These can be understood through what researchers call the four-part processor model:

- Orthographic Processor: This part helps us recognize the visual forms of letters and words.
- Phonological Processor: It links the visual forms to their corresponding sounds, a key step in decoding words.
- Meaning Processor: This area connects the recognized word to its meaning.
- Context Processor: It helps us understand words in the context of a sentence or passage (Dehaene, 2009, 2013a. 2013b; Dehaene & Cohen, 2011; Dehaene et al., 2015).

This model shows how different brain regions work together to make reading possible, highlighting the importance of both visual recognition and sound processing.

One of the most critical skills in learning to read is phonological awareness—the ability to hear and manipulate the sounds in spoken language. This skill is foundational for reading. Teaching methods that emphasize phonics, which involves linking letters with sounds, are particularly effective because they align with how the brain processes reading. Children can decode words more easily by building strong connections between the letters we see and the sounds we hear (Ehri, 2005; Seidenberg, 2017).

Early reading instruction is vital, especially during the period when children's brains are most flexible and ready to learn new skills. When children receive systematic phonics instruction early on, they develop the neural pathways necessary for reading. If children miss out on this early instruction, it can be harder for them to develop these pathways later, leading to reading difficulties (Dehaene, 2009, 2013; Dehaene & Cohen, 2011; Dehaene et al., 2015). This highlights the importance of early literacy programs and interventions to ensure that all children have the best start in their reading journey.

Dyslexia is a common reading disorder where individuals struggle with word recognition, spelling, and decoding despite having normal intelligence. Dyslexia is linked to differences in how the brain processes written and spoken language. Specifically, people with dyslexia often show less activity in

the VWFA and related brain areas during reading tasks (Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2005). This difference makes it harder for them to recognize words quickly and accurately, which affects their reading fluency. Understanding these brain differences has led to the development of targeted teaching strategies, such as structured literacy approaches, which focus on strengthening phonological awareness and decoding skills (Moats, 2020a, 2020b). Please refer to the Iowa Dyslexia Handbook (Department, 2025) for further information.

Learning to read helps children become literate and boosts their overall cognitive development. Reading enhances memory, attention, and critical thinking skills. These benefits extend beyond literacy itself, impacting a child's success in all areas of learning (Wolf, 2007). This is why effective reading instruction in the early years is so important—it sets the foundation for lifelong learning.

Interestingly, the brain processes reading in similar ways, no matter what language or writing system a person uses. The VWFA is involved in reading across different languages, suggesting that there are universal principles in how the brain adapts to reading (Dehaene, 2009, 2013; Dehaene & Cohen, 2011; Dehaene et al., 2015). This means that evidence-based reading instruction can be adapted to different languages but should remain grounded in the same cognitive principles to be effective.

Understanding how the brain learns to read provides valuable insights to help us support children's literacy development. From the concept of neuronal recycling to the importance of the VWFA and phonological processing, the research highlights the complex processes involved in reading. This knowledge underscores the need for early, systematic literacy instruction and offers guidance for addressing challenges like dyslexia. By using research-based approaches, we can better support all children in becoming confident, skilled readers, setting them up for success in school and beyond.



Educator Resources:
English Learners | Reading League Summit | "Learning to Read in One or More Languages: What Happens to the Brain, and How Can We Facilitate It?" (Dehaene, 2024)

The Science of Reading

The Science of Reading is a vast body of research from multiple fields (i.e., education, linguistics, psychology, neuroscience) and derives from multiple studies that explain how individuals learn to read and the practices most effective in maximizing student literacy outcomes. This body of research informs the "what" and "how" of teaching literacy (reading and writing). It also informs the focus of teacher preparation programs, the instructional materials districts select, and the professional learning most likely to impact teaching and learning.

The Science of Reading is not a philosophy, a specific program, or a single method of teaching or component of instruction. While scientifically based reading research is supported by state (Iowa Code 279.68(2a) and federal policy (Every Student Succeeds Act, 20 U.S.C. 6301), the Science of Reading is a nonpartisan topic; it is based on what is most effective in teaching reading and writing.

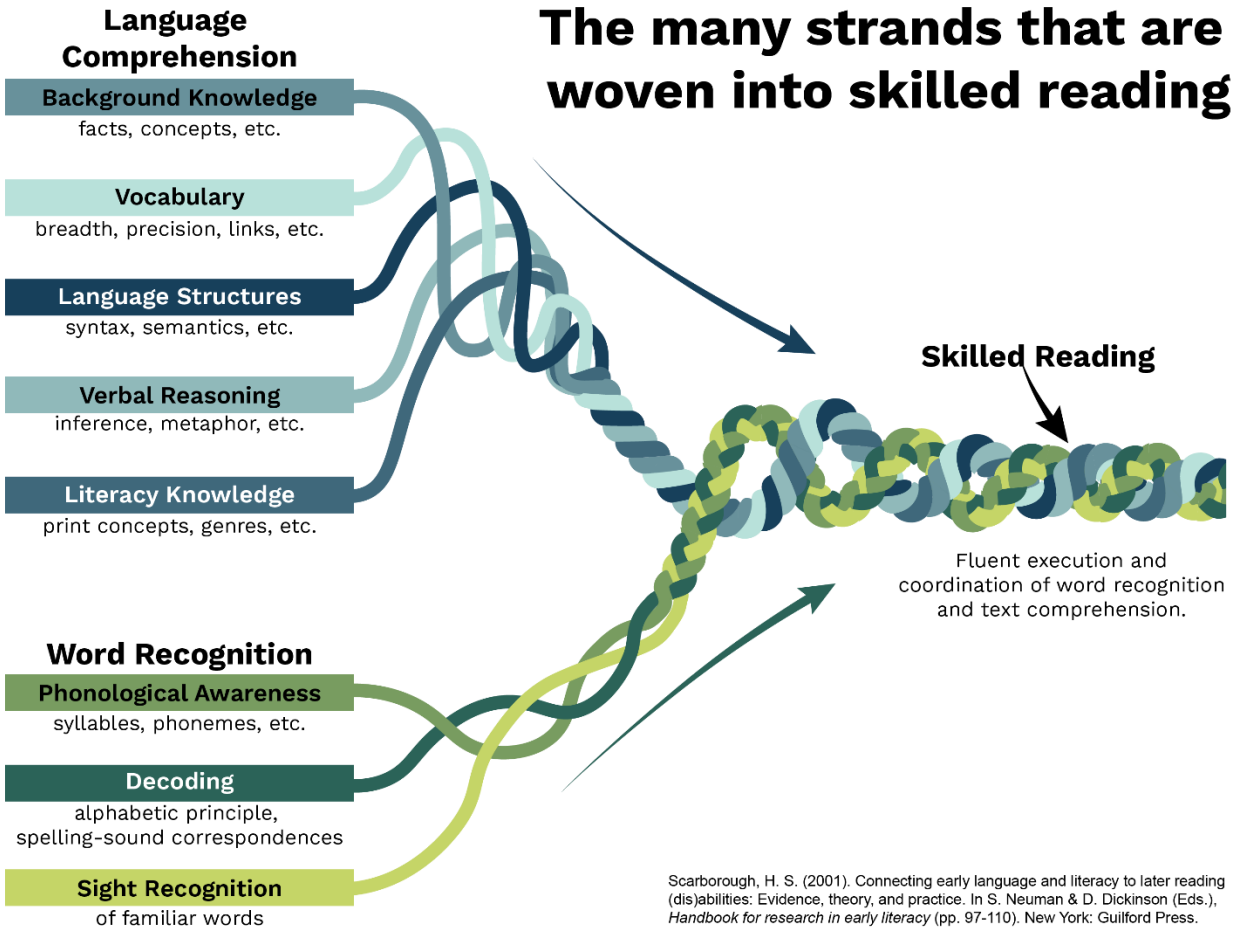
The Science of Reading recognizes the most scientifically based "what" and "how" of teaching reading and writing. These components have the most evidence for impacting learning outcomes for typical learners, learners with disabilities and those at risk for reading concerns. It is important to recognize that the Science of Reading is evolving and dependent on continued scientifically based reading research. Teaching based on the Science

> "Part of preventing reading difficulties means focusing on programs to ensure that all children have access to books from birth and that they have access to adults who will read those books with them and discuss them." —Catherine Snow, Ph.D.
>
> Amplify | Science of Reading: The Podcast–S8-12

of Reading is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Some students may need more or less emphasis on specific components of literacy and/or more or less explicit, systematic and sequential instruction. The effectiveness of instruction based on the Science of Reading is dependent on responsive teaching and using data regularly to ensure that instruction is having the expected impact.

Scarborough's Rope

There are several models for the Science of Reading. The adopted model for the Iowa Department of Education is Scarborough's Rope, created by Dr. Hollis Scarborough (2001), a cognitive developmental psychologist. Scarborough's Rope indicates that there are many individual strands in both language comprehension and word recognition that interact and influence each other to develop skilled reading. Please refer to the Department Literacy page (2024) for more information.



Scarborough's Reading Rope illustrates the complex and interconnected skills required for proficient reading, divided into two main strands: Language Comprehension and Word Recognition. The Language Comprehension strand encompasses several components that contribute to understanding the meaning of text. Background Knowledge refers to a reader's understanding of the world, including concepts and information that are essential for making sense of what is read. Vocabulary involves knowing the meanings of words within context, which is crucial for interpreting the text accurately. Language Structures include the understanding of sentence structure, grammar, and syntax, which are necessary for grasping how ideas are connected within and across sentences. Verbal Reasoning is the ability to infer and reason about what is read, allowing readers to draw conclusions and understand

implicit meanings. Finally, Literacy Knowledge involves understanding the conventions of print, such as recognizing genres, narrative structures, and literary devices, all of which help readers navigate and interpret various types of texts effectively.

The Word Recognition strand focuses on the foundational skills needed to decode and recognize words, which are essential for fluent reading. Phonological Awareness refers to the ability to hear and manipulate the sounds within words, which is a precursor to decoding. Decoding and Spelling involve applying knowledge of letter-sound relationships to read and spell words, enabling readers to translate written symbols into spoken language. Sight Recognition is the ability to recognize words quickly and effortlessly, often due to repeated exposure, allowing for more fluid reading and freeing cognitive resources for comprehension. Together, these components of the Reading Rope illustrate the multifaceted nature of reading and underscore the need for integrated instruction that develops both word recognition and language comprehension to achieve skilled reading.

Each of these components is depicted as a “strand” in the rope. As students develop their reading abilities, the strands become more tightly woven together, leading to fluent and skilled reading. The model emphasizes that proficient reading is not a single skill but a combination of multiple interrelated skills that work together.

The Reading Rope highlights the importance of integrating both word recognition and language comprehension in literacy instruction, suggesting that strong readers need to develop both decoding skills and a deep understanding of language and content.

The Reading Rope provides a comprehensive framework for educators to understand that reading proficiency is not the result of a single skill but the integration of multiple, interrelated skills. For example, while phonological awareness and decoding are critical for word recognition, they must be complemented by vocabulary knowledge and text comprehension to enable students to understand and interpret text effectively. This comprehensive approach aligns with evidence-based reading instruction, which advocates for explicit teaching in all the key components of reading identified by research.

The Reading Rope demonstrates that teachers must identify specific areas where a student may be struggling. For instance, if a student can decode words but struggles with comprehension, the issue may lie in one of the language comprehension strands, such as background knowledge or vocabulary. This targeted approach enables more effective interventions, ensuring that each student receives the help they need in the areas that matter most for their reading development.

The model emphasizes the importance of integrating both word recognition and language comprehension. This is supported by research from the National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), 2000), which found that reading instruction is most effective when it includes systematic phonics (for word recognition) along with strategies for developing language comprehension skills. The Reading Rope underscores that these skills do not develop in isolation but must be woven together to create a proficient reader.

By breaking down the complex process of reading into its component parts, the Reading Rope helps educators focus on building strong foundational skills in early literacy. This is crucial because gaps in any of the strands can weaken the overall reading ability, leading to struggles in later grades. Evidence-based practices, such as systematic phonics instruction and explicit vocabulary teaching, are aligned with this approach and are proven to be effective in building these foundational skills.

Implementing the components of the Reading Rope in instruction leads to improved student literacy by ensuring that all aspects of reading are addressed in a structured, systematic way. As students develop each strand of the rope, they become more confident and capable readers. Students who receive comprehensive, evidence-based reading instruction demonstrate significant gains in reading achievement.

Furthermore, the Reading Rope's emphasis on the integration of word recognition and language comprehension aligns with the Science of Reading, a body of research that supports the use of explicit, systematic instruction to improve reading outcomes. By focusing on both strands, educators can ensure that students are not only able to decode words but also understand and interpret what they read, leading to greater overall literacy.

In conclusion, Scarborough's Reading Rope is an essential tool for guiding evidence-based reading instruction. It helps educators understand the complexity of reading, target specific areas of need, and provide comprehensive instruction that improves literacy outcomes for all students.

Core Literacy Components

Oral Language

Oral language development begins as early as infancy when babies engage with caregivers through social interactions (Honig, 2007). It includes both speaking and listening, helping young children learn about the world and communicate with others. Oral language skills are considered a key predictor of later language and literacy success (NICHD, 2008).

Babies first start exploring language by babbling and cooing. As they grow, they begin repeating sounds like "da da" and eventually speak their first words. These early one-word utterances develop into multiple words and later into complex sentences. The preschool years, in particular, show significant growth in language development, with children learning roughly 2,500 new words each year by age 3 (Roskos et al., 2004). Exposure to new words and conversations is essential to fostering this growth.

Children use oral language for many purposes—making requests, asking questions, sharing information, and engaging in social and playful exchanges. The more language they are exposed to through daily conversations, the faster their vocabulary and language comprehension grow (Honig, 2007; Roskos et al., 2004).

Oral language is a complex system that links sounds with meaning. It consists of several key components (Justice & Ezell, 2001; Moats, 2020a, 2020b; NICHD, 2000; Owens, 2016; Paul & Norbury, 2012; Snow et al., 1998).

1. Phonological Component: This involves the rules for combining sounds in a language. For instance, in English, certain sounds like "-ng" can end a word but not begin one. Children absorb these rules naturally as they learn to speak.
2. Semantic Component: This focuses on the meaning of words and sentences. The smallest units of meaning, called morphemes, can be combined to form words and sentences (e.g., "paper" + "s" becomes "papers"). As children's vocabulary grows, so does their understanding of word meanings.
3. Syntactic Component: This refers to the rules that govern how words are arranged into sentences. Even when young children form phrases like "more cracker," they are applying basic rules of syntax. Over time, they learn more complex sentence structures, such as using suffixes (e.g., -s or -ing) and combining multiple ideas in one sentence.
4. Pragmatic Component: Pragmatics involves understanding how to use language appropriately in different contexts. Children need to learn how to adjust their language for different situations, such as speaking casually at home versus more formally in school. Pragmatic skills are vital for social communication and help children navigate various conversational settings.

Children's language development is shaped by a combination of genetic factors, environmental exposure, and their own thinking abilities (Bishop, 2006; Dale et al., 2000; Hart & Risley, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978; Wells, 1986). As they interact with others, they refine their use of language, making

connections and making sense of their experiences. While language acquisition follows a general timeline—first words around 12 to 18 months and complex sentences by 4 to 4 ½ years—there is significant variability in when individual children reach these milestones.

Oral language development is a natural and dynamic process shaped by a child's interactions with their environment and nurturing caregivers (Huttenlocher et al., 2002). Encouraging conversations and exposing children to rich vocabulary helps them build the language skills they need for later success in reading and communication (Honig, 2007; NICHD, 2008).

Progression of Oral Language

Birth to Age 3: Oral language development begins from birth, as babies listen to and respond to the speech around them. By the first year, babies can follow simple instructions, and by age 2, toddlers typically speak in two- or three-word sentences. Interaction with caregivers through songs, stories, and conversations is critical at this stage for building the foundations of oral language (Hart & Risley, 1995; NICHD, 2008; Snow, 1991). Babies and toddlers need consistent exposure to rich, responsive language to build their verbal skills (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2015; Zwiers & Crawford, 2011).

Preschool (Ages 3–5): In the preschool years, oral language skills become more sophisticated. Children start to use more complex sentence structures and engage in longer conversations. They learn the rules of conversation, such as turn-taking and staying on topic, which are vital for communication. At this stage, preschoolers also begin to use language to express ideas, describe events, and ask questions. At this phase, language interactions between caregivers and children, also supports children's oral language skills. Rich oral language experiences in preschool, such as through dialogic reading (Justice & Pullen, 2003; U.S. DOE, IES, WWC, 2007, 2010, 2015), interactive storytime, or adults expanding on and asking questions during play, are also crucial for developing the skills necessary for literacy (Shanahan & Lonigan, 2010).

Early Elementary (Ages 5–7): As children enter kindergarten and first grade, their oral language abilities become more advanced. They can produce longer and more grammatically complex sentences and engage in sustained conversations with peers and adults. Their vocabulary expands rapidly, allowing them to describe experiences in greater detail and use language for various functions, including storytelling, explaining, and asking clarifying questions. At this stage, children also begin to develop phonological awareness, which supports early reading development (NICHD, 2008). Oral language experiences, such as class discussions, show-and-tell activities, and interactive read-alouds, help refine their ability to listen, respond, and use language effectively in different contexts (Beck & McKeown, 2001). Explicit vocabulary instruction and opportunities for oral rehearsal before writing tasks further enhance their language development (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Graham et al., 2012).

Middle Elementary (Ages 7–9): By second and third grade, children's oral language skills continue to develop, with an increasing focus on academic discourse. They become more adept at using language to compare, contrast, persuade, and explain abstract concepts. Their ability to follow multi-step directions improves, and they begin to understand and use more complex sentence structures, including conjunctions and embedded clauses. This stage also marks a shift toward the use of academic vocabulary, as children are exposed to more sophisticated words through reading and subject-specific discussions. Classroom activities that encourage oral presentations, collaborative group work, and structured discussions help children refine their communication skills and prepare them for more advanced language use (Nagy & Townsend, 2012).

Late Elementary (Ages 9–12): By fourth to sixth grade, children develop greater flexibility in their use of oral language. They can adjust their speech based on audience and purpose, distinguishing between informal conversational language and more formal academic or presentation-style speech. They become more skilled at participating in debates, summarizing information, and explaining reasoning in a clear and logical manner. Their ability to engage in higher-order discussions improves, allowing them to infer, hypothesize, and analyze texts through spoken language. As they encounter increasingly

complex texts, discussions about figurative language, idioms, and nuanced word meanings further enhance their oral communication skills. Structured classroom discussions, Socratic seminars, and debates provide essential practice in expressing ideas coherently and responding to differing viewpoints (Applebee et al., 2003).

Adolescence and Beyond (Ages 12+): By middle and high school, students are expected to use oral language in sophisticated ways across academic and social contexts. They refine their ability to argue a point with evidence, analyze texts through discussion, and engage in structured dialogues about complex topics. Their vocabulary continues to grow, particularly in academic and discipline-specific areas, which supports their ability to engage in subject-matter discussions in science, history, and literature. They also develop metalinguistic awareness, allowing them to think about and discuss the structure and use of language itself. Mastery of oral language is critical at this stage for success in presentations, interviews, and written expression. Opportunities for public speaking, collaborative discussions, and academic debates help refine their ability to articulate complex ideas clearly and persuasively (Applebee et al., 2003; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008).

Oral language development is a continuous and dynamic process that influences all areas of literacy and academic achievement. By fostering strong oral communication skills at each stage, educators and caregivers provide children with the tools they need to succeed in reading, writing, and lifelong learning.

Print Awareness (Concepts of Print)

Print awareness or **concepts of print** refer to a child's understanding of how written language works. This includes recognizing that print carries meaning and understanding the basic rules that govern print, such as:

1. Text Direction: Knowing that in English, we read from left to right and from top to bottom.
2. Book Handling: Understanding how to hold a book properly, turn pages, and know where the story begins and ends.
3. Word and Letter Recognition: Identifying the difference between letters, words, and spaces, as well as recognizing that words are made up of letters and separated by spaces.
4. Punctuation: Noticing punctuation marks and understanding that they influence the way we read (e.g., periods indicate a stop, question marks signal a question).
5. Concept of Word in Text: Realizing that each word in the text represents spoken language.

Print awareness is one of the earliest literacy skills children develop and is essential for reading readiness. Teaching children how books work, pointing out words and letters in their environment, and reading aloud to them are key ways to foster this skill.

Progression of Print Awareness

Birth to Age 3: During the earliest years, print awareness begins to develop as children are exposed to books and print through interactions with caregivers. Infants and toddlers may begin to show interest in books by touching, mouthing, or looking at pictures. By age 2 or 3, children start to recognize familiar symbols and logos from their environment (e.g., recognizing the McDonald's logo). They also begin to understand basic book-handling skills, such as holding a book right-side up and turning pages, though they may not yet associate print with meaning (Justice & Pullen, 2003).

Preschool (Ages 3–5): At this stage, children's understanding of print concepts deepens. They learn that print represents spoken language and that reading moves from left to right in English (Justice & Ezell, 2001; NICHD, 2008). By age 4 or 5, children often recognize some letters of the alphabet, especially those in their names, and can identify that print, rather than pictures, is the source of the story (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998, 2001). Preschoolers also begin to grasp the alphabetic principle, understanding that letters correspond to specific sounds.

Early Elementary (Ages 5–7): As children enter kindergarten and first grade, their print awareness transitions into more structured literacy learning. They develop a stronger understanding of print directionality, recognizing that text is read from left to right and top to bottom in English (Clay, 2001; NICHD, 2008). They also begin to differentiate between letters, words, and sentences, understanding that spaces separate words in print. Alphabet knowledge becomes more advanced, with children recognizing most or all letters and their corresponding sounds (Piasta & Wagner, 2010; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). They start engaging in early decoding by blending sounds together to read simple words (Ehri, 2005). Their exposure to environmental print and classroom labels reinforces the idea that print has meaning beyond books, such as on signs, labels, and packaging. Activities such as shared reading, interactive writing, and guided play with print materials further solidify their print awareness and emergent literacy skills (Walpole & McKenna, 2017).

Middle Elementary (Ages 7–9): By second and third grade, children refine their understanding of print structure as they transition from learning to read to reading to learn (Chall, 1983). They become adept at recognizing different text features, such as headings, paragraphs, and punctuation, and begin to understand how print is organized in different genres (e.g., narratives, informational texts, poetry) (Duke & Roberts, 2010; Snow et al., 1998). They develop automaticity in recognizing high-frequency words and decoding unfamiliar words, allowing them to focus more on comprehension rather than print mechanics (Ehri et al., 2001; Foorman et al., 1998). As print awareness shifts toward fluency development, children become more confident in their ability to navigate books and digital texts independently (Rasinski, 2012). Explicit instruction in text structure, word recognition, and decoding strategies helps strengthen their reading confidence and fluency (Archer & Hughes, 2011; Ehri, 2005; NICHD, 2000;).

Late Elementary (Ages 9–12): By fourth to sixth grade, children have mastered the basic conventions of print and can effectively navigate increasingly complex texts. They develop a deeper awareness of how print is structured in different subject areas, recognizing elements such as captions, indexes, glossaries, and diagrams in informational texts. Their ability to skim and scan for key information improves, helping them become more strategic readers. At this stage, students also engage more with digital literacy, understanding how print functions in online formats, including hyperlinks, menus, and search results. They refine their ability to distinguish between different sources of print information and evaluate text organization for meaning. Instruction should emphasize text analysis, comprehension strategies, and exposure to varied print formats to prepare students for more advanced literacy tasks (Duke & Pearson, 2002).

Adolescence and Beyond (Ages 12+): By middle and high school, students demonstrate advanced print awareness, allowing them to engage with rich, complex texts across disciplines. They develop a nuanced understanding of text organization, recognizing how authors structure arguments, present evidence, and use print features to guide comprehension. Their ability to interpret and evaluate different print formats—including academic articles, technical manuals, and digital texts—becomes essential for independent learning and critical thinking. At this stage, students also refine their ability to analyze and synthesize information across multiple sources, distinguishing between credible and non-credible print materials. Advanced literacy instruction should focus on text analysis, research skills, and comprehension strategies that support higher-level learning and academic success (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008).

Print awareness is a foundational skill that evolves from basic recognition of books and symbols in early childhood to sophisticated text analysis in adolescence. Supporting print awareness at each stage ensures that students develop strong reading, writing, and critical thinking skills necessary for lifelong literacy.

Phonological and Phonemic Awareness

Each individual sound is called a **phoneme**; phonemes are the smallest units of spoken language. Phonemic awareness is the knowledge of spoken language, not written language. When sounds

themselves are represented in writing, not letters that represent them, they appear in slashes (e.g., /a/ instead of “a”).

English has about 44 phonemes, though the exact number may vary slightly depending on accents or dialects. These phonemes are classified into two main types:

1. **Consonant Phonemes** are sounds produced when the airflow is partially or completely blocked by the lips, tongue, or teeth. English has about 24 consonant sounds.

   Examples:

   - /b/ as in “bat”
   - /s/ as in “sun”
   - /ch/ as in “chip”
   - /th/ as in “this” (voiced) or “thin” (voiceless)

2. **Vowel Phonemes** are produced with an open vocal tract, allowing the sound to flow freely. There are around 20 vowel sounds in English, including both single vowels and diphthongs (vowel sounds that glide from one to another).

   Examples:

   - /a/ as in “cat”
   - /ee/ as in “see”
   - /oo/ as in “moon”
   - /ai/ as in “train” (a diphthong)

Phonemic awareness is the ability to identify, hear, and manipulate the individual sounds, or phonemes, in spoken words. The manipulation of sounds may take the form of the following:

- Sound Isolation: This involves identifying individual sounds within a word, such as determining the first, middle, or last sound. For example, the initial sound in “cat” is /k/.
- Sound Matching: In this skill, children recognize which words share the same sound. For instance, they might identify that “bat” and “ball” both start with the /b/ sound.
- Blending Sounds into Words: Children learn to combine individual sounds to form a complete word. For example, blending /s/ /u/ /n/ results in “sun.”
- Segmenting Sounds in Words: This involves breaking a word down into its separate sounds. For example, segmenting “dog” results in /d/ /o/ /g/.
- Deleting Sounds: Children practice removing a specific sound from a word to form a new word. For example, deleting the /s/ sound from “stop” leaves “top.”
- Adding Sounds: This skill involves adding a new sound to an existing word to create a different word. For example, adding /s/ to “lip” forms “slip.”
- Substituting Sounds: Children learn to replace one sound in a word with another, creating a new word. For example, changing the /m/ in “mat” to /r/ produces “rat.”

Phonological awareness encompasses a broad range of skills related to recognizing and manipulating sounds in spoken language, including the ability to work with syllables, alliteration,

rhymes, and onsets and rimes. Phonological awareness sets the stage for decoding, blending, and, ultimately, word reading. It begins developing before the beginning of formal schooling and continues through third grade and beyond. Readers must have awareness of the speech sounds that letters and letter combinations represent in order to move from a printed word to a spoken word (reading), or a spoken word to a written word (spelling) (Moats, 2020a, 2020b).

Phonological awareness is developed through listening and speaking activities such as rhyming games, sound play, and clapping out syllables, which lay the foundation for reading and writing.

- Syllables are the distinct sound units in words, each containing one vowel sound; for example, the word “tiger” has two syllables (ti-ger), and “elephant” has three (el-e-phant).
- Alliteration is the ability to identify words that begin with the same sound, such as “big blue ball.”
- Rhyming involves recognizing words that share the same ending sounds, like “cat” and “hat” or “sun” and “fun.”
- Onsets and rimes are key components of phonological awareness as well: the onset is the initial consonant sound of a syllable, and the rime includes the vowel and everything that follows it. For instance, in the word “cat,” the onset is /c/ and the rime is /-at/, while in “sun,” the onset is /s/ and the rime is /-un/.

Progression of Phonological Awareness

Birth to Age 3: Phonological awareness begins to develop in infancy through exposure to spoken language. Babies are attuned to the rhythm, intonation, and patterns of speech, responding to the prosody of caregivers’ voices (Kuhl, 2004). By age 2, children demonstrate an emerging sensitivity to sounds in language, often enjoying rhymes and simple wordplay, even if they cannot yet produce rhyming words themselves (Gillon, 2004). They may begin to experiment with sounds, engaging in repetitive vocalizations and playful speech patterns, laying the groundwork for more structured phonological awareness (Adams, 1990; Snow et al., 1998).

Preschool (Ages 3–5): During the preschool years, phonological awareness becomes more explicit and intentional. Children start to recognize and generate rhymes, segment words into syllables, and detect similarities in sounds within words. As they approach age 5, some children begin to isolate and manipulate sounds in words, demonstrating early phonemic awareness. They may identify the first sound in a word (“/c/ in cat”) or blend simple sounds to form words (“/m/ + /a/ + /p/ = map”). This stage is essential for later reading development, as strong phonological awareness is linked to early decoding skills (NICHD 2008; Shanahan & Lonigan, 2010).

Early Elementary (Ages 5–7): As children enter formal schooling, phonological awareness deepens, progressing into full phonemic awareness. They refine their ability to segment words into individual sounds (e.g., breaking cat into /c/ /a/ /t/) and blend phonemes to form words. By first grade, many children can manipulate phonemes, such as deleting or substituting sounds (e.g., changing /m/ in mat to /s/ to form sat). These skills form the foundation for phonics instruction, allowing students to connect sounds with letters and develop decoding abilities (NICHD, 2008).

Middle to Late Elementary (Ages 7–9): By mid-elementary school, most children have mastered phonemic awareness and begin to rely on orthographic knowledge for word recognition rather than solely on phonological processing. However, phonological awareness remains important, especially for spelling and decoding unfamiliar words. Some students who struggle with phonemic manipulation may need continued support in phonological awareness activities, particularly if they show signs of reading difficulties such as dyslexia (Ehri, 2014).

Adolescence and Beyond: While phonological awareness is typically mastered in early elementary years, it remains relevant for older students, particularly for spelling, vocabulary development, and

learning additional languages. Students with reading challenges may continue to benefit from phonemic awareness instruction, especially in decoding multisyllabic words and understanding morphological patterns (Moats, 2020a, 2020b).

Phonics

Phonics involves teaching the relationship between sounds (phonemes) and their corresponding letters (or groups of letters), also called graphemes. Phonics teaches that there are regular and predictable relationships between written letters and spoken sounds. Through phonics instruction, children learn how to decode (read) and encode (spell) words by applying their knowledge of these sound-letter correspondences.

Written English is based on the alphabet; therefore, the **alphabetic principle** is one of the core components of phonics instruction. It is the understanding that there is a systematic relationship between letters (graphemes) and sounds (phonemes) in a language. It means recognizing that letters and combinations of letters represent the sounds of spoken language, and that these sounds can be blended together to form words. For example, knowing that the letters “c,” “a,” and “t” correspond to the sounds /k/, /æ/, and /t/ allows a reader to decode and pronounce the word “cat.”

According to the National Reading Panel report children with strong phonological awareness skills tend to become better readers, as it helps them understand the **alphabetic principle**—that letters represent sounds in words (NICHD, 2000).

Orthographic mapping is the process of connecting sounds (phonemes) to their written forms (graphemes) and is crucial for the development of fluent reading.

Graphemes are the written symbols or letters that represent individual sounds, or phonemes, in a language. They are the smallest units of written language that correspond to sounds. In English, a grapheme can be a single letter (like “a” or “b”) or a group of letters (like “ch” or “igh”) that together represent a single sound.

Types of **graphemes:**

1. Single-letter graphemes (e.g. “b” represents the /b/ sound as in “bat”; “a” represents the /a/ sound as in “cat”)
2. Digraphs–two letter graphemes: (e.g. “sh” represents the /sh/ sound as in “ship”; “th” represents the /th/ sound as in “that”)
3. Trigraphs–three letters graphemes: (e.g. “igh” represents the /ī/ sound as in “sigh”; “tch” represents the /ch/ sound as in “match”)
4. Quadgraphs–four letters graphemes: (e.g. “eigh” represents the /ā/ sound as in “eight”)

Graphemes are essential to understanding how written language works because they are the visual symbols that correspond to the sounds of spoken words. Mastery of grapheme-phoneme relationships is crucial for developing reading and spelling skills, as readers must decode graphemes to sound out words and writers must encode sounds into appropriate graphemes.

Progression of Orthographic Mapping

Birth to Age 3: The development of the alphabetic principle begins subtly as babies are exposed to spoken language and start to recognize the sounds of speech. During this period, they become familiar with the rhythm and patterns of language, which lays the groundwork for understanding that words are made up of smaller sounds. By age 1, children begin to produce sounds and simple words, often imitating what they hear. From ages 1 to 3, toddlers gain awareness of spoken language through interactions with caregivers, songs, and nursery rhymes. While they are not yet connecting sounds to specific letters, they start to develop early phonological awareness, such as recognizing rhymes and

playing with sounds, which are essential precursors to understanding the alphabetic principle (Snow et al., 1998).

Preschool (Ages 3–5): As children enter preschool, they begin to develop a more explicit understanding of the alphabetic principle through exposure to letters and sounds. By age 4 or 5, many children can recognize and name some letters of the alphabet and are starting to connect these letters to the sounds they hear in spoken words. Phonics instruction in preschool is often informal, focusing on playful activities that teach letter-sound relationships, such as identifying the first sound in a word or matching letters to objects that start with the same sound (e.g., “B” for “ball”). Developing this connection between letters and sounds is critical because it allows children to begin decoding words when they encounter them in print. Effective early phonics experiences help solidify the understanding of the alphabetic principle, setting a foundation for successful reading in later years (NICHD, 2000).

Early Elementary (Ages 5–7): Between ages 5 and 7, children move from the partial to the full alphabetic stage as they begin applying their phonemic awareness and phonics knowledge to accurately decode words. Systematic instruction in sound-letter correspondences and blending allows them to map phonemes to graphemes and build a foundation for orthographic mapping. Each successful decoding experience strengthens their ability to recognize words efficiently and store them for automatic retrieval. At this stage, students begin reading decodable texts with increasing ease and start to read many familiar words automatically through repeated, accurate decoding. This process lays the groundwork for fluent reading and spelling as the brain builds connections between sounds, letters, and meaning (Ehri, 2014; Kilpatrick, 2015).

Middle Elementary (Ages 7–9): Children reach the full alphabetic state and develop the ability to fully decode words using systematic phonics knowledge. They can segment and blend all phonemes within a word and understand common spelling patterns. This marks the beginning of true orthographic mapping, as they start linking phonemes to graphemes across entire words, allowing for rapid word recognition. During this stage, students begin storing high-frequency words in long-term memory through repeated decoding experiences. They also start recognizing morphological patterns (e.g., jumping contains jump + -ing), which further supports word recognition. The speed of word retrieval increases as more words become part of their sight vocabulary.

Late Elementary (Ages 9–12): At this stage, children reach the consolidated alphabetic stage and move beyond phoneme-grapheme connections and begin recognizing larger units of print, such as syllables, common morphemes (prefixes, suffixes, root words), and orthographic patterns. Their ability to recognize words efficiently without decoding individual sounds expands, increasing reading fluency and comprehension. Students start generalizing spelling patterns across words (e.g., knowing light, fight, and might share the same spelling pattern and pronunciation). The development of automaticity in word recognition allows for smoother and more efficient reading, freeing cognitive resources for comprehension.

Adolescence and Beyond: By middle school and high school, proficient readers have a well-developed orthographic lexicon and have reached the automatic stage, allowing them to read most words instantly without conscious decoding. They rely on their extensive mental dictionary of stored words, which includes not only common words but also more complex academic and domain-specific vocabulary. Readers continue to refine their ability to recognize and spell multisyllabic words by using their knowledge of root words, affixes, and spelling rules (e.g., understanding how biology and biography share the root bio- meaning “life”). Struggling readers who have not fully developed orthographic mapping skills may still rely on slow decoding and benefit from structured literacy interventions.

Fluency

Reading fluency is the ability of students to read text with appropriate speed, accuracy, and prosody (Rasinski, 2004, 2006). Automaticity is the ability to read with speed and accuracy so that the reading

sounds smooth. Prosody is reading with proper phrasing, intonation, and expression. Until a reader achieves fluency (usually in second or third grade), comprehension is apt to suffer, because too much conscious attention must be directed at word identification and too little attention can be paid to comprehending what is read (NICHD, 2000; Walpole & McKenna, 2016). The goal of becoming a fluent reader is not to become a speed reader, but rather to achieve automaticity, so that the reader's attention can focus on the meaning of the text rather than on decoding the words.

Progression of Fluency Development

Birth to Age 3: Fluency development begins in infancy through exposure to spoken language. Babies listen to the rhythm, intonation, and patterns of speech, which helps them become familiar with the flow of language. By age 2, toddlers may imitate speech patterns, including the speed and rhythm of spoken words, even if their vocabulary is still limited. These early experiences with the cadence of language lay the groundwork for fluent reading later on, as they learn to perceive speech as a continuous stream rather than isolated sounds (Kuhl, 2004).

Preschool (Ages 3–5): During the preschool years, fluency continues to develop as children engage in more structured language experiences. Children begin to practice smooth, expressive speech through storytelling, songs, and repeated reading of familiar texts. By ages 4 and 5, they can often recite simple poems or chants, mimicking the natural pace and phrasing they have heard from adults. These early reading activities help them understand the concept of phrasing, expression, and rhythm, which are essential components of reading fluency. Exposure to books with predictable patterns and repeated phrases also supports their growing ability to recognize words quickly, setting the stage for fluent reading (Rasinski, 2003, 2004, 2006).

Early Elementary (Ages 5–7): As children enter kindergarten and first grade, they begin transitioning from oral fluency to reading fluency. Their primary focus is on decoding words accurately, though their reading is often slow and laborious. At this stage, children rely heavily on phonics skills to sound out words, and their reading may be choppy and disconnected. They begin to recognize high-frequency words by sight and engage in repeated readings of familiar texts to develop confidence and speed. While prosody is limited, they may begin to show signs of natural phrasing in familiar sentence structures. Activities such as choral reading, echo reading, and guided oral reading help reinforce accuracy and automaticity, essential components of fluency development (Rasinski, 2003, 2004, 2006).

Middle Elementary (Ages 7–9): By second and third grade, children make significant strides in fluency as they become more comfortable with decoding and word recognition (Ehri et al., 2001; NICHD, 2000). Reading becomes smoother and more natural, with increased accuracy and speed. Prosody begins to emerge, as students start to read with appropriate phrasing and expression, reflecting the meaning of the text. They engage in self-monitoring, correcting errors when meaning is disrupted, and adjusting their pace as needed. This is a critical period for fluency growth, as children who do not develop sufficient automaticity may continue to struggle with reading comprehension. Frequent opportunities for oral reading, paired with feedback and support, help solidify fluency skills and ensure that reading becomes an effortless process (Rasinski, 2012; Walpole & McKenna, 2016).

Late Elementary (Ages 9–12): By fourth to sixth grade, fluent reading is expected, allowing students to devote more cognitive resources to comprehension rather than decoding. Accuracy remains high, and students develop the ability to recognize multisyllabic words and complex spelling patterns effortlessly. Reading rate continues to improve, though proficient readers adjust their speed based on text difficulty and purpose. Prosody becomes more sophisticated, with students pausing at appropriate punctuation, emphasizing key words, and modulating their tone to reflect meaning. They encounter increasingly complex texts across disciplines, requiring flexibility in fluency skills. This stage solidifies the connection between fluency and comprehension, as smooth, expressive reading allows for deeper engagement with the text (Rasinski, 2012).

Adolescence and Beyond (Ages 12+): By middle and high school, fluent readers can navigate a variety of texts with ease, adjusting their reading rate and expression to match different reading purposes (Kamil et al., 2008; Reed, 2022). Accuracy is high, and most words, including academic and content-specific vocabulary, are recognized effortlessly (Barth et al., 2014). Readers employ strategic techniques such as skimming for key information or rereading for deeper understanding (Kamil et al., 2008; Shanahan, 2021). Prosody is fully developed, allowing for natural expression and tone in both silent and oral reading (Kuhn et al., 2014). While most students reach this stage by adolescence, struggling readers may still require targeted fluency interventions, particularly when encountering complex texts that demand advanced decoding and comprehension skills (Reed, 2022; Shanahan et al., 2010). Continued practice with reading aloud, paired with explicit instruction in prosody and phrasing, helps ensure that all students reach proficiency in fluency, a cornerstone of lifelong literacy development (Kamil et al., 2008; Kuhn et al., 2014).

Vocabulary

The term vocabulary refers to the body of words known by a person. However, vocabulary can be subdivided into many categories, including receptive vocabulary (understanding what is heard), and expressive vocabulary (understanding how to use words correctly when speaking and/or writing). Knowing what words mean makes up as much as 70–80% of a reader's comprehension of a text (Beck et al., 2013). Vocabulary development is a continuous process that begins in early childhood and is linked to long-term reading success (Snow et al., 1998). A strong vocabulary supports reading comprehension, academic achievement, and effective communication. Vocabulary development is a key predictor of reading success, and explicit, systematic vocabulary instruction—paired with rich language experiences—ensures that students acquire the words they need for lifelong literacy and learning.

Progression of Vocabulary Development

Birth to Age 3: Vocabulary development begins at birth as babies are exposed to spoken language. By 12 months, most infants can understand a few basic words and may start to produce their first words. Between 1 and 3 years, toddlers rapidly expand their vocabulary, often acquiring several new words each day. By age 2, they can typically use simple sentences and start to name objects in their environment, thanks to frequent interactions with caregivers and exposure to rich language (Hart & Risley, 1995).

Preschool (Ages 3–5): In preschool, vocabulary growth accelerates as children are exposed to new words through conversations, books, and educational activities. By age 4 or 5, children typically have a vocabulary of thousands of words and can use more complex sentences. Vocabulary development is closely tied to oral language experiences, such as storytelling and interactive conversations, which help build a rich lexicon (Zwiers & Crawford, 2011). Strong vocabulary in the preschool years is predictive of later reading comprehension (Burchinal et al., 2022).

Early Elementary (Ages 5–7): As children enter kindergarten and first grade, their vocabulary continues to expand rapidly. By this stage, children recognize and use thousands of words in daily conversation, and their receptive vocabulary is much larger than their expressive vocabulary. Exposure to print plays a crucial role in vocabulary growth, as children begin learning words not commonly found in spoken language. They start to encounter academic vocabulary through read-alouds, classroom discussions, and early reading experiences. Children at this stage also begin to recognize that words can have multiple meanings and that words can be related by categories, such as synonyms, antonyms, and word families. Explicit instruction in word meanings, context clues, and morphology (e.g., prefixes and suffixes) supports vocabulary acquisition (Beck et al., 2013; Foorman et al., 2016).

Middle Elementary (Ages 7–9): By second and third grade, children's vocabulary development shifts toward more academic and domain-specific words. They begin to acquire words across subject areas, including science, mathematics, and social studies, which are essential for reading comprehension. At

this stage, students also refine their understanding of figurative language, such as metaphors, similes, and idioms. The ability to use context clues to determine word meanings improves, and they begin to explore morphology more deeply, understanding how roots, prefixes, and suffixes change word meaning (e.g., happy → unhappy, help → helpful). Independent reading becomes an important driver of vocabulary growth, as exposure to new words in varied contexts strengthens word retention and usage. Students benefit from explicit vocabulary instruction that includes direct explanations, rich discussions, and opportunities to use new words in speaking and writing (Beck et al., 2013; Foorman et al., 2016; Nagy & Scott, 2000; Snow et al., 1998).

Late Elementary (Ages 9–12): By fourth to sixth grade, children develop a more sophisticated vocabulary, including abstract and academic words (Beck et al., 2013). They can analyze word relationships, understand multiple-meaning words, and use figurative language with greater ease (Snow et al., 2005). They also begin to recognize Greek and Latin roots (e.g., bio- meaning life, port- meaning carry), which help them decode unfamiliar words. At this stage, students read more complex texts that introduce specialized vocabulary, requiring them to infer meanings from textual clues and background knowledge. They also engage in more structured writing assignments, where they must choose precise words to convey ideas effectively (Graham et al., 2012). Vocabulary instruction should focus on explicit teaching of high-utility academic words, encouraging deep processing through discussion, writing, and repeated exposure in meaningful contexts (Stahl & Nagy, 2006).

Adolescence and Beyond (Ages 12+): By middle and high school, vocabulary growth becomes increasingly subject-specific, as students encounter more technical and discipline-based language in textbooks, literature, and research materials (Kamil et al., 2008). They refine their understanding of nuanced word meanings, register (formal vs. informal language), and connotations (Beck et al., 2013). The ability to use academic language effectively becomes essential for reading comprehension, argumentation, and writing across genres. Students also develop metalinguistic awareness, allowing them to analyze word formation and etymology to decode complex words (Kuo & Anderson, 2006). Exposure to sophisticated texts, discussions that promote critical thinking, and direct instruction in academic vocabulary are essential for continued vocabulary growth. Struggling readers may require additional support in morphology, word-learning strategies, and comprehension scaffolds to access grade-level content (Snow, 2010).

Comprehension

Reading comprehension is the entire purpose for reading. Reading comprehension is the ability to understand, interpret, and make meaning from text. It is a complex process that depends on multiple skills, including vocabulary knowledge, background knowledge, working memory, and the ability to make inferences. Comprehension development occurs gradually as children acquire language, learn to decode, and engage with increasingly complex texts. Reading comprehension is a cumulative process, built upon early language experiences, vocabulary acquisition, and engagement with increasingly complex texts. By fostering strong comprehension skills at each stage of development, educators and caregivers help ensure that students become critical and independent readers capable of understanding and interpreting a wide range of texts throughout their lives.

Progression of Comprehension Development

Birth to Age 3: Comprehension skills begin developing in infancy as babies listen to and engage with spoken language. By 12 months, infants can follow simple directions and respond to familiar words or phrases, showing an early understanding of language (NICHD, 2008). Between 1 and 3 years, toddlers improve their comprehension as they listen to stories, answer simple questions, and engage in conversations with caregivers. These interactions help them connect words with meanings, actions, and concepts, laying the groundwork for more advanced comprehension skills (Snow et al., 1998). By age 2, children can understand basic questions like “Where is your toy?” and respond appropriately, demonstrating their growing ability to make sense of language (Fernald & Marchman, 2012).

Preschool (Ages 3–5): During the preschool years, comprehension skills become more sophisticated as children are exposed to more complex language and storytelling. By age 4 or 5, children can understand and retell simple stories, answer questions about events, and make predictions about what might happen next (NICHD, 2008; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Activities such as reading picture books, engaging in discussions, and participating in pretend play help strengthen their ability to comprehend spoken and written language. Storytime becomes a critical opportunity for building comprehension skills as children learn to connect ideas, infer meaning from pictures and context, and understand cause-and-effect relationships (Justice et al., 2005). Developing strong comprehension skills in preschool is essential for later reading success, as it enables children to understand and engage with more complex texts in school (Foorman et al., 2016; Scarborough, 2001).

Early Elementary (Ages 5–7): By kindergarten through first grade, comprehension development expands rapidly as children integrate decoding skills with oral language, background knowledge, and vocabulary to make meaning from text. Foundational reading skills and comprehension develop concurrently, with children learning to connect sounds to print while also constructing meaning through listening and reading experiences (Foorman et al., 2016; NICHD, 2000). Early comprehension is strengthened when teachers engage students in interactive read-alouds, explicit vocabulary instruction, and guided discussions that prompt students to predict, retell, and connect ideas (Beck & McKeown, 2001; Justice, Meier, & Walpole, 2005). Oral language and print-rich classroom environments remain critical as children move from learning to read toward reading for meaning (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). As students become more fluent, they begin to focus cognitive resources on understanding narrative structure, identifying main ideas, and making simple inferences (Scarborough, 2001; Snow, 2002). High-quality instruction that integrates decoding, vocabulary, and comprehension ensures that children establish the foundation necessary for future reading success.

Middle Elementary (Ages 7–9): By second and third grade, students' developing comprehension skills become more sophisticated as children gain fluency and automaticity in reading. They begin to make simple inferences, recognize cause-and-effect relationships, and summarize main ideas. Vocabulary continues to play a critical role in comprehension, as students encounter more complex words and concepts in both fiction and informational texts (Foorman et al., 2016). Background knowledge becomes increasingly important, as comprehension relies not only on what is stated explicitly but also on what readers already know about a topic (Kintsch, 2004). Instruction at this stage should include guided reading discussions, explicit strategy instruction (such as questioning, predicting, and summarizing), and opportunities for students to make connections between texts and their own experiences (Shanahan et al., 2010; Snow, 2002).

Late Elementary (Ages 9–12): By fourth to sixth grade students expand their comprehension skills by moving beyond basic comprehension and begin to engage in higher-order thinking about texts. They analyze themes, compare and contrast multiple texts, and evaluate an author's purpose and perspective (Duke et al., 2011). Their ability to infer meaning from context grows stronger, allowing them to understand more abstract ideas and figurative language (Shanahan et al., 2010). They also develop metacognitive skills, such as monitoring their understanding and using fix-up strategies when comprehension breaks down (Shanahan et al., 2010). Texts at this stage include increasingly complex narratives and expository content that require students to synthesize information from multiple sources. Instruction should emphasize deep discussions about texts, the use of graphic organizers to map out ideas, and opportunities for writing in response to reading (Foorman et al., 2016; Shanahan et al., 2010).

Adolescence and Beyond (Ages 12+): By middle and high school, proficient readers can critically analyze and interpret complex texts across various disciplines. They engage in argumentation, evaluate multiple perspectives, and synthesize information from multiple sources (Kamil et al., 2008). Academic language and domain-specific vocabulary play a significant role in comprehension, particularly in science, history, and technical subjects (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008; Snow, 2010). Students must navigate more abstract and nuanced texts, including primary source documents, essays, and research-

based writing. Instruction should support comprehension through explicit vocabulary instruction, discussion-based learning, and opportunities for students to analyze, critique, and defend interpretations of texts (Graham et al., 2016; Kamil et al., 2008). While most students develop strong comprehension skills by adolescence, struggling readers may require continued support in text analysis, inferencing, and strategic reading practices to fully engage with grade-level content (Shanahan et al., 2010).

Phases of Reading Development

Ehri's (1995, 2014) phases of word reading development describe the progression children undergo as they learn to read, from recognizing visual cues to achieving automatic word recognition. This theoretical framework helps educators understand how to support readers at different stages of literacy development, from beginning to proficient readers.

Pre-Alphabetic Phase

In the **pre-alphabetic phase**, children have little or no understanding of the relationship between letters and sounds. Instead, they rely on visual cues, such as pictures or familiar logos, to recognize words. For instance, a child might see a familiar logo and say the brand name, but they are not actually reading the word; they are simply recognizing a symbol. Children in this phase may guess words based on the context, pictures, or the shape of the word rather than decoding the letters. Instruction should focus on building phonological awareness and letter knowledge and introducing the concept of grapheme-phoneme correspondences. Typically, developing readers move out of this phase early in kindergarten as phonics instruction begins.

Partial Alphabetic Phase

As children enter the **partial alphabetic phase**, they start to form connections between some letters and sounds, a process known as phonetic cue reading. However, these connections are often incomplete or inconsistent. For example, a child may use the first letter of a word to guess its identity, thinking that all words beginning with "P" are "puppy" because they recognized it once. While this approach is more reliable than relying solely on visual cues, it is not sufficient for reading new words. Instruction at this stage should reinforce letter-sound correspondences and phonemic awareness, emphasizing the importance of using all letters in a word to decode it accurately.

Full Alphabetic Phase

Children develop a comprehensive understanding of letter-sound relationships in the **full alphabetic phase**. They can decode words by converting graphemes to their corresponding phonemes, blending these sounds together to read words. This method is more reliable than the partial use of phonetic cues, as children have learned to attend to every letter in a word. Typically, readers reach this phase by late kindergarten or early first grade as they continue to receive phonics instruction. Effective teaching during this phase should focus on activities that promote segmenting and blending phonemes, as well as repeated exposure to words to strengthen orthographic mapping, which helps bond the spelling, pronunciation, and meaning of words in memory.

Consolidated Alphabetic Phase

The consolidated alphabetic phase marks a shift from decoding individual phonemes to recognizing chunks of letters, such as digraphs (e.g., "sh"), vowel teams (e.g., "ea"), and common word families (e.g., "-ing," "-tion"). Children begin to store these larger patterns in memory, allowing them to decode words more efficiently. This phase also involves recognizing syllables and morphemes as units, a skill Ehri referred to as consolidated graphosyllabic and grapho-morphemic processing. Instruction at this level should focus on teaching students to identify and use these larger chunks within words, further reinforcing orthographic mapping. This phase typically begins around second grade and continues as readers become more fluent.

Automatic Phase

The final phase in Ehri's model is the automatic phase, where word reading becomes quick and effortless. Most words have been stored as sight words, allowing readers to recognize them instantly without conscious decoding. Even unfamiliar words are decoded rapidly and accurately using well-developed strategies. At this stage, readers can focus entirely on the meaning of the text rather than on the process of decoding. This automaticity characterizes proficient adolescent and adult readers. Instruction for students in this phase should focus on reading comprehension, vocabulary development, and continued exposure to more complex words and texts.

Ehri's phases demonstrate that learning to read is a progressive process, beginning with basic visual recognition and moving toward automatic, fluent word reading. Each phase builds on the previous one, highlighting the importance of systematic and explicit instruction to support children's development through these phases.

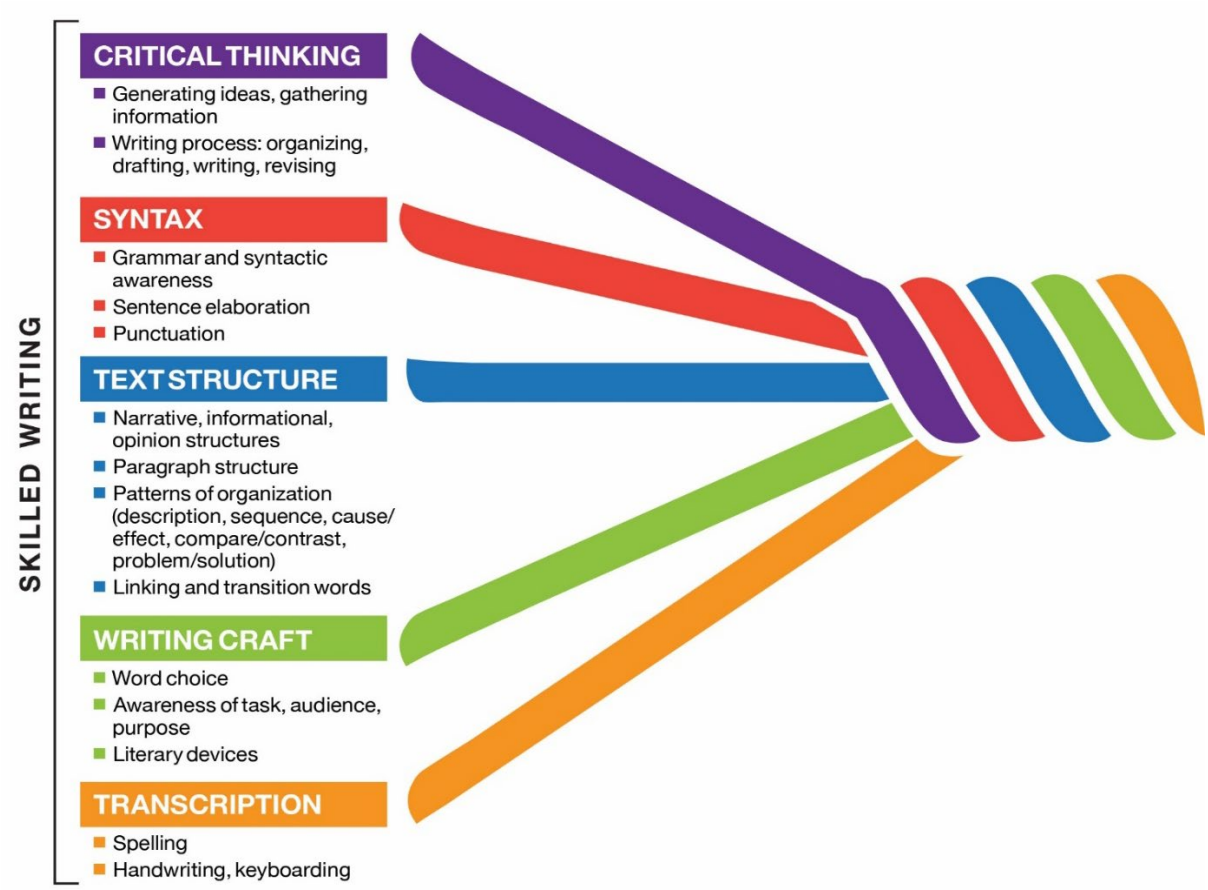
Fluent Reading & Advanced Comprehension (Middle School to High School)

In middle and high school, reading becomes a tool for acquiring knowledge across various subjects. Students learn to integrate information from multiple sources, analyze different perspectives, and appreciate literary elements like symbolism. Oral language comprehension and reading comprehension become more aligned, and students can comprehend complex, dense texts. Reading contributes significantly to vocabulary growth, especially as they encounter words rarely used in everyday conversation.

Skilled Reading (Adulthood)

By adulthood, skilled readers are capable of understanding complex texts and engaging in critical analysis of information. Reading serves as a primary means of learning, and advanced comprehension skills enable individuals to synthesize and apply knowledge across different domains.

The Writing Rope



Sedita, J. (2019). The Writing Rope. Rowley, MA, Keys to Literacy. Reprinted with permission from Joan Sedita. All rights reserved.

Joan Sedita's (2019) Writing Rope is a model designed to help educators understand and teach the complexities of writing, similar to how Scarborough's Reading Rope illuminates the complexities of reading. The Writing Rope breaks down the process of writing into multiple strands or components that need to be developed and intertwined to produce skilled writers.

The Writing Rope model encompasses several key strands essential for developing proficient writers. Critical thinking involves generating ideas, organizing thoughts, and applying reasoning to writing tasks, including brainstorming, outlining, and constructing coherent arguments or narratives. Syntax focuses on sentence structure and grammar, ensuring that students write sentences that are both grammatically correct and varied in complexity to match the writing's purpose. Text structure addresses the overall organization of a piece of writing, whether narrative, informative, or argumentative, guiding students in understanding and applying different structures such as paragraphs, introductions, conclusions, and transitions. Writing craft pertains to the creative aspects of writing, such as word choice, tone, voice, and style, which make the writing engaging and appropriate for the intended audience. Transcription includes the mechanical skills necessary for writing, such as handwriting, spelling, punctuation, and typing, providing the foundational skills that allow students to express their ideas without technical difficulties. Finally, the writing process covers the stages of writing, including planning, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing, emphasizing that writing is a process that often requires multiple drafts and ongoing refinement. Together, these strands support the comprehensive development of students' writing abilities.

Sedita's Writing Rope is important for supporting evidence-based writing instruction because it provides a clear, structured approach to teaching writing that aligns with the best practices identified in educational research. The model emphasizes that writing is a multifaceted skill that requires the integration of various components, each of which must be explicitly taught and practiced.

The Writing Rope model ensures that writing instruction comprehensively covers all critical aspects, from basic mechanics to higher-order thinking skills, helping students become well-rounded writers capable of effectively communicating their ideas. By breaking writing into manageable strands, this model allows teachers to provide scaffolded instruction that gradually builds students' abilities, which is particularly beneficial for struggling writers who need targeted support. When students receive instruction addressing all the strands of the Writing Rope, they show significant improvements in writing proficiency as they better integrate their knowledge of content, structure, and style, leading to more coherent and effective writing. Additionally, the Writing Rope aligns with the Science of Reading by promoting explicit, systematic instruction in writing, ensuring consistency in literacy instruction across both reading and writing and reinforcing essential skills for students' overall literacy development (Seidenberg, 2017).

Stages of Writing Development

Children's writing development progresses through several stages, starting from early mark-making in infancy to more refined and complex writing by age 12. Each stage builds upon the previous one, helping children develop the skills necessary to communicate through writing.

Scribbling and Drawing

From birth to age 3, children engage in scribbling and drawing, which helps them build fine motor skills and hand-eye coordination necessary for writing (Collins & Schickedanz; Puranik & Lonigan, 2011). During the prewriting stage, around ages 3–4, children begin to understand that writing represents meaning. They often engage in pretend writing, using random letters or shapes to imitate adult writing (Levin & Bus, 2003; NICHD, 2008).

Emergent: Letter-Like Forms and Shapes

As they reach ages 4–5, in the emergent writing stage, children start connecting letters with sounds and may begin to write their names and simple words using invented spelling (Puranik & Lonigan, 2011). This stage is crucial for phonemic awareness development, which supports reading and writing skills (Graham et al., 2012; NICHD, 2000; NICHD, 2008).

Early Writing

Between ages 5–7, in the early writing stage, children's letter formation becomes more consistent, and they begin writing simple sentences, improving their ability to link sounds with letters (Berninger, 2012; Puranik & Lonigan, 2011).

Transitional

By ages 7–9, in the transitional writing stage, children start writing longer sentences and paragraphs, applying more grammar and spelling rules. Their ability to revise their writing and consider their audience grows (Berninger et al., 2002; Graham et al., 2012). At ages 9–12, in the fluent writing stage, children are expected to organize their ideas into multiple paragraphs and use more complex sentence structures. They begin editing their work for clarity and accuracy.

Proficient

By age 12 and beyond, students enter the proficient writing stage, where they can produce sophisticated, well-organized essays and creative pieces, applying appropriate grammar, punctuation, and spelling (Berninger & Swanson, 1994; Graham & Perin, 2007). Throughout these stages, explicit

and systematic writing instruction is vital for developing children's writing skills and supporting their overall literacy development (Graham et al., 2012; Graham et al., 2015; National Institute for Literacy, 2008).

Continued Refinement

Writers are always honing their skills and refining their craft. They improve their writing through continued practice, by reading a variety of texts, and by using expert models to develop a better understanding of various writing types and techniques. As in Sedita's writing rope, writers are continually working to use the threads more strategically and effectively as the threads come together.



Family and Caregiver Resources:
Iowa Reading Research Center | Parents Guide to Core Literacy Skills

Reach Out and Read | Milestones of Early Literacy Development | Español

Structured Literacy

Structured Literacy is a clear, systematic, and research-based approach to teaching reading and writing. It focuses on helping children understand the structure of language, which is especially helpful for struggling readers and those with dyslexia. It's designed to teach all students the skills they need to become strong readers and writers by breaking down the learning process into manageable steps.

Key Components of Structured Literacy:

Phonology: This is the study of sounds in language. In structured literacy, children learn to recognize and work with spoken words' sounds (or phonemes). This helps them understand how sounds map to letters, which is crucial for reading and spelling.

Sound-Symbol Association (Phonics): Children are explicitly taught the connection between sounds and the letters or groups of letters that represent them. This is the foundation of phonics instruction, where students learn how to sound out words (decoding) and spell them (encoding).

Syllable Instruction: Students are taught to recognize and divide words into syllables, making reading and spelling longer words easier. Knowing the different types of syllables helps children understand how words are structured.

Morphology: This involves teaching the meaning of word parts like prefixes, suffixes, and roots. Understanding word parts helps students figure out the meaning of unfamiliar words and improves both vocabulary and spelling.

Syntax: This is about the rules that govern sentence structure. In structured literacy, children learn how sentences are put together, including grammar and punctuation, which helps them comprehend what they read and write clearly.

Semantics: This refers to the meaning of words and sentences. Children are taught how to understand and use words in context, improving their overall comprehension of what they read.

Why Is Structured Literacy Important?

Structured Literacy is especially important because it's research-backed and proven to help all students, especially those who struggle with reading. It's highly effective for teaching students how to decode (sound out) and spell words, understand sentence structure, and grow their vocabulary. This method is also beneficial for students with dyslexia, providing them with the tools they need to read and write successfully.

With clear and direct instruction, plenty of practice, and a focus on the basic building blocks of language, structured literacy gives students a solid foundation for literacy success. Parents can support this learning by engaging in activities like reading aloud, playing sound and word games, and discussing the meaning of new words.

Systematic and Explicit Instruction

Systematic and explicit instruction are critical components of structured literacy instruction, particularly for early learners and struggling readers. These approaches ensure that students acquire skills in a well-organized, intentional manner, making the learning process clearer and more efficient.

Systematic instruction involves teaching skills and concepts in a planned, logical sequence, with easier or more frequently used skills taught before more complex ones. For example, students might first learn common consonant and vowel sounds, which are more straightforward and essential for early reading, before tackling more complex phonics rules like vowel digraphs. This step-by-step approach ensures that each new skill builds upon previously mastered skills in a cumulative manner, creating a solid foundation for learning.

In systematic instruction, lessons focus on clearly defined objectives that are stated in terms of what students will do. This clarity helps both the teacher and students stay focused on the specific skills being taught. Additionally, systematic instruction includes multiple, purposeful practice activities to ensure that students have ample opportunities to master and retain new skills. These activities are designed to reinforce learning and help students apply what they've learned in different contexts.

Another key element of systematic instruction is regular assessment. These assessments help teachers monitor students' progress and identify areas where they may need additional support. By using assessments in a timely fashion, teachers can ensure that students are not only acquiring new skills but also retaining them over time and using them independently.

Explicit instruction complements the systematic approach by clearly stating what is being taught and demonstrating how to apply the skill. For example, in teaching students how to blend sounds to read an unfamiliar word, a teacher might say, "I'll show you how to sound out this word. Listen carefully as I say each sound slowly without stopping between the sounds." This type of instruction directly draws students' attention to the specific steps or skills being taught, ensuring that the learning is intentional and focused.

Explicit instruction is highly effective because it leaves little room for ambiguity; students know exactly what they are learning and how it applies to reading or writing. The teacher's modeling of the skill provides students with a clear example of how a proficient reader would use the strategy, which students can then imitate and practice.

Combining systematic and explicit instruction is crucial for building strong reading skills. Systematic instruction ensures that students build their knowledge progressively, while explicit instruction makes the learning process transparent and understandable. This combination helps students, especially those who may struggle with reading, gain confidence as they see how to apply new skills in reading and writing.

According to the National Reading Panel (NICHD, 2000), both systematic and explicit instruction in reading are key for teaching foundational reading skills, particularly for phonics and phonemic awareness, where students benefit from clear, direct teaching and plenty of practice with new skills.

These approaches help create a structured learning environment where students can systematically develop essential reading skills while receiving clear, direct guidance on how to apply those skills effectively.

Gradual Release of Responsibility

A key component of effective instruction within a structured literacy model is the inclusion of the gradual release of responsibility. The Gradual Release of Responsibility (GRR) Model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983; Webb et al., 2019) is an instructional framework designed to shift the cognitive load from the teacher to the student gradually. It helps students become independent learners by providing structured support initially and then gradually releasing responsibility to the students as they gain mastery of the skills or content being taught.

The GRR model is based on the idea that learning happens in stages, which are typically broken down into four main phases:

1. Focused Instruction ("I Do"):

- In this phase, the teacher is primarily responsible for delivering instruction. This includes modeling and demonstrating a skill, concept, or process while explaining their thinking aloud. The purpose is to provide clear guidance and establish the learning objective.

2. Guided Instruction ("We Do"):

- Here, the teacher works closely with students to practice the skill or apply the concept. The teacher provides scaffolding, offers prompts, asks guiding questions, and engages students in collaborative learning. The goal is to support students while they practice new skills.

3. Collaborative Learning ("You Do It Together"):

- During this phase, students work in pairs or small groups to complete tasks or solve problems. The teacher monitors their progress, offers feedback, and provides additional support when necessary. Collaboration allows students to share ideas and learn from one another, reinforcing the skills they are acquiring.

4. Independent Practice ("You Do It Alone"):

- In this final phase, students demonstrate their ability to apply the skill or concept independently. They work without teacher support, which allows them to internalize the learning and build confidence in their ability to perform the task on their own.

The GRR Model ensures that students are supported through the learning process, giving them the tools and confidence to perform tasks independently over time. It is widely used across different subject areas and grade levels and is applicable to skills-based learning as well as conceptual understanding.

The model was popularized by Pearson and Gallagher in the 1980s and has since become a fundamental instructional approach in education and should be encouraged to be used flexibly, and not necessarily linearly (Webb, 2019). The flexibility of the GRR model allows it to be adapted to various teaching contexts, making it highly effective in promoting student achievement and engagement.



Educator Resources:
CEEDAR Center | High Leverage Practice #16: Use Explicit Instruction | High Leverage Practice for Students with Disabilities (Kennedy et al., 2018) *Note: This resource is also excellent for helping all educators understand explicit instruction for all students.*

Family and Caregiver Resources:
Iowa Reading Research Center | Structured Literacy [online learning module]

Center for Student Achievement Solutions | Gradual Release of Responsibility and Phonics Instruction (William, 2024)

Distributed Practice

Distributed practice refers to the instructional strategy of spacing out learning over time, rather than cramming or massed practice. This approach involves revisiting concepts and skills periodically, allowing for breaks between practice sessions to reinforce learning and help students retain information more effectively. In the context of teaching reading and writing, distributed practice can be incredibly beneficial, as it enhances long-term retention and mastery of literacy skills.

Importance in Teaching Reading and Writing

1. **Improves Retention and Recall:** Distributed practice encourages students to revisit reading and writing skills multiple times across a longer period, which helps them commit the knowledge to long-term memory. For example, instead of teaching vocabulary words in one long session, students would be exposed to and practice the words in multiple short sessions over several days or weeks. This repeated exposure ensures that students are more likely to remember and apply the words in their reading and writing.
2. **Builds Reading Comprehension:** In reading instruction, distributed practice allows students to revisit texts, strategies, and comprehension techniques over time. For instance, students may practice reading fluency in short sessions spread over several days, or revisit strategies for identifying the main idea in different types of texts, which helps them internalize these skills. Gradual, repeated exposure to varied texts and comprehension strategies enables students to make deeper connections and gain a better understanding of reading materials.
3. **Supports Writing Development:** Writing, like reading, is a complex skill that requires regular practice. Distributed practice in writing could involve frequent short writing assignments, where students practice different aspects of writing such as structure, grammar, argumentation, and style over time. Revisiting writing tasks, such as writing prompts or specific writing techniques, across different assignments allows students to apply and refine their skills, ultimately improving their writing fluency.
4. **Encourages Mastery:** The spaced repetition embedded in distributed practice helps prevent the forgetting curve, which occurs when information is learned but not revisited. In literacy, this means that students are less likely to forget skills or strategies if they are spaced out in a way that allows for review and reinforcement. Whether it's practicing writing essays, revising drafts, or working on reading fluency, distributing practice helps ensure that students master these skills over time.
5. **Reduces Cognitive Overload:** In traditional "massed" practice, students may experience cognitive overload by trying to absorb too much information in a single sitting. Distributed practice prevents this by breaking up the material into smaller, more manageable segments. For reading and writing, this could mean breaking down complex tasks, such as writing an essay, into smaller components (e.g., brainstorming, drafting, revising) and revisiting them over several sessions.
6. **Improves Motivation and Confidence:** When students are given opportunities to gradually build their reading and writing skills over time, it reduces the pressure and anxiety of trying to learn everything at once. This structured and paced approach allows students to experience

success at each stage, boosting their confidence and motivation to continue practicing. This also prevents students from becoming frustrated by the difficulty of mastering a skill all at once.

7. **Aligns with the Science of Learning:** The concept of distributed practice is grounded in cognitive science. Spaced learning is more effective for long-term retention than massed learning. This is especially true for complex skills such as reading and writing, which require students to engage in critical thinking, practice, and application. By using distributed practice, teachers align their instruction with proven cognitive principles, making learning more efficient and effective.

In summary, distributed practice is an effective approach in teaching reading and writing because it enhances retention, fosters deeper understanding, and supports the mastery of complex skills over time. It encourages consistent engagement, reduces cognitive overload, and increases student motivation, making it a crucial strategy for helping students become more proficient readers and writers.

Importance of Establishing Classroom Routines to support Distributed Practice (and other Learning Experiences)

Establishing classroom routines is critical in minimizing cognitive overload and ensuring that students can effectively transition from one lesson to the next. When routines are clear and consistently applied, students can shift their attention away from understanding how to perform a task or following complex instructions, allowing them to focus on the actual content of the lesson and practicing new skills.

1. **Reduces Cognitive Load:** When routines are established and students know exactly what to expect at the beginning, middle, and end of a lesson, they can focus on learning and practicing the material, rather than using their cognitive resources to figure out what comes next. For example, if a daily phonics routine includes the same steps (e.g., review of previously learned sounds, introduction of new sounds, blending practice), students don't need to spend mental energy on understanding the structure of the lesson. This allows them to dedicate their cognitive resources to practicing phonics, reading, or writing tasks.
2. **Fosters a Predictable Learning Environment:** Routines create a sense of predictability and security for students. When they know the routine and feel confident in the structure of the lesson, they can engage more fully with the content. For example, in a reading or writing block, a teacher might always begin with a brief review of the previous day's lesson, followed by a short writing prompt or reading activity, and then transition into group work. This consistency not only helps students feel more comfortable but also allows them to quickly get into the flow of the lesson and start working.
3. **Increases Efficiency and Time on Task:** Well-established routines ensure that transitions from one activity to the next are smooth, saving valuable instructional time. This is particularly important when practicing reading and writing skills, as time spent transitioning can eat into the time students have to practice. For instance, if students know that after the phonics lesson they will immediately engage in a short independent writing task or peer review, they can quickly shift gears and begin working without needing detailed directions for each new task.
4. **Supports Focused Practice:** Once students are familiar with the structure of a lesson, they can concentrate on practicing the skills they are learning without the distraction of figuring out what they are supposed to do next. In phonics instruction, for example, once the routine is established, students can spend more time blending sounds and reading words, rather than worrying about how to begin the activity. This focused practice is crucial for skill development, as it allows students to reinforce and apply what they've learned consistently.
5. **Encourages Independence:** Classroom routines also foster independence. As students become more familiar with the structure of lessons, they are able to follow along with less

support from the teacher. For example, once students are familiar with the steps in a writing workshop (e.g., brainstorming, drafting, revising, and editing), they can begin these tasks with minimal prompting, freeing up the teacher to provide more targeted support where needed.

6. **Promotes Student Confidence:** When students are not overwhelmed by the logistics of transitioning between lessons, they are more likely to engage in the activities with confidence. A routine that emphasizes practice and skill development helps students gain a sense of mastery over the tasks at hand, whether it's decoding words in reading or composing sentences in writing.
7. **Encourages Classroom Management:** Clear routines also enhance classroom management. When students are accustomed to a well-structured classroom flow, it minimizes disruptions and distractions that can arise when they are unsure of what to do next. This creates an environment where students can focus more on their learning and less on navigating the classroom dynamics.

Standards, Evidence-Based Practices, and Resources

Evidence-Based Practices

Evidence-based practices as instructional or intervention strategies that have been rigorously tested and shown to be effective through scientific research. These practices are grounded in empirical evidence and data, demonstrating their ability to improve outcomes for students or individuals. They are typically based on research studies that use randomized controlled trials or other rigorous methods to determine their effectiveness. Evidence-based practices are considered to be a key component of high-quality education and are used to guide decision-making and implementation of programs and interventions in schools and other educational settings.

Evidence-based practices change and shift as students become increasingly more fluent and strategic with the five components of reading as outlined in Scarborough's Rope (2001). Below, the Iowa CSLP outlines the evidence-based practices that the Iowa Department of Education and State Board of Education supports as most effective in advancing our children's literacy growth and achievement across the state.

Birth–Age 3 Literacy: Iowa Early Learning Standards

What follows outlines the Iowa Early Learning Standards, 3rd Ed (Early Childhood Iowa, 2019), the research supporting them, and research- and evidence-based instructional practices that connect to each age band and standard.

The Iowa Early Learning Standards, 3rd Ed. are designed to inform families, professionals, and community leaders about child development expectations, guide early care and education decisions, support policy development, and unify professional expectations across early childhood sectors. They aim to ensure high-quality early care, health, and education for all children. They provide standards for communication, language and literacy (pages 181–198) alongside seven other strands of developmentally appropriate standards for children from birth to age five.

Iowa Early Learning Standard Birth–Age 3: Infants and toddlers understand and use communication and language for a variety of purposes.

Through interaction with caring and nurturing adults, infants and toddlers acquire both listening (receptive language) and speaking (expressive language) vocabulary. Young infants typically make sounds, take turns in 'conversations' with adults, and respond to adult spoken conversations (Hibrink et al., 2015; Lock, 2004a, 2004b). Language development in early childhood is crucial, with infants and toddlers acquiring vocabulary through interactions with nurturing adults. Infants begin by making sounds and using gestures, eventually progressing to phrases and sentences (Camaioni, 2004a, 2004b; Hibrink et al., 2015). These early interactions are influenced by intellectual growth, and routine conversations during activities like feeding or dressing significantly expand a child's vocabulary (Hoff-Ginsberg, 1991).

Understanding dual language acquisition is essential, as early exposure to multiple languages fosters bilingualism without hindering development (Genesee et al., 2004; Hammer et al., 2014). Fostering relationships with families from a range of linguistic backgrounds promotes both language development and cultural identity (Pearson & Mangione, 2006; Tabors, 2008).

Communication patterns vary across cultures, with differences in expectations for verbal and non-verbal responses. Understanding these cultural nuances allows adults to tailor communication strategies to align with family beliefs and values (Rogoff et al.,1993). Additionally, addressing early hearing problems is vital, as they can impact language and cognitive development. Early intervention and the use of sign language or adaptive devices can support communication for children with hearing impairments (Moeller, 2000; Stika et al., 2015). Finally, increasing family involvement in literacy activities enhances children's intellectual and social-emotional development during early childhood (Baker, 2013).

Iowa Early Learning Standard Birth–Age 3: Infants and toddlers engage in early reading experiences.

Shared book experiences greatly benefit infants and toddlers by enhancing communication, vocabulary, and early literacy skills (Bus et al., 1995; Murray & Egan, 2014). The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends pediatricians encourage early reading (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2014). Early exposure to books fosters book-handling skills and phonemic awareness, especially through nursery rhymes and rhyming games (Bryant et al., 1990). Responsive reading, including warm interactions and frequent conversations, further supports language development (Farrant & Zubrick, 2011; Sim et al., 2014). Early intervention, especially before age three, is crucial for promoting these skills (NICHD, 2008).

Iowa Early Learning Standard Birth–Age 3: Infants and toddlers engage in early writing experiences.

Infants and toddlers develop early writing skills through the exploration of materials like markers and crayons during play. As they mature, they shift from using a fist grasp to more refined grips (Carlson & Cunningham, 1990). Their early scribbles evolve into drawings and symbols, reflecting their cognitive development (Dyson, 2001). It is crucial for adults to model writing behaviors to encourage imitation (Hernik & Csibra, 2015; McCarty et al., 2001), even if the marks initially hold meaning only for the child (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001).

Birth to Age 3: Research-Based Recommendations

Essential Instructional Practices in Language and Emergent Literacy

The following research-based recommendations support early literacy development for children from birth to age three and are examined in more detail in Essential Instructional Practices in Language and Emergent Literacy: Birth to Age 3 (Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators General Education Leadership Network Early Literacy Task Force, 2018).

1. **Create Safe, Secure, and Stimulating Environments:** Infants and toddlers thrive in safe, secure, and stimulating environments. When children feel safe, they are more likely to explore and engage in learning activities actively. Stimulating environments encourage child-led exploration, giving adults opportunities to engage in responsive conversations that promote language development. These nurturing spaces are essential in supporting early cognitive and emotional growth, which directly impacts language acquisition.
2. **Highlight Print Concepts in Books and the Environment:** Introducing infants and toddlers to print concepts helps them understand how print works and its role in daily life. Caregivers create a print-rich world that builds early literacy awareness by pointing out words and letters in the environment. Children learn the mechanics of reading, such as text direction and word recognition, through shared book-reading experiences.
3. **Engage Children Through Interactive Book Sharing:** Interactive and engaging book-sharing experiences foster a love of reading. When adults share books in a way that captures the child's interest—connecting the story to their experiences and inviting them to engage—it supports vocabulary development and comprehension. Children who are read to regularly before age one demonstrate stronger language and literacy skills later in life.
4. **Play with Sounds and Encourage Sound Exploration:** Infants naturally respond to sounds, particularly higher-pitched and musical tones. Playful sound games, such as rhymes and songs, enhance phonological awareness, an early predictor of reading success. Introducing sound play early encourages children to explore and mimic sounds, which helps in developing auditory discrimination and early word learning.
5. **Use Gestures to Enhance Two-Way Communication:** Gestures, such as pointing or waving, are a powerful tool in supporting two-way communication between infants and adults. Preverbal children use gestures to initiate conversations, which promotes language development by helping them connect words with ideas. When toddlers combine gestures with words, it aids in their understanding of how words form sentences, an essential step in language acquisition.
6. **Support Early Writing Skills Across Developmental Domains:** Writing is a complex process involving motor skills, symbol recognition, and message creation. Early writing often appears as scribbles, but these marks indicate that children understand that writing carries meaning. Providing children with opportunities to scribble, draw, and experiment with writing tools supports the development of fine motor skills and the conceptual understanding of written communication.
7. **Engage in Child-Led Conversations:** High-quality, responsive language interactions are crucial for early language development. Infants and toddlers benefit from conversations that are directly related to their interests, whether through facial expressions, gestures, or words. Adults should respond to the child's cues, letting them choose the topics of conversation to promote deeper engagement and language growth.
8. **Provide Constant Access to Reading and Writing Materials:** Children learn best when they have continuous access to materials that support their literacy development. Offering books,

writing tools, and drawing materials in environments where children can freely explore and engage with them encourages independent learning and creativity. This unrestricted access is key to fostering an intrinsic interest in literacy activities.

9. **Monitor Language Development and Intervene Early:** Monitoring language development is crucial during the toddler years, as this is when delays often first appear. Early identification and intervention are essential to addressing delays that can impact future literacy and social skills. If left unaddressed, language delays may lead to more significant literacy challenges later in life. Regular screenings and early referrals to support services ensure that children receive the help they need at the right time.
10. **Partner with Families to Create Rich Home Literacy Environments:** The home is the primary learning environment for infants and toddlers. Families play a critical role in supporting language and literacy development through rich, responsive interactions. A home environment filled with books, conversations, and storytelling fosters language skills and sets the foundation for academic and social success. Engaging families in their child's literacy journey has lasting benefits, not only for the child's early development but also for their long-term educational outcomes.



Educator Resources:
Essential Practices in Language and Emergent Literacy: Birth to Age 3 (Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators General Education Leadership Network Early Literacy Task Force, 2018).



Family and Caregiver Resources:
Reading Rockets | Creating a Healthy Technology Environment for Your Baby and Toddler (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association and Screen Time Acting Network at Fairplay, 2025)

Reading Rockets | Home Literacy Environment Checklist (Get Ready to Read and National Center for Learning Disabilities, n.d.)

Pediatric Care Center | PCC Reads: Childhood Literacy and Development: Reading Tips for Your Family (2024)

Preschool, Ages 3–5

Iowa Early Learning Standard Ages 3–5: Children understand and use communication and language for a variety of purposes.

During preschool years, children expand their sentence complexity and social language use, both verbally and non-verbally (Snow et al., 1998). While vocabulary growth is rapid, it varies widely due to cultural and economic factors (Hart & Risley, 1995). Programs must provide rich, language-filled experiences to bridge these gaps (Wright & Neuman, 2015).

Oral language is foundational for future reading, requiring regular, meaningful conversations (NICHD, 2008; Schickedanz & Collins, 2013). Children learn by connecting new information to existing knowledge, which is crucial for reading comprehension (Duke et al., 2012). The expanding range of racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds among preschoolers brings both challenges and opportunities. Supporting home languages fosters strong familial connections and aids in learning English and other academic skills (Bialystok, 2001; Burchinal et al., 2012). Children benefit from recognizing language

differences and valuing all languages (California Department of Education, 2009; IRIS Center, n.d.; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2019).

Iowa Early Learning Standard Ages 3–5: Children engage in early reading experiences.

Early literacy builds on language skills, which are crucial for reading comprehension (Cain, 2015; Catts et al., 2002). Conversations about stories and events enhance vocabulary, oral language, and print knowledge (Dickinson & Sprague, 2001; NICHD, 2008). Engaging children in storytelling boosts vocabulary, which in turn supports reading development. Key predictors of early reading include alphabet knowledge and phonological awareness, such as recognizing rhymes and syllables (Suortti & Lipponen, 2016; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001). Adults can nurture these skills through daily reading, storytelling, and word games (Morrow, 2014).

Iowa Early Learning Standard Ages 3–5: Children engage in early writing experiences.

Reading and writing are interconnected, mutually-reinforcing processes (Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000). Early writing predicts later reading success (NICHD, 2008). Children's initial writing, including scribbles and invented spellings, reflects their developmental stage and supports literacy growth (Puranik & Lonigan, 2011; Schickedanz & Collins, 2013). Adults should encourage early writing, provide materials, and model writing behaviors (Cabell et al., 2013; Gerde et al., 2012). Fine motor skills are crucial for writing development and later academic success (Grissmer et al., 2010). Supportive environments foster children's understanding of print and phonological awareness.



Leader Resources:
The Meadows Center | 10 Key Policies and Practices for Supporting Language Development (University of Texas at Austin, 2023)

Educator Resources:
Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators General Education Leadership Network Early Literacy Task Force | Essential Instructional Practices in Early and Elementary Literacy: Prekindergarten (2023)

The Meadows Center | 10 Key Policies and Practices for Supporting Language Development (University of Texas at Austin, 2023)

IES: Professional Learning Community Emergent Literacy (Kosanovich, Phillip, & Willis, 2020)

This PLC suite of materials includes four modules: *Print Knowledge, Phonological Awareness, Vocabulary, and Oral Language.* Each module comprises four resources: Participant Guide, Facilitator Guide, PowerPoint presentation, and Videos.

With support from a trained facilitator, the Professional Learning Community: Emergent Literacy engages preschool teachers in regular, collaborative learning experiences to support their use of evidence-based language and literacy strategies when working with young children. The PLC materials are designed to guide preschool teachers as they collaborate through discussions, engage in hands-on activities, and reflect on their own implementation of strategies learned during the PLC with the support of peers and a trained facilitator. Through this collaborative learning experience, preschool teachers expand their knowledge base as they read, discuss, share, and apply evidence-based ideas and strategies.

Family and Caregiver Resources:
IRRC | Caregiver Hub

Early Childhood Iowa (Iowa Health and Human Services)

National Center for Families Learning | Cultivating Readers

PBS Kids for Parents | ABC Literacy

Colorin' Colorado: For Families

- Help Your Child Learn to Read
- Storytelling Music and Rhyme

Reading Rockets

- Oral Language Comprehension: Activities for Your Pre-K Child
- Print Awareness Activities for Your Pre-K Child
- Phonological and Phonemic Awareness: Activities for Your Pre-K Child
- Vocabulary: Activities for Your Pre-K Child
- Writing Activities for Your Pre-K Child

Tandem, Partners in Learning | Building Print Awareness by Sharing a Book (2016)

The Meadows Center | 10 Key Policies and Practices for Supporting Language Development (University of Texas at Austin, 2023)

Parents and Caregivers

Here are some activities families and caregivers can do to support young children's writing development:

- Keep colored pencils, pens, and chalk easily accessible at home. Children naturally develop early writing skills through play, such as drawing, doodling, or tracing shapes. These activities help strengthen the muscles needed for holding a pencil and forming letters.
- Teach children to write their name. It's a great confidence booster and helps them start to see themselves as writers.
- Involve them in everyday writing tasks. For example, work together on a to-do list, and highlight words that share the same starting sound as their name.

And most importantly…

- Read books with your children. Regular exposure to letters, sounds, and stories is key to helping them learn both reading and writing.
- Once they're familiar with letters, practice writing them in different ways — on paper, in the air, or using sensory methods like sand or shaving cream. This helps children experience the shape and movement of each letter.
- As they begin writing, ask, "What does this say?" Then, write their words below their scribbles and attempt to write the letters. This helps reinforce their understanding of letters and words.
- When reading, point out what makes the book enjoyable: "Listen to how the author describes the forest — don't those words make it feel like we're hiking through the woods?"
- Let them see you writing, too. Whether you're jotting down a grocery list, sending a text, or leaving a note, showing that you write reinforces that writing is a valuable everyday activity.

Preschool, Ages 3–5: Research-Based Recommendations

The What Works Clearinghouse (WWC), Preparing Young Children for School: Educator's Practice Guide (Burchinal et al., 2022), outlines five overarching themes that are central to providing instruction in preschool:

1. **Provide Focused and Purposeful Teaching:** Preschool instruction should be intentional and goal-oriented, aiming directly at specific learning objectives. Teachers are encouraged to design activities and conversations that clearly target a particular skill or concept. Repetition and practice are key, allowing children to reinforce what they learn through hands-on experiences. Praise can be used to highlight progress and help students build confidence in their newly acquired skills. In this context, "teachers" refers broadly to any adult facilitating learning, including assistants, volunteers, or parents.

2. **Value Interaction and Dialogue:** Interaction is essential for learning. Children benefit more from meaningful conversations than from extended listening. Teachers are urged to create opportunities for back-and-forth conversations that allow children to express and explore the skills and ideas they are learning. Interactive activities, such as games, singing, and reading, further engage students. Instruction should be hands-on and age-appropriate, keeping children engaged through short verbal instructions and dynamic activities.

3. **Create Sequential Structured Lessons:** Lessons need to be structured in sequential order, with concepts building progressively in difficulty aligned with children's natural development. Concepts should advance from simpler to more complex. An evidence-based curriculum that follows a systematic sequence can ensure that learning aligns with developmentally appropriate practices.

4. **Include Structured Time for Focused Learning:** Scheduling regular, intentional learning sessions for key areas like social-emotional skills, executive function, math, and literacy. These sessions should be integrated into daily routines, with a blend of large-group demonstrations and small-group, hands-on activities to promote deeper practice. Small groups can facilitate individualized learning, while well-managed center activities keep the rest of the class engaged.
5. **Recognizing Students' Backgrounds and Experiences:** Teachers are encouraged to learn about their students' backgrounds and integrate that knowledge into lessons and materials, ensuring representation in books, toys, and activities. Engaging families and communities and including traditions and students' experiences fosters a more supportive learning environment.

PK, Ages 3–5 | EBP | Build Children's Vocabulary and Language Skills

Recommendation | Intentionally planning activities to build children's vocabulary and language skills (Strong Evidence)

Source: *Preparing Young Children for School: Educator's Practice Guide* (Burchinal et al., 2022)

The vocabulary children acquire at ages 3, 4, and 5 is crucial for their future language, reading development, and overall academic success. Studies highlight that learning new words enhances their ability to understand new information, which in turn facilitates further vocabulary growth. Vocabulary development is cumulative, meaning early exposure has lasting impacts. By the end of preschool, children should be able to describe people, places, and things and categorize words effectively (NICHD, 2008). Research emphasizes the importance of repeated exposure and the use of new words in varied contexts to solidify understanding. Activities like shared reading, themed games, and engaging conversations are key strategies to enhance vocabulary (Beck et al., 2013).

How to Implement the Recommendation

1. **Choose Meaningful Words:** Select 3–5 words likely unfamiliar to most children but relevant to academic, conversational, or book contexts. Words should be:
    - Frequently encountered in texts, conversations, or academic content.
    - Related to a theme or topic of interest to the students (e.g., animals, transportation, seasons).
    - Starting with concrete, easily visualized words (e.g., objects, actions) is ideal, progressing to more abstract terms (e.g., concepts, prepositions) over time.
2. **Introduce and Explain the Words:** Provide direct explanations of each word in simple terms, using language children understand. Incorporate:
    - Definition: Explain the word clearly.
    - Examples: Provide examples of the word in use.
    - Context: Connect the word to a story or real-world scenario.
    - Use tools such as books, pictures, gestures, or props to illustrate meanings. Encourage children to say the word aloud to reinforce recognition and understanding.
3. **Engage Children in Practice:** Design activities that integrate the target vocabulary, such as:
    - Acting out the words (e.g., pretending to "emerge" from an egg for the word "emerge").

- Using the words in conversations or storytelling.
- Playing with related materials, such as toys or images, that represent the words. Provide opportunities for children to practice these words through play, collaborative projects, or reenacting stories.

4. **Use Repetition and Gradual Complexity:** Reintroduce words in various contexts throughout the week and in later lessons. Gradually ask more complex questions or encourage children to use the words in extended sentences. Repetition helps deepen understanding and solidify retention.
5. **Encourage Interactive Conversations:** Create opportunities for children to use the words in interactive conversations. For example, during free play or group discussions, ask questions that prompt students to incorporate the words into their responses. Provide feedback and expand on their contributions to clarify meaning.
6. **Incorporate Thematic Learning:** Select words that align with children's interests or classroom themes, such as marine life or weather. This approach provides natural repetition of the vocabulary in varied contexts, increasing engagement and retention.

By following these steps, educators can help students build a robust vocabulary, enhancing comprehension, communication, and overall academic success.



Educator Resources:
National Association for the Education of Young Children | Equalizing Opportunities to Learn: A Collaborative Approach to Language and Literacy Development in Preschool (Reynolds et al., 2019)

FCRR & FDE | Vocabulary Resources (2022)



Family and Caregiver Resources:
NAEYC | 8 Creative Ideas to Help Your Child Learn New Words (Bowman, n.d.)

Reading Rockets: Vocabulary: Activities for Your Pre-K Child (n.d.)

PK, Ages 3–5 | EBP | Letters and Sound Correspondence

Recommendation (PK): Build children's knowledge of letters and sounds. (Strong Evidence)

Source: *Preparing Young Children for School: Educator's Practice Guide* (Burchinal et al., 2022)

This evidence-based practice includes systematically building children's knowledge of letters and sounds to support early literacy development. Educators are encouraged to explicitly teach letter names and sounds in a clear, engaging, and interactive manner. This involves helping children recognize both uppercase and lowercase letters, as well as associating each letter with its corresponding sound. Instruction should include a variety of activities that encourage children to manipulate and play with letters and sounds, such as singing alphabet songs, practicing writing letters, and playing games involving sound-letter matching. Additionally, teachers should provide frequent opportunities for children to practice these skills in both structured and informal settings to reinforce learning. This foundational knowledge helps children develop the necessary skills for decoding words and understanding language, setting them up for successful reading experiences.

Family and Caregiver Resources:
Reading Rockets | Letters and Sounds: Practical Ideas for Parents (Texas Education Agency, n.d.)

Reading Rockets | Environmental Print (versiones en español disponibles)

PK, Ages 3–5 | EBP | Shared Book Reading

Recommendation (PK): Use shared book reading to develop children's language, knowledge of print features, and knowledge of the world. (Strong Evidence)

Source: *Preparing Young Children for School: Educator's Practice Guide* (Burchinal et al., 2022)

Source: Early Childhood Education Intervention Report: Shared Book Reading (US DOE, IES, WWC, 2015)

Shared book reading includes reading aloud engaging, high-quality books that expose children to new vocabulary, sentence structures, and concepts. This practice can be used with individual children, small groups, or an entire class. During reading, the adult can point out and discuss print features, such as the direction of text, spaces between words, and punctuation, helping children become familiar with how print works. Additionally, shared reading offers opportunities to introduce new ideas and expand children's general knowledge about the world, fostering curiosity and language comprehension. Interactive discussions before, during, and after reading help reinforce key concepts, encourage children to ask questions and engage them actively in the learning process. Repeated readings of the same text can also deepen understanding and improve vocabulary retention. Shared book reading advances children's comprehension and language development.

Print-Focused Read Alouds

One specific research study that contributed to the recommendation on shared book reading in Early Childhood Education Intervention Report: Shared Book Reading, by Justice et al. (2010), "Print-focused read-alouds in preschool classrooms: Intervention effectiveness and moderators of child outcomes" focused on highlighting concepts of print in read alouds.

Print-focused read-alouds involve using explicit strategies during shared reading to draw children's attention to the print features of books, such as letters, words, punctuation, and print organization. Justice et al. highlights the importance of these interactions in fostering early literacy skills, especially print awareness. During print-focused read-alouds, adults purposefully incorporate verbal and nonverbal cues to focus children's attention on print while engaging them in meaningful and interactive reading experiences. These strategies are shown to positively impact children's understanding of the mechanics of written language, serving as a foundational skill for later reading development.

Key components of print-salient read-alouds include:

1. Pointing to Print: Guiding children's attention to specific print elements while reading.
2. Commenting on Print Features: Verbally discussing the letters, words, and punctuation.
3. Asking Questions About Print: Prompting children to notice and talk about print elements.
4. Encouraging Interaction: Inviting children to participate by identifying or naming print features.

Justice and colleagues' research indicates that these strategies are particularly effective for children at risk of reading difficulties and those from low-literacy backgrounds, as they make the often-overlooked features of print more accessible and engaging.

What does it look like and sound like?

The following is taken from Justice & Sofka (2010), Table 2.1: References to Print, p. 25.

- The adult points to part of the book and asks a question about the print: "What do you think this says here?" or "Do you know this letter?"
- The adult points to a word and comments on the print: "This says 'Danger!'" or "this letter is an *S*, like your name."
- The adult makes a request about the print: "Show me where I should read." or "Point to the words as I read."
- The adult makes nonverbal references and points to specific letters, words or other features of print in the book.
- The adult makes nonverbal references while reading and tracks the print with their finger while reading.

> "…when adults read storybooks to preschoolers and simply read the text and talk about the illustrations, children fixate on print about 11 times during the entire reading event; however, when adults read the same storybooks and include nonverbal references to print, children fixate on print about 21 times during the event. These differences can add up dramatically over time. If we extrapolate these findings to typical preschool children who are read to for 10 minutes per day for an entire year, children who are read to by adults who nonverbally reference print by tracking the print and pointing to print will fixate on print about 40,000 times during these reading experiences compared to about 20,000 fixations on print for children who are read to by adults who seldom or never nonverbally reference print (Justice et al., 2008). Not surprisingly, children who look more often at print during storybook-reading experiences have more knowledge about print compared to children who seldom look at print (Evans et al., 2008)."
>
> —Laura M. Justice and Amy E. Sofka (2010), *Engaging Children with Print: Building Early Literacy Skills through Quality Read-Alouds*, pp. 25–26



Educator Resources:
REL Northwest | 5 Steps to Use with Young Children During Shared Book Reading Time (Sabalburo, 2023)



Family and Caregiver Resources:
Reading Rockets | Simple Yet Powerful Things to Do While Reading Aloud

Read Alouds: Print Awareness: Upside Down Books (Omaha Public Library, 2020)

Read Alouds: Print Awareness: Repeated Text (Omaha Public Library, 2020)

PK | EBP | Dialogic Reading: Supporting Oral Language Development

Recommendation PK: Dialogic Reading to support Oral Language Development (Promising)

Source: *What Works Clearinghouse, Intervention Report: Dialogic Reading* (U.S. DOE, IES, WWC, 2007)

Intervention Ages 3–6: Dialogic Reading to support Oral Language Development (Promising)

Source: *What Works Clearinghouse, Intervention report: Dialogic Reading*–Early Childhood Education Interventions for Children with Disabilities (U.S. DOE, IES, WWC, 2010)

Dialogic reading is a specific type of **shared book reading**. It is an interactive and engaging method designed to promote early language and literacy development in children, particularly between ages 2 and 5. This approach shifts the role of the child from a passive listener to an active participant during shared reading sessions. Adults—whether parents, caregivers, or teachers—use a structured technique to engage children in discussions about the book, focusing on expanding their vocabulary, comprehension, and critical thinking skills.

The core of dialogic reading is based on the PEER sequence:

- **P–Prompt** the child to say something about the book (e.g., “What do you think is happening here?”)
- **E–Evaluate** the child’s response (e.g., affirming their answer or gently correcting it).
- **E–Expand** on the child’s response by adding more information or introducing new vocabulary (e.g., “Yes, the boy is running. He’s running fast because he’s late for school.”).
- **R–Repeat** the prompt to reinforce the learning (e.g., “Why was the boy running again?”).

In addition to PEER, dialogic reading encourages the use of CROWD prompts to engage children in different types of interactions:

- **C–Completion** prompts: Asking the child to finish a sentence from the book.
- **R–Recall** prompts: Encouraging the child to remember something from the story.
- **O–Open-ended** prompts: Asking broad questions about what’s happening in the pictures or story.
- **W–Wh- prompts**: Using “what,” “where,” “when,” and “why” questions to stimulate detailed responses.
- **D–Distancing prompts**: Asking the child to relate events in the story to their own experiences.

This method is highly effective because it involves repetition, active engagement, and scaffolding of knowledge. Dialogic reading also supports the development of narrative skills, phonological awareness, and print awareness, laying the foundation for later reading success. By continuously encouraging children to respond, elaborate, and interact, dialogic reading fosters stronger oral language skills and prepares them for formal literacy instruction.

Educator Resources:
IRRC | Dialogic Reading: Having a Conversation about Books (Folsom, 2017)

Doing What Works | Preparing a Dialogic Reading Lesson

Reading Rockets | Dialogic Reading: An Effective Way to Read Aloud with Young Children (Whitehurst, n.d.)

FCRR & FDE | Module 1: Dialogic Reading | Includes videos and Dialogic Reading Lesson Planning Template

Family and Caregiver Resources:
Florida International University & Center for Children and Families | Dialogic Reading Demonstration Video

Reading Rockets | Dialogic Reading: An Effective Way to Read Aloud with Young Children

U.S. DOE, IES, REL Southeast | Supporting Your Child's Emergent Literacy at Home (2020)

Preschool Considerations for English Learners

The Early Literacy Development and Instruction for Dual Language Learners in Early Childhood Education (Socorro et al., 2022) helped inform the following section and is an helpful resource when considering dual language programs or support for ELs in preschools or other early childhood programs.

Effective early literacy development for ELs involves recognizing that they are learning two languages at once. ELs use their home language to support the acquisition of literacy skills in a new language, like English. Whether in bilingual/dual language programs or English-focused classrooms with home language support, literacy develops alongside both languages.

The brain processes languages together, and learning both concurrently provides cognitive, academic, and social advantages. Strong skills in the home language often transfer to English, with rich language experiences in the home language supporting bilingualism and biliteracy.

Proficiency in a first language enhances literacy and academic success in a second language (Cárdenas-Hagán et al., 2007; Collier & Thomas, 2017; Lindholm-Leary, 2012). This effect is strongest when literacy instruction occurs in the child's dominant language. Children familiar with vocabulary and concepts in their primary language are more likely to succeed in reading and writing in English. Effective programs support maintaining the home language while teaching English, using non-English materials to reinforce the child's first language.

Early literacy skills in the home language can transfer to English through cross-linguistic connections (Lems et al., 2017), and bilingual children develop stronger metalinguistic awareness—understanding differences between languages—which supports reading development (Bouchereau & Gort, 2012; Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2007). Understanding how two languages interact and leveraging cross-linguistic connections are essential for fostering biliteracy. Maintaining strong oral language skills in the home language is key to English literacy success.

Educator Resources:
Supporting Language: Culturally Rich Dramatic Play (Salinas-Gonzalez et al., 2018)

Parents and Caregivers

An emergent reader:

- Recognizes some letters of the alphabet.
- Understands that writing communicates a message.
- Uses “scribbles” when attempting to write.
- May recognize familiar words or letters in their surroundings (like “stop,” “exit,” or logos such as the large “T” for Target or “M” for McDonald’s).

When reading with an emergent reader:

- Demonstrate finger-point reading by following the text from left to right with your finger. As your child begins to read, they will start imitating this action.
- Encourage them to engage in “reading” or “pretend reading.” This memory-based reading helps them practice retelling the story and learning how to handle books properly.
- Discuss the story afterward. Once your child has finished a book, talk about what happened, “re-read” their favorite parts, and explore any interesting words or new ideas.
- Celebrate their progress! Sharing books with your child helps foster a love for reading and excitement about stories.

Iowa English Language Arts Standards

The Iowa English Language Arts Standards (Department, 2024e) apply to students in grades Kindergarten through twelve.

As specified by the Chief Council of State School Officers (CCSSO) and National Governors Association (NGA), the Standards are (1) research and evidence based, (2) aligned with college and work expectations, (3) rigorous, and (4) internationally benchmarked. A particular standard was included in the document only when the best available evidence indicated that its mastery was essential for college and career readiness in a twenty–first–century, globally competitive society. The Standards are intended to be a living work: as new and better evidence emerges, the Standards will be revised accordingly.

The Standards set requirements not only for English language arts (ELA) but also for literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects. Just as students must learn to read, write, speak, listen, and use language effectively in a variety of content areas, so too must the Standards specify the literacy skills and understandings required for college and career readiness in multiple disciplines. Literacy standards for grade 6 and above are predicated on teachers of ELA, history/social studies, science, and technical subjects using their content area expertise to help students meet the particular challenges of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language in their respective fields. It is important to note that the 6–12 literacy standards in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects are not meant to replace content standards in those areas but rather to supplement them. States may incorporate these standards into their standards for those subjects or adopt them as content area literacy standards.

As a natural outgrowth of meeting the charge to define college and career readiness, the Standards also lay out a vision of what it means to be a literate person in the twenty-first century. Indeed, the skills and understandings students are expected to demonstrate have wide applicability outside the classroom or workplace. Students who meet the Standards readily undertake the close, attentive reading that is at the heart of understanding and enjoying complex works of literature. They habitually perform the critical reading necessary to pick carefully through the staggering amount of information available today in print and digitally. They actively seek the wide, deep, and thoughtful engagement with high-quality literary and informational texts that builds knowledge, enlarges experience, and broadens worldviews. They reflexively demonstrate the cogent reasoning and use of evidence that is essential to both private deliberation and responsible citizenship in a democratic republic. In short, students who meet the Standards develop the skills in reading, writing, speaking, and listening that are the foundation for any creative and purposeful expression in language.

An integrated model of literacy: Although the Standards are divided into Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening, and Language strands for conceptual clarity, the processes of communication are closely connected, as reflected throughout. For example, Writing standard 9 requires that students be able to write about what they read. Likewise, Speaking and Listening standard 4 sets the expectation that students will share findings from their research and inquiry.

Research and media skills blended into the Standards as a whole: To be ready for college, workforce training, and life in a technological society, students need the ability to gather, comprehend, evaluate, synthesize, and report on information and ideas, to conduct original research in order to answer questions or solve problems, and to analyze and create a high volume and extensive range of print and nonprint texts in media forms old and new. The need to conduct research and to produce and consume media is embedded into every aspect of today's curriculum. In like fashion, research and media skills and understandings are embedded throughout the Standards rather than treated in a separate section.

Shared responsibility for students' literacy development

The Standards insist that instruction in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language be a shared responsibility within the school. The K–5 standards include expectations for reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language applicable to a range of subjects, including but not limited to ELA. The grades 6–12 standards are divided into two sections, one for ELA and the other for history/social studies, science, and technical subjects. This division reflects the unique, time–honored place of ELA teachers in developing students' literacy skills while at the same time recognizing that teachers in other areas must have a role in this development as well.

Part of the motivation behind the interdisciplinary approach to literacy promulgated by the Standards is extensive research establishing the need for college and career ready students to be proficient in reading complex informational text independently in a variety of content areas. Most of the required reading in college and workforce training programs is informational in structure and challenging in content; postsecondary education programs typically provide students with both a higher volume of such reading than is generally required in K–12 schools and comparatively little scaffolding.

Foundational Literacy Grades K–3

Grades K–1 Print concepts (Print Awareness) Standards

By the end of Kindergarten, children should be able to: a) follow the words on a page from left to right, top to bottom, and from one page to the next, b) understand that spoken words are written down using specific letters, c) recognize that there are spaces between words in writing, and d) know and name all the uppercase and lowercase letters of the alphabet. By the end of first grade, they should also be able to recognize important parts of a sentence, like the first word, capital letters, and punctuation at the end.

Educator Resources:
Phonics in Motion | Concept of Print Activities for Kindergarten – A Guide

Reading Rockets | Concepts of Print: Ideas for Teachers (Michigan's Mission: Literacy, n.d.)

Edmonton Regional Learning Consortium (ERLC) | Literacy Instruction for Students with Significant Disabilities | Access to Books (2016)

Family and Caregiver Resources:
Preschool–Kindergarten | North Carolina Dept. Of Home Instruction | At Home Learning Lesson Supporting Print Awareness [Video] (n.d.)

Center for Student Achievement Solutions | Gradual Release of Responsibility and Phonics Instruction (William, 2024)

Grades K–3 Phonological Awareness and Phonemic Awareness Standards

In Kindergarten, students are learning important skills to help them understand how words work. They will a) practice counting, creating, blending, and breaking up syllables in spoken words, b) Work on putting together and separating the beginning and ending sounds in simple words, c) Identify and say the first, middle (vowel), and last sounds in short words like "cat" or "dog", d) Play with sounds by adding or changing them to create new words, e) Recognize and come up with rhyming words.

In first grade, students are learning to recognize and work with individual sounds in spoken words. They will practice hearing the difference between long and short vowel sounds in simple words, like "cat" and "cake." They will also blend sounds together to say words, even those with tricky consonant blends like "slip" or "drip." Additionally, they will focus on identifying and saying the first, middle (vowel), and last sounds in words. Lastly, they will practice breaking words apart into all their individual sounds.

Intervention | Students with Disabilities | Phonological Awareness Training (Promising)

Source: What Works Clearinghouse Intervention Report, Phonological awareness training. (US DOE, IES, 2012)

The What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) intervention report evaluates the effectiveness of phonological awareness training (outlined below) in improving early reading skills, particularly for children at risk of reading difficulties, including students eligible for special education services. The research indicates that phonological awareness training is generally effective in helping young learners develop the foundational skills necessary for reading, such as the ability to recognize and manipulate the sounds in spoken language.

Four studies reviewed met the WWC evidence standards without reservations (O'Connor et al., 1993; Sweat, 2003; Tyler et al., 2011; & Tyler et al., 2003) in the report demonstrate that this type of training significantly improves phonemic awareness, which is closely linked to later success in reading. The research highlights that interventions focusing on phonemic awareness, especially in early education (pre-K through first grade), are effective in building the skills students need to decode words and develop reading fluency. The WWC review also emphasizes that the most successful programs use a systematic and explicit approach, providing guided practice with increasing complexity.

The studies included in the report show that phonological awareness training can benefit a wide range of students, including those with disabilities, and help close early reading skill gaps. While most research focuses on short-term gains in phonological skills, there is also evidence suggesting that

these early improvements can lead to longer-term benefits in reading comprehension and overall literacy development.

Phonological awareness training involves instructional activities that aim to help students recognize and manipulate sounds in spoken language. The goal is to improve students' ability to hear, identify, and work with sounds at various levels, such as individual phonemes (smallest units of sound), syllables, and rhymes. This type of training typically focuses on helping students develop skills such as blending sounds together to form words, segmenting words into their component sounds, and identifying or manipulating sounds within words.

The instructional activities often involve oral exercises where students practice sound patterns, either by clapping for syllables, matching pictures with rhyming words, or isolating initial sounds in spoken words. These activities can be designed for individual, small group, or whole class settings. Importantly, phonological awareness training does not involve reading or writing text, as it focuses solely on the auditory aspect of language development.

By strengthening students' awareness of how sounds function in words, phonological awareness training serves as a foundational step toward developing reading skills, particularly for students who are at risk for reading difficulties. This type of training has been found to be especially beneficial for younger students, including those with disabilities, helping them build a solid base for future phonics instruction and overall literacy development.



Educator Resources:

Kindergarten | Phonemic Awareness

Reading Rockets | Blending and Segmenting Games

IRRC | Teaching Students to Map Graphemes to Phonemes Module

Reading Rockets | Elkonin Boxes

Understood.org | Elkonin Sound Boxes (Video)

Florida Center for Reading Research (FCRR) & Florida Department of Education (FDE) | Phonemic Awareness Instructional Routine: Blending (2022)

FCRR & FDE| Phonemic Awareness Instructional Routine: Segmenting (2022)

Kindergarten–Grade 1 | Phonological Awareness

U.S. DOE, IES, WWC: Professional Learning Community Emergent Literacy - Module 2: Phonological Awareness (Kosanovich, Phillip, & Willis, 2020)

FCRR & FDE | Phonemic Awareness Instructional Routine: Rhyme (2022)

Reading Rockets | Rhyming Games

ERLC | Alphabet and Phonological Awareness (2016)

Family and Caregiver Resources:
Reading Rockets | Phonological and Phonemic Awareness: Activities for your Kindergartener

Reading Rockets | Phonological and Phonemic Awareness: Activities for Your First Grader

Reading Rockets | Phonological and Phonemic Awareness: Activities for Your Second Grader

Grades K–3 Phonics and Word Recognition Standards

In **Kindergarten**, children are learning important phonics skills to help them read and write words. They will practice matching sounds with letters by saying the most common sound for each consonant. They will also learn to recognize and say both the long and short vowel sounds for the five main vowels. In addition, children will work on reading common words they see a lot, like "the," "to," "you," and "my," quickly and accurately. Lastly, they will practice telling the difference between words that look similar by paying attention to the letters and sounds that make them different.

In **first grade**, children are building important phonics skills to help them read and spell words. They will learn to sound out and spell one-syllable words that have common letter pairs, like "ch" or "sh." They'll also practice reading and spelling simple one-syllable words with consonant blends, such as "jump" or "sand," and words with silent "e" patterns, like "cake" or "ride." Children will also work on recognizing words with common vowel combinations that make long vowel sounds, like "team" or "rain." They'll learn that every syllable must have a vowel, which helps them figure out how many syllables are in a word. They'll also practice breaking longer words into syllables to read and spell them. With some help, they'll start working with words that have endings like "-ed" or "-ing." Finally, they'll focus on reading common first-grade words quickly and correctly.

In **second grade**, children are continuing to build their reading and spelling skills. They will learn to read and spell one-syllable words with both long and short vowel sounds. They will also work on reading and spelling words with common vowel combinations, like "ea" in "team" or "oi" in "boil," and with some help, they'll tackle more tricky vowel combinations. They'll practice reading and spelling longer words with two or more syllables and will also learn how prefixes (like "un-") and suffixes (like "-ing") change the meaning of words. With guidance, they'll work on reading and spelling words that have unusual spelling patterns. Finally, they'll focus on reading common second-grade words quickly and accurately.

In **third grade**, children build upon their foundational reading and spelling abilities. They will learn to recognize and understand the meaning of common prefixes (like "pre-" or "re-") and suffixes (like "-ful" or "-less"). They will also work on reading and spelling words that have common Latin suffixes, such as "-tion" in "action." Additionally, children will practice reading and spelling longer words with multiple syllables. They'll focus on reading tricky, irregularly spelled words quickly and correctly, helping them become more fluent readers.

High Frequency Words

High-frequency words are words that children will see and read over and over again in many different books and texts. These words can be either regular (they follow the typical rules of sounding out) or irregular (they don't follow the usual phonics rules and need to be remembered as special words). For example, words like "in," "had," and "like" can be sounded out using what children have learned about letters and sounds. But words like "the," "was," and "said" are irregular and need to be recognized as unique because they don't follow the normal rules of spelling.

When children learn these words, teachers help them know which parts of the word can be sounded out or if it's one of those special irregular words that needs to be remembered in a different way. The goal is for children to recognize these words automatically, so they don't have to stop and think about them while reading. This is called becoming a "sight word," which means the word is so familiar that the brain can instantly understand it without sounding it out.

Once students develop decoding skills, they begin to store and automatically recognize many words through the orthographic mapping process, which allows for fluent reading.

The teaching of high frequency words should be integrated into phonics instruction and done by spelling patterns, rather than thematically as has been an instructional technique in the past.

Grades K–3 Phonics

Systematic and explicit phonics instruction has been found to be highly effective, especially for beginning readers (Ehri et al., 2001; NICHD, 2000; Torgerson et al., 2006). The term decoding is used to describe a reader's ability to translate a printed word into speech. Systematic and explicit phonics instruction significantly improves readers' word recognition, the foundation of all reading.

Synthetic and Analytic Phonics

Synthetic and analytic phonics are two instructional approaches used to teach the relationship between letters and sounds, each with distinct routines.

Synthetic phonics involves teaching students to convert individual letters or letter combinations (graphemes) into their corresponding sounds (phonemes) and then blend these sounds to form whole words. This method emphasizes a systematic, explicit approach where students learn specific letter-sound correspondences and practice decoding by sounding out each phoneme in a word.

Instructional Routine:

1. Explicit Instruction: Students are taught individual letter-sound correspondences (e.g., "s" = /s/, "a" = /a/).
2. Blending: Students learn to blend these sounds together to read whole words (e.g., /s/ + /a/ + /t/ = "sat").
3. Practice with Decodable Texts: Students read texts composed of words that use the letter-sound patterns they have learned, reinforcing their blending skills.

Synthetic phonics is effective for helping students understand how to decode unfamiliar words, as it teaches them to approach words systematically by breaking them down into their component sounds.

Analytic phonics, in contrast, teaches students to recognize whole words first and then analyze the components of those words to learn about letter-sound relationships. Instead of focusing on individual phonemes, students are taught to identify patterns or chunks within familiar words, such as onset-rime patterns ("st-" in "stop") or word families ("-ake" in "bake," "cake," "lake").

Instructional Routine:

1. Word Recognition: Students are introduced to whole words they already know (e.g., "cat," "bat").
2. Identifying Patterns: They learn to identify and analyze common patterns within those words (e.g., "-at" in "cat" and "bat").
3. Applying Patterns to New Words: Students apply these patterns to decode new words with similar structures (e.g., using knowledge of "-at" to read "hat" and "mat").

Analytic phonics encourages students to use familiar word patterns to decode new words, promoting the recognition of larger chunks within words rather than focusing on individual sounds.

Both approaches can be effective, but **synthetic phonics** tends to be more explicit and systematic (Johnston et al., 2012), making it particularly beneficial for beginning readers who need structured guidance in decoding skills. Analytic phonics may be more suitable for students who are already somewhat familiar with reading and can use their existing knowledge to identify and generalize patterns.

Synthetic vs. Analytic Phonics

Much debate has occurred over the years about which instructional practice is best for teaching phonics for emerging readers. In fact, both can be effective. Torgerson et al. (2006), found no significant evidence that one approach is stronger than the other. This is similar to the findings of the National Reading Panel (NICHD, 2000).

Gallager-Mance (2023), in her recent doctoral research, overseen by Laurie Elish Piper at Northern Illinois University, which was a study on the use of both analytic and systematic phonics, found that there are strong implications for practice that it is important to build a strong foundation in oral language and letter sound knowledge *in addition* to using both synthetic phonics and analytic phonics to offer comprehensive phonics instruction and more accurate word recognition for emergent readers.

Shanahan (2018), in his blog post “Which is best? Analytic or synthetic phonics?” also asserts that there are no significant results in current research that asserts one approach is better than another. He recommends that educators begin by using synthetic phonics to simplify early learning, as it is more concrete and accessible for beginners, then gradually integrate analytic phonics to help students analyze patterns, understand morphological features, and apply phonics skills more flexibly to reading and spelling.

Systematic Phonics Instruction

Many of the more recent models of reading instruction have been missing that have caused the need to clearly outline and define evidence and research-based reading instruction, is that phonics should be taught systematically (Ehri et al., 2001; NICHD, 2000; Torgerson et al., 2006). However, there is also no current research that says how much systematic phonics is needed (Torgerson et al., 2006).

This includes students with reading disabilities.

Systematic phonics instruction is a structured approach to teaching reading that emphasizes the explicit and sequential teaching of letter-sound correspondences, blending, and decoding skills. Unlike incidental or discovery-based phonics, where instruction is integrated as needed, systematic phonics follows a well-planned curriculum, ensuring that all necessary phonics skills are taught in a logical order.

This instructional method helps students understand how letters and letter combinations correspond to sounds (phonemes) and how these sounds blend to form words. For example, students might first learn simple consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) patterns (e.g., “cat”) before progressing to more complex patterns such as consonant blends or digraphs (e.g., “ship” or “blend”).

Key Features

1. Explicit Instruction: Teachers directly teach letter-sound relationships rather than leaving students to infer them.
2. Sequential Progression: Lessons are ordered to build foundational skills before introducing more advanced concepts.
3. Blending and Decoding: Students practice combining sounds to read words and segmenting words to spell them.

4. Systematic Practice: Ample opportunities are provided for students to apply phonics skills in reading and writing tasks.

Benefits of Systematic Phonics

There are several advantages of systematic phonics instruction, particularly for beginning readers and those at risk of reading difficulties. The National Reading Panel (NICHD, 2000) found that systematic phonics instruction significantly improves children's ability to decode, spell, and comprehend text compared to non-systematic or no phonics instruction. Similarly, Torgerson et al. (2006) noted that systematic phonics programs yielded better outcomes in reading accuracy and fluency.

Considerations

While systematic phonics instruction is effective for many learners, it should be integrated with other essential components of reading, including vocabulary development, reading comprehension, and oral fluency (NICHD, 2000). This approach ensures that students develop a comprehensive set of skills to become proficient readers.

K–3 | Evidence Based Practice | Letter and Sound Correspondence

Recommendation K–3: Develop awareness of the segments of sound in speech and how they link to letters. (Strong Evidence)

Source: Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade (Foorman, et al., 2016).

The evidence-based practice from the Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten through 3rd Grade (Foorman et al., 2016) outlines key strategies for helping young students develop strong reading skills. These strategies focus on decoding, recognizing, and writing words by teaching students phonological awareness and the alphabetic principle, which are crucial for reading fluency and comprehension. Below is a detailed breakdown of these components, incorporating key terms and concepts relevant to early reading instruction:

1. **Teach students to blend letter sounds and sound–spelling patterns from left to right within a word to produce a recognizable pronunciation.**

   Blending is an essential phonological skill, where students connect individual phonemes (the smallest units of sound) to form words. For instance, when students blend the sounds /b/ /a/ /t/ together, they create the word "bat." This skill is key to understanding the alphabetic principle—the idea that letters represent sounds, and these sounds can be blended to form words.

   For educators, this means teaching students how to blend segments of sound smoothly using tools like letter tiles and Elkonin sound boxes. These tools help students visually represent phonemes and practice letter-sound relations. Educators should also focus on words featuring continuous sounds (like /m/ or /s/) at first, as these are easier for students to blend, and gradually introduce more complex words, including those with consonant blends (like "fl" in "flag") or digraphs (like "sh" in "ship").

2. **Instruct students in common sound-spelling patterns.**

   Understanding common sound-spelling patterns helps students decode words more efficiently by applying familiar phonics rules. For example, students can learn that the spelling pattern "ai" makes a long /a/ sound, as in "rain." These patterns include onsets (the initial sound in a syllable, like "st" in "stop") and rimes (the vowel and everything after it, like "op" in "stop").

For educators, it's important to provide systematic instruction on sound-spelling patterns, such as vowel teams, consonant blends, and syllable types. Activities like advanced word building using letter tiles and word lists that highlight specific patterns allow students to see these patterns in action. This knowledge helps students recognize how sounds map to letters and syllables in both simple and complex words.

3. **Teach students to recognize common word parts.**

   Recognizing word parts, such as prefixes, suffixes, and root words, allows students to decode multisyllabic words. For instance, understanding that "un-" means "not" and "-ful" means "full of" helps students decode and comprehend words like "unhappy" or "joyful." Similarly, building and dividing compound words (like "sunshine" or "baseball") helps students recognize how smaller word units come together to form larger, meaningful words.

   For educators, this involves direct teaching of morphology, the study of word parts, through activities that focus on both decoding (reading) and encoding (spelling). Teachers can use word-building exercises that emphasize root words, prefixes, and suffixes, helping students understand how these parts contribute to the meaning of a word. Activities should also include breaking down complex words into their components, reinforcing the idea that knowing smaller parts of a word can aid in decoding unfamiliar words.

4. **Have students read decodable words in isolation and in text.**

   Decodable words follow predictable sound-spelling patterns, which students can use to practice their decoding skills. These words might be read in isolation (such as on word lists or flashcards) and in connected text (such as in short stories or passages). Reading decodable words in context reinforces the phonics skills students are learning.

   Providing decodable texts aligned with students' phonics lessons is crucial. Students should practice reading these words first in isolation to build confidence and then in stories to apply their decoding skills in context. For example, a student might first read a word like "cat" on its own and then encounter it within a story, reinforcing their ability to recognize and decode it. Elkonin sound boxes and word lists are also helpful for isolating specific patterns for targeted practice.

5. **Teach regular and irregular high-frequency words so that students can recognize them efficiently.**

   High-frequency words are words that appear frequently in texts, such as "the," "and," or "said." Many of these words follow predictable spelling rules, but some, like "said" or "of," do not. Teaching students to recognize these words quickly improves fluency and allows them to focus more on comprehension rather than decoding every word.

   Many of the historical models of reading instruction have been missing systematic phonics instruction (Ehri et al., 2001; NICHD, 2000; Torgerson et al., 2006). However, there is also no current research that says how much systematic phonics is needed (Torgerson et al., 2006).

   This includes students with reading disabilities. For educators, this means incorporating high-frequency word recognition into daily reading instruction through phonemic awareness activities and practice. Students can learn regular high-frequency words using phonics rules and irregular ones through memorization techniques like flashcards, word walls, and repeated exposure in connected text.

6. **Introduce non-decodable words that are essential to the meaning of the text as whole words.**

Some words do not follow predictable phonics rules and are essential for understanding the meaning of a text. These non-decodable words, like “because” or “could,” need to be taught as whole words, meaning students should recognize them immediately without sounding them out.

For educators, this means introducing these words in a meaningful context. Teachers can use strategies like visual aids, sentence examples, and explicit practice in both isolated word lists and in stories where the words are essential to comprehension. By reinforcing these words as part of the reading experience, students can better grasp the overall meaning of a text.

These six components provide a comprehensive and systematic approach to building early reading skills. Educators should focus on teaching phonological awareness, including how to blend and segment sounds in words, understand syllables, and recognize letter-sound relations. By teaching students to break down words into parts, recognize sound-spelling patterns, and decode both regular and irregular words, students will develop the skills needed for fluent and accurate reading. This ultimately supports greater comprehension as students move from learning to read to reading for understanding.



Educator Resources:

Kindergarten and Grade 1 Phonics

FCRR & FDE | Encoding and Decoding: Letter Cube Blending (2005)

FCRR & FDE | Encoding and Decoding: Make-A-Word (2005)

FCRR & FDE | Encoding and Decoding: Word Steps (2005)

Reading Rockets | Matching Books to Phonics Features

Kindergarten and Grade 3 Phonics: Instruct students in common sound-spelling patterns, including consonant patterns, vowel patterns, and syllable construction patterns.

FCRR & FDE | Encoding and Decoding: A Digraph A Word (2005)

FCRR & FDE | Variant Correspondences: Silent "e" Changes (2005)

FCRR & FDE | Syllable Patterns: Syllables, Words, and Pictures (2005)

Reading Rockets | Syllable Games

Kindergarten and Grade 3 Phonics: Teach students to recognize common word parts. Teach students to isolate and identify word parts. Breaking the words into smaller, meaningful word parts helps students read more challenging words.

FCRR & FDE | Affix Hunt (2005)

FCRR & FDE | Phonics instructional routine: Identify base words and suffixes to read multi-syllabic words #1 (2022)

FCRR & FDE | Phonics instructional routine: Identify base words and affixes to read multi-syllabic words #2 (2022)

IRRC | Grade 2 | Understanding Compound Words Through Their Two Word Parts (Gibbs & Reed, 2019)

Kindergarten and Grade 3 Phonics: Teach irregular high-frequency words so that students can recognize them efficiently. Help students recognize words frequently appearing in text to speed up the reading process.

FCRR & FDE | Fluency Instructional Routine–High-Frequency Words (2022)

IRRC | Teaching Sight Words as a Part of Comprehensive Reading Instruction (Reed & Hinzman, 2018)



Family and Caregiver Resources:

Reading Rockets | Phonics and Decoding: Activities for Your Kindergartner

Reading Rockets | Phonics and Decoding: Activities for Your First Grader

Reading Rockets | Phonics and Decoding: Activities for Your Second Grader

Priority Resources for Leaders and Educators

The following PLC guide and educator family involvement guides are based on this anchor guide:

IES Educator's Practice Guide, WWC | Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade (Foorman et al., 2016)

The following guides were developed to help educators support families support literacy at home. The home literacy activities are 1) aligned with classroom instruction, 2) informed by student need, 3) grounded in evidence based practices, and 4) facilitated by ongoing parent-teacher communication.

Each guide provides a framework of support that can be presented during family literacy nights and parent-teacher conferences and includes:

1. Recommendation reminders
2. Language to use with parents
3. Family literacy videos (demonstrations)
4. Family activities
5. Appendices, that includes teacher text messages to families, video links, books to share, and teacher resources.

Kindergarten | REL Southeast, IES | A Kindergarten Teacher's Guide to Supporting Family Involvement in Foundational Reading Skills (Kasonovich et al., 2020)

First Grade | REL Southeast, IES | A First Grade Teacher's Guide to Supporting Family Involvement in Foundational Reading Skills (Kasonovich et al., 2020)

Second Grade | REL Southeast, IES | A Second Grade Teacher's Guide to Supporting Family Involvement in Foundational Reading Skills (Kasonovich et al., 2020)

Third Grade | REL Southeast, IES | A Third Grade Teacher's Guide to Supporting Family Involvement in Foundational Reading Skills (Kasonovich et al., 2020)

Support for Professional Learning Communities

The Professional Learning Communities Facilitator's Guide (Kasanovich & Foorman, 2016) is designed to support PLCs in implementing evidence-based strategies to help K–3 students develop language and literacy skills necessary for academic success. Educators will engage in a collaborative learning experience, where they will read, discuss, share, and apply key ideas from this guide. It is designed for teachers, reading coaches, principals, and other educators, offering structured instructional recommendations.

Grades K–3 Fluency Standards

In **Kindergarten**, students work on reading aloud grade-appropriate texts with purpose and understanding. By first grade, they should be able to read accurately and fluently to help them understand what they're reading. This means reading at their grade level with purpose, correcting themselves when needed, and reading out loud smoothly, at a good pace, and with expression.

In **second grade**, students continue to improve their accuracy and fluency, reading grade-level text with understanding. They use their decoding skills to fix any mistakes and read aloud with a good flow, speed, and expression after multiple readings.

In **third grade**, students build on these skills by reading grade-level text, including prose and poetry, with purpose and understanding. They correct themselves when they make mistakes and read aloud accurately, at the right speed, and with expression to bring the text to life.

K –3: Fluency Evidence Based Practice: Read Connected Texts Every Day

Recommendation K–3 | Ensure that each student reads connected text every day to support reading accuracy, fluency, and comprehension. (Moderate Evidence)

Source: IES Educator's Practice Guide, WWC | Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade (Foorman et al., 2016)

This recommendation emphasizes the importance of daily connected text reading, both with and without constructive feedback, to develop reading accuracy, fluency, and comprehension in young students in kindergarten through 3rd grade. Foorman et al. (2016) suggest that teachers should start incorporating this practice as soon as students can identify a few words and highlight the value of exposing students to a variety of texts, including different genres and content, such as informational and narrative texts.

To support reading development, students should regularly practice reading aloud while receiving feedback from a more proficient reader, such as a teacher, parent, or peer. This practice helps with decoding and word identification, especially when students are introduced to new sound-spelling patterns. Teachers should scaffold this process by modeling effective reading strategies and providing prompt feedback. For instance, after teaching a sound–spelling pattern (like "th"), students should read texts containing words with this pattern, helping them apply their learning to real reading situations.

The guide also stresses that the texts chosen for practice should be at the student's instructional level—texts that provide some challenge without being overwhelming. Instructional-level texts allow students to make mistakes but also successfully read most of the content, which enhances learning. During reading practice, when students encounter difficult words, they are encouraged to apply word-reading strategies such as sounding out the word or using known letter patterns. Teachers should avoid strategies like guessing based on pictures or first letters, which are ineffective for more advanced texts.

Moreover, the recommendation calls for teaching students self-monitoring and self-correction skills. Students should learn to recognize when a sentence doesn't make sense because of a misread word and how to fix it.

The recommendation also includes opportunities for oral reading practice to develop fluency, which is the ability to read smoothly, with expression, and at a natural pace. Teachers should model fluent reading and guide students in reading in meaningful phrases rather than word by word. Various activities, such as partner reading, echo reading, and repeated reading, are suggested to help students practice fluency. Over time, teachers should reduce support as students gain more independence in their reading, reinforcing the goal of creating fluent, confident readers who can read and understand increasingly complex texts.



Educator Resources:

FCRR & FDE | Instructional Routine–Reading Text with Appropriate Phrasing and Proper Expression (2022)

Reading Rockets | Paired Reading

IRRC | Repeated Reading with Goal Setting for Reading Fluency (Zimmermann & Reed, 2019)

Reading Universe | How long should students work with decodable texts? [video] (Moats, 2024)

Reading Universe | Free Decodable Texts for Each Phonics Skills

Family and Caregiver Resources:
Reading Rockets | Fluency: Activities for Your First Grader

Reading Rockets | Fluency: Activities for Your Second Grader

North Carolina Dept. of Public Instruction | Fluency for 3rd Grade

Grades K–3 Language Standards

The Language Standards for grades K–5 guide students in *developing essential grammar, vocabulary, and communication skills*. Each grade level focuses on building these skills step by step, ensuring students master the basics before moving on to more complex language concepts.

In **Kindergarten**, students are introduced to the basics of language use. They learn to use common nouns and verbs, form plural words, and understand simple prepositions like “in” and “on.” They also practice asking and answering questions using words like “who,” “what,” and “why.” Kindergarteners are taught to write simple sentences, capitalize the first word in a sentence, and recognize punctuation marks like periods. They begin to explore new word meanings, categorize objects, and act out verbs to understand their meanings better. Through conversations and reading, they start to use new words in their speaking and writing.

By **First Grade**, students expand on what they’ve learned by using singular and plural nouns, pronouns like “I” and “they,” and verbs to talk about the past, present, and future. They also learn to form complete sentences, use adjectives and prepositions, and capitalize names and dates. First graders practice understanding compound words like “birdhouse” and use basic punctuation, such as commas, in lists. They explore word relationships by sorting words into categories, identifying opposites, and describing real-life situations with new vocabulary.

In **Second Grade**, students dive deeper into language. They learn to use collective nouns (e.g., “group”), irregular plurals (e.g., “feet”), and reflexive pronouns (e.g., “myself”). They also form and use the past tense of irregular verbs, and understand how adjectives and adverbs work in sentences. Students focus on using punctuation like apostrophes for contractions (e.g., “can’t”) and commas in letters. They also begin comparing formal and informal English and explore new words by looking at prefixes (e.g., “happy/unhappy”) and root words. Vocabulary skills are enhanced by identifying real-life connections between words, like describing foods as “spicy” or “juicy.”

In **Third Grade**, students continue to develop their grammar skills by explaining the roles of nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs in sentences. They work on forming regular and irregular verbs and using comparative adjectives (e.g., “bigger” vs. “biggest”). They also learn more about punctuation, such as commas in addresses and quotation marks in dialogue. Third graders begin using reference materials like dictionaries and start recognizing the difference between spoken and written language. They also practice understanding word meanings by using context clues and recognizing how prefixes and suffixes change word meanings (e.g., “careful/careless”).

Overall, each grade level focuses on mastering the foundational elements of language, from grammar to vocabulary use, helping students gradually improve their communication skills both in writing and speaking. These standards ensure that students gain a deep understanding of how language works, preparing them for more complex writing and reading tasks as they move forward.

K–3 | Evidence Based Practice | Understanding Word Parts

Recommendation K–3: Vocabulary | Teach students to decode words, analyze word parts, and write and recognize words. (Strong Evidence)

Source: Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade (Foorman, et al., 2016).

Once students learn a few consonants and vowels, they can start using this knowledge to sound out and read words, either on their own or in stories. It is important for them to also learn how to break down harder words by splitting them into smaller, easier-to-say parts. This involves understanding how words are made up of meaningful parts, which is called morphology. By recognizing common letter patterns and understanding how letters and sounds work together, students will be able to read more difficult words. This will improve their reading speed, accuracy, and understanding of what they read.

As students practice reading more words and learn different sound-spelling patterns (like how “ph” makes an “f” sound) and word parts (like “-ing” in “running”), they will become better at recognizing words, even ones they haven’t seen before. Helping them quickly recognize common words they see all the time will also make their reading smoother. When students can recognize words more easily, they can focus on understanding the meaning of what they’re reading, which is key for good comprehension.

Teaching students how to sound out and recognize words and word parts is one of the most effective strategies for learning to read, according to the National Reading Panel report (NICHD, 2000). New evidence continues to support these findings.

How to Implement the Recommendation

1. **Teach students to blend letter sounds and sound–spelling patterns from left to right within a word to produce a recognizable pronunciation.**

   Blending is a key skill that helps students sound out unfamiliar words by connecting individual letter sounds (phonemes) and spelling patterns to form complete words. For example, a student might learn to blend the sounds /c/ /a/ /t/ to form “cat.” This process involves teaching students to read words left to right and blend sounds smoothly without pauses.

   For educators, this means providing explicit and systematic instruction in phonics, starting with individual letter sounds and moving toward more complex spelling patterns. Teachers can use strategies like:

   - Modeling how to sound out words.
   - Engaging in choral reading where students blend sounds together with the teacher.
   - Incorporating manipulatives such as letter tiles or cards to help students visualize and practice blending sounds.

2. **Instruct students in common sound–spelling patterns.**

   Students need to recognize and understand common spelling patterns to decode words efficiently. These patterns include vowel teams (like “ea” in “bread” or “ee” in “feet”), consonant blends, digraphs (like “sh” or “ch”), and silent letters. Understanding these patterns helps students apply known rules to unfamiliar words.

   For educators, this involves:

- Systematic instruction on various sound–spelling patterns, including regular review and practice.
- Using word sorts and spelling lists that highlight specific sound–spelling patterns.
- Providing direct teaching and practice with word families (e.g., words ending in "-ake" like "bake" and "cake") to help students see connections between similar words.
- Incorporating games and activities that allow students to practice recognizing and applying these patterns in context.

3. **Teach students to recognize common word parts.**

   Many words are made up of smaller morphemes like prefixes, suffixes, and root words, which carry meaning and can help students decode and understand unfamiliar words. For example, understanding that "un-" means "not" and "-ful" means "full of" can help students understand words like "unhappy" or "joyful."

   For educators, this means:

   - Explicitly teaching common prefixes (e.g., "re-", "un-", "dis-") and suffixes (e.g., "-ing," "-ed," "-ly").
   - Helping students break down multisyllabic words by identifying the root word and affixes.
   - Using visual aids like word trees or charts that display the relationships between root words and their derivatives.
   - Encouraging students to practice identifying and using word parts to build new words, which enhances both decoding and vocabulary skills.

4. **Have students read decodable words in isolation and in text.**

   Decodable texts are composed of words that follow the phonics patterns and spelling rules students have been taught, allowing them to apply their decoding skills in real reading situations. By reading decodable words in isolation (such as word lists) and in connected text (such as short stories), students strengthen their word recognition and fluency.

   For educators, this involves:

   - Incorporating decodable texts that align with the phonics rules students are learning. These texts should provide ample opportunities to practice specific sounds and spelling patterns.
   - Having students read lists or practice sets of decodable words before transitioning to longer texts, helping them build confidence and fluency.
   - Encouraging repeated reading of decodable texts to reinforce word recognition and promote automaticity.
   - Assessing students' ability to decode both isolated words and words within context to ensure that they can transfer their decoding skills to real reading tasks.

Together, these four components create a systematic approach to teaching reading. Educators must focus on explicit instruction in phonics and word recognition skills, gradually introducing more complex word structures and providing plenty of practice with decodable texts. This helps students develop the foundational decoding and word analysis skills needed for fluent reading and comprehension. The key

is to scaffold learning, offering targeted support and practice as students build their understanding of how words work.

K–5 | English Learners | Evidence Based Practice | Vocabulary Instruction Throughout the Day

Recommendation K–5: Provide high-quality vocabulary instruction throughout the day. Teach essential content words in depth. In addition, use instructional time to address the meanings of common words, phrases, and expressions not yet learned. (Strong)

Source: What Works Clearinghouse | *Effective Literacy and English Language Instruction for English Learners in the Elementary Grades: A Practice Guide* (Gersten et al., 2007)

Gersten et al. (2007) recommend providing extensive and varied vocabulary instruction for ELs. The goal is to offer high-quality, explicit vocabulary teaching throughout the day, focusing on both essential content words and common phrases to promote second language acquisition.

1. **Explicit Vocabulary Instruction**

   Teachers should adopt an evidence-based approach by delivering daily, intensive vocabulary instruction across subjects like reading, writing, science, and history. Multiple exposures to words over several days and in various contexts (speaking, reading, writing) are important. Definitions should be student-friendly, and vocabulary instruction should include opportunities to use new words in meaningful conversations.

2. **Core and Conversational Vocabulary**

   Alongside teaching academic vocabulary, teachers must also address common everyday words that native English speakers might naturally know. Second language acquisition must include Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) as well as Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP).

3. **Districtwide Vocabulary Lists**

   Schools should develop districtwide lists of essential vocabulary words across different content areas (e.g., science, history). This ensures a focused and coordinated approach to vocabulary instruction, helping teachers prioritize which words to teach in-depth.

4. **Teacher Training and Professional Learning**

   Professional learning is essential for effective vocabulary instruction. Teachers should participate in study groups and receive coaching to refine their techniques for teaching vocabulary.

Explicit vocabulary instruction combined with student-to-student conversation opportunities improves reading comprehension for students of all proficiency levels and is critical for reducing achievement gaps experienced by ELs.

K–5 | English Learners | Develop Formal or Academic English

Recommendation K–5: Ensure that the development of formal or academic English is a key instructional goal for English learners, beginning in the primary grades. Provide curricula and supplemental curricula to accompany core reading and mathematics series to support this goal. Accompany with relevant training and professional learning. (Expert Opinion)

Source: What Works Clearinghouse | *Effective Literacy and English Language Instruction for English Learners in the Elementary Grades: A Practice Guide* (Gersten et al., 2007)

The goal of this recommendation is to ensure that developing formal or academic English is a primary instructional focus for English learners starting in the primary grades. Academic English (CALP) is more complex and abstract than conversational English (BICS), involving the language of academics (such as science, history, and literature). This type of English is essential for students' success in understanding school content and participating in academic discussions.

1. **Explicit Daily Instruction**

   Teachers should dedicate time daily to teaching academic English within the core curriculum. This instruction should focus on vocabulary, sentence structure, and the use of academic discourse across content areas, including reading and mathematics.

2. **Instruction Beginning in Early Grades**

   English learners should not have to wait until they master conversational English to start learning academic English. Teachers should incorporate academic vocabulary and language features (like sentence structures and grammar) in both oral and written contexts, even before students can read.

3. **Teacher Training and Support**

   Professional learning is essential for teachers to understand and teach academic English effectively. Training should include practical exercises, such as analyzing texts for language features, creating student-friendly definitions, and designing instructional activities focused on academic language. Effective professional learning is ongoing in nature, providing opportunities for implementation, feedback, and revised application.

4. **Dedicated Time Blocks**

   Schools should consider setting aside specific blocks of time each day devoted to developing academic English, separate from general content instruction. This ensures that students get focused instruction on the language structures they need for academic success.

Teaching academic English is essential because it equips students with the language needed for academic success, higher-order thinking, and access to the core curriculum. It bridges the gap between social and academic language, empowering English learners to excel in school and future careers.

K–8+ | EBP | English Learners | Academic Vocabulary Across Several Days

Recommendation Grades K–8+ | Teach a set of academic vocabulary words intensively across several days using a variety of instructional activities. (Strong)

Source: Teaching Academic Content and Literacy to English Learners in Elementary and Middle School (Baker et al., 2014)

+Note: While this EBP is recommended for grades K–8 in the practice guide, the Department would also recommend this practice in grades 9–12 as needed.

English learners need repeated exposure to new words in order to decode them in reading and listening as well as to produce them verbally and in writing. Baker et al. (2014), provide a detailed overview of a method for teaching vocabulary words across several days. This practice can be used across all content disciplines.

1. **Choose a Brief, Engaging Informational Text**

   Begin by selecting a short, content-rich informational text that captivates students' interest while introducing key academic vocabulary. The text should align with the unit of study, contain words important for comprehension, and offer various perspectives for discussion. Ideal texts include

articles, opinion pieces, or excerpts from books that are accessible yet challenging, promoting critical thinking and vocabulary growth. With scaffolding, even complex texts can serve as effective platforms for academic vocabulary instruction.

2. **Select a Small Set of Academic Vocabulary Words for In-Depth Instruction**

   Identify five to eight essential academic words from the selected text for focused, in-depth instruction. These words should be central to understanding the text, appear frequently, and have cross-curricular relevance. Choosing words with multiple meanings or morphological variations, as well as cognates across languages deepens vocabulary knowledge for all students. Limiting the number of words allows for more meaningful and thorough instruction.

3. **Teach Academic Vocabulary Using Multiple Modalities**

   Provide student-friendly definitions, examples, non-examples, and graphic organizers like word maps to clarify meaning. Incorporating visuals, gestures, and concrete examples enhances understanding. Engaging students in activities that involve reading, writing, speaking, and listening helps them use vocabulary in multiple contexts and reinforces learning.

4. **Provide Opportunities to Use Words in Speaking and Writing**

   Give students frequent opportunities to use new vocabulary in both spoken and written forms. Facilitate discussions that incorporate target words and assign writing tasks such as short responses or essays that require students to apply the vocabulary. Activities like vocabulary games or sketches further reinforce word usage, helping students become more comfortable with academic language in varied contexts.

5. **Teach Word-Learning Strategies**

   Teach students strategies for determining the meanings of unfamiliar words using context clues, word parts, and cognates. Show them how to break down words into roots, prefixes, and suffixes, and encourage them to use context to infer meaning. For English learners, recognizing cognates can boost meaningful comprehension across languages. Equipping all students with these strategies empowers them to expand their vocabularies across different subjects more independently.

Gone are the days of the vocabulary worksheets and the long lists of words with sentences copied out of the back of the book, or at least they should be. These practices do not promote a deep understanding and application of words, especially for ELs. Extended exposure and practice with academic vocabulary empowers ELs and English speakers alike (Lesaux et al., 2010, as cited in Baker et al., 2014).

> ""I see academic language and exposure to academic language as an expansion of children's language skills that both contributes to successful literacy—successful reading comprehension—and gets built through encounters with texts, but also encounters with oral activities." —Catherine Snow, Ph.D.
>
> Amplify | Science of Reading: The Podcast–S8-12 (Lambert, 2024)

Educator Resources:
Reading Rockets | Teaching Vocabulary (Diamond & Gutlohn, 2006)

Anita Archer | Vocabulary Instruction [Video Demonstrating Explicit Vocabulary Instructional Routine] (2014)

The Reading League Florida | Teaching Reading is Complex: Techniques and Decisions [webinar] (Diamond, 2022)



Family and Caregiver Resources:
Reading Rockets

Vocabulary: Activities for Your Kindergartener

Vocabulary: Activities for Your First Grader

Vocabulary: Activities for Your Second Grader

Grades K–3 Reading Comprehension Standards – Literature

In **Kindergarten**, students are just beginning their journey into reading and understanding stories. With help, they are expected to ask and answer questions about key details in stories, retell familiar stories, and identify characters, settings, and major events. They also learn to recognize different types of books, like story books or poems, and understand the roles of the author and illustrator. They practice comparing characters' adventures and experiences in familiar stories and actively participate in group reading activities.

By **First Grade**, students build on these skills by asking and answering more detailed questions about the stories they read. They retell stories and explain the main message or lesson. First graders describe characters, settings, and important events in a story and identify words that convey emotions or appeal to their senses. They also compare different types of books and start to recognize who is telling the story. With more independence, they use illustrations to help explain a story's events and begin to compare characters' adventures across different stories.

In **Second Grade**, students start to ask and answer more complex questions, such as who, what, when, where, and why, using details from the story to support their answers. They learn to determine the main lesson or moral of a story, especially fables and folktales from different cultures. They also describe how characters respond to challenges and how words, phrases, and structure add rhythm and meaning to stories. Additionally, they compare different versions of the same story from various authors or cultures and begin reading more challenging texts with some help.

Grades K–3 Reading Comprehension Standards – Informational

By **Third Grade**, students are expected to demonstrate a deeper understanding of texts by asking and answering questions with clear references to the text itself. They recount the main lesson or moral of fables, folktales, and myths from different cultures and explain how it's shown in the story. They describe characters' traits, motivations, and feelings, and how these affect the events in the story. Third graders also learn to differentiate between literal and nonliteral language, use specific terms when discussing stories, and compare their own perspective with that of the narrator or characters. They begin comparing themes, settings, and plots of stories written by the same author and read more complex literature independently.

In **Kindergarten** for informational texts, students focus on understanding the key details of texts with help, learning to identify the main topic and describe connections between individuals, events, or ideas.

They practice asking questions about unknown words, identifying parts of a book (like the front cover and title page), and explaining how illustrations relate to the text.

In **First Grade**, students build on these skills by asking questions about key details, identifying the main topic, and describing connections between events or ideas. They use text features like headings and captions to locate information and compare illustrations with the information provided by words. First graders also learn to recognize the reasons an author gives to support points in the text.

In **Second Grade**, students ask more complex questions about who, what, where, when, why, and how, to show their understanding of a text. They learn to identify the main idea of a multi-paragraph text and describe how events are connected. They use text features more efficiently and explain the author's purpose or perspective.

By **Third Grade**, students dig deeper into informational texts by asking detailed questions and recounting key details that support the main idea. They describe the relationship between events or ideas, using words that show time, sequence, or cause/effect. They also start using text features like keywords and sidebars to find information quickly and compare their perspective with that of the author.

K–1 | Intervention | Dialogic Reading

Intervention Ages 3–6: Dialogic Reading to support Oral Language Development (Promising)

Source: What Works Clearinghouse Intervention Report | *Early Childhood Education Interventions for Children with Disabilities: Dialogic Reading* (U.S. DOE, IES, WWC, 2010)

Dialogic reading was introduced previously in the section for children in ages 3–5, at the preschool stage, as an evidence-based practice, and as an intervention tool. When used as an intervention, it is important that educators plan for its use in small groups and target students based on their specific skills using data informed processes.

K–3 | EBP | Teach Reading Comprehension Strategies

Recommendation K–3: Teach students how to use reading comprehension strategies. (Strong)

Source: IES Practice Guide, What Works Clearinghouse | *Improving Reading Comprehension in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade* (Shanahan et al., 2010)

Shanahan et al. (2010) emphasize the importance of teaching students how to use various reading comprehension strategies. These strategies are cognitive tools that help readers understand, retain, and analyze texts. Good readers use these strategies before, during, and after reading to construct meaning from texts. Below is a breakdown of the key instructional practices teachers can use to implement this recommendation:

1. **Teach students how to use several research-based reading comprehension strategies.**

   Students should be taught a variety of reading strategies that enhance comprehension. Examples of effective strategies include:

   - Activating prior knowledge: Encouraging students to think about what they already know about a topic before reading.
   - Making predictions: Teaching students to predict what will happen next based on the text and then confirming or revising their predictions as they read.

- Questioning: Encouraging students to ask and answer questions about the text, which keeps them engaged and focused on understanding key details.
- Visualization: Helping students create mental images of what they are reading to improve understanding and retention.
- Summarizing: Teaching students to condense what they've read into a brief summary, identifying key points and main ideas.
- Inferring: Guiding students to make inferences or draw conclusions based on clues in the text.

For educators, this means providing explicit instruction for each strategy, explaining how it works, why it's helpful, and when to use it. This could involve modeling the strategy through a "think-aloud" approach, where teachers demonstrate how to apply the strategy while reading aloud to the class.

2. **Teach reading comprehension strategies individually or in combination.**

   Teachers can choose to introduce strategies one at a time, allowing students to focus on mastering a single strategy before moving on to others, or teach multiple strategies simultaneously, helping students learn how to use them together while reading.

   Single-strategy instruction allows students to develop a deep understanding of each strategy in isolation. Teachers might spend a few weeks on each strategy, ensuring students have sufficient time to practice and internalize it. However, it is essential for teachers to encourage students to apply previously learned strategies while learning new ones, so they don't forget or stop using them.

   Multiple-strategy instruction involves teaching students to use strategies together. For example, while reading, students might make predictions, visualize scenes, and ask questions all at once. This approach may provide a more authentic reading experience because good readers naturally use several strategies while reading.

   For educators, the choice between single- or multiple-strategy instruction depends on classroom dynamics and student needs. Both approaches are effective, but the goal should be to teach students to use a variety of strategies over time.

3. **Teach reading comprehension strategies by using a gradual release of responsibility.**

   The gradual release of responsibility model helps students learn to use strategies independently. Teachers begin by explicitly teaching and modeling a strategy. Next, they guide students as they practice the strategy, providing feedback and support. Gradually, students take more responsibility until they are using the strategy on their own without teacher assistance.

   For educators, this means scaffolding learning by providing support early on and slowly transferring the responsibility of using strategies to students. Some students may need more modeling and practice than others, so it's important to tailor instruction based on individual needs:

   - **Reciprocal Teaching**: This method involves students taking turns leading a discussion about the text using four key strategies: predicting, clarifying, questioning, and summarizing. Teachers model the strategies first and then gradually hand over responsibility to the students. This small-group approach helps students practice multiple strategies at once.

- **Transactional Strategy Instruction (TSI)**: Teachers select a few key strategies to teach explicitly, explaining the processes involved and modeling their use. Students practice the strategies, with the teacher gradually stepping back to allow more independent use. The goal is to help students apply these strategies while reading and writing.
- **Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction (CORI)**: This approach teaches comprehension strategies in the context of learning about an overarching concept, often in science or social studies. CORI engages students by integrating hands-on activities and collaboration, making the learning experience more meaningful. Strategies like activating prior knowledge, questioning, and summarizing are introduced systematically and reinforced through authentic content.

This recommendation encourages teachers to equip students with a toolkit of reading comprehension strategies to become independent and resourceful readers. Strategies like activating prior knowledge, making predictions, visualizing, questioning, inferring, summarizing, and monitoring comprehension are essential for building deep reading skills. Whether taught individually or in combination, teachers should gradually release responsibility, enabling students to confidently use these strategies independently. Classroom approaches such as Reciprocal Teaching and Transactional Strategy Instruction are effective ways to integrate multiple strategies, ensuring students not only understand what they read but also learn how to apply these skills across different texts and subjects.

K –3 | EBP | Teach Text's Organizational Structure

Recommendation K–3: Teach students to identify and use the text's organizational structure to comprehend, learn, and remember content. (Moderate)

Source: IES Practice Guide, What Works Clearinghouse | *Improving Reading Comprehension in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade* (Shanahan et al., 2010)

This recommendation encourages teachers to help students recognize how texts are organized, so they can better understand and remember the information. When students learn to identify the structure of stories or informational texts, it becomes easier for them to grasp the main ideas, follow the flow of events, and remember key points.

Even young children, like those in Kindergarten, can start learning about the structure of stories by focusing on basic elements such as characters, settings, and the sequence of events. As they grow older, they can also learn how informational texts, like news articles or reports, are organized in ways that make it easier to understand complex topics.

1. **Explain how to identify and connect the parts of a story (narrative texts)**

   Narrative texts, like stories and fables, are organized in a way that makes it easy to follow the events. Teachers should teach students how to recognize important parts of the story, such as:

   - Characters: Who is in the story?
   - Setting: Where and when does the story take place?
   - Plot: What happens in the story? What problem do the characters face, and how is it solved?
   - Resolution: How does the story end?
   - Theme: What lesson or message does the story teach?

Teachers can use familiar stories (like Goldilocks and the Three Bears) to teach these elements. Tools like story maps or graphic organizers help students visualize the structure of a story and organize their thoughts. For example, students might fill out a chart showing the characters, setting, and main events of the story. Teachers can also ask students to retell the story in their own words, helping them to recall the structure.

2. **Teach students the structure of informational texts:**

   Informational texts, such as articles, reports, or how-to guides, are structured differently from stories. Teachers should explain the common ways these texts are organized, including:

   - Description: Texts that describe something in detail, such as a person or event.
   - Sequence: Texts that explain things in order, like steps in a recipe.
   - Cause and Effect: Texts that show how one event leads to another.
   - Problem and Solution: Texts that explain a problem and how it was or could be solved.
   - Compare and Contrast: Texts that explain how things are similar or different.

   Teachers can use graphic organizers like Venn diagrams or sequence charts to help students identify these structures. For example, when reading a text that compares two animals, students might use a Venn diagram to list the similarities and differences between them.

3. **Use graphic tools to reinforce understanding**

   Teachers often use visual aids like flowcharts, concept maps, or Venn diagrams to help students organize the information they read. These tools allow students to clearly see the relationships between different parts of the text, making it easier to understand and remember. For example, when teaching cause and effect, students might use a flowchart to map out how one event leads to another in a text about natural disasters.

4. **Adapt instruction for young students and early readers:**

   For younger students, such as those in Kindergarten, the instruction should be simpler. Teachers might use questions like “Who is in the story?” and “What happened at the end?” to help students identify key elements. For students who are not yet reading independently, teachers can read stories aloud and ask students to follow along, either visually or with their own copy of the book. Teachers can also use pictures and simple diagrams to help students connect the different parts of a story or informational text.

5. **Gradually release responsibility to students:**

   As students become more familiar with identifying text structures, teachers should gradually give them more responsibility for using these strategies on their own. This means that teachers first model how to recognize and use text structure, then guide students in practicing it, and finally, allow students to apply the strategies independently.

By teaching students how to recognize the structure of both stories and informational texts, teachers are giving them tools to better understand and remember what they read. When students know how to break down a text into its key parts, they can follow along more easily and retain important information. This makes them more confident and capable readers as they progress in their learning.

K –3 | EBP | Engaging and Motivating Context

Recommendation K–3: Establish an engaging and motivating context in which to teach reading comprehension. (Moderate)

Source: IES Practice Guide, What Works Clearinghouse | *Improving Reading Comprehension in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade* (Shanahan et al., 2010)

In this recommendation Shanahan et al. (2010) emphasize the importance of creating an engaging, motivating context for teaching reading comprehension to students in kindergarten through 3rd grade. They outline four key strategies found in the research that support this recommendation:

1. **Help Students Discover the Purpose and Benefits of Reading**

   Teachers should demonstrate the value of reading by integrating it into daily life and classroom activities. This includes reading memos, posting classroom rules, and using books and literacy centers to inspire excitement about reading. Hands-on activities, such as acting out scenes from books or engaging in projects like growing plants, can help students connect their learning to real-world experiences. Choosing texts with themes relevant to students' lives and interests, like weather or friendship, makes reading more meaningful and motivating.

2. **Create Opportunities for Students to See Themselves as Successful Readers**

   Reading activities should be challenging yet achievable, helping students gain confidence and a positive attitude toward reading. Teachers should set high expectations, offer guidance when students struggle, and praise progress frequently. Helping students set goals and giving them feedback fosters a sense of accomplishment, which increases their intrinsic motivation to read.

3. **Give Students Reading Choices**

   Offering students options in their reading can boost engagement. Teachers can allow students to choose from a selection of texts related to the instructional goals or give them choices in how they respond to readings—through presentations, dramatizations, or journal entries. Providing choices in where and how students read can also encourage them to take ownership of their reading experience.

4. **Give Students the Opportunity to Learn by Collaborating with Their Peers**

   Collaborative learning, where students work together on reading tasks, is most effective when all students feel their contributions are valuable and when they are encouraged to help each other learn. This could involve paired reading, retelling stories together, or group projects based on reading. Collaborative activities not only reinforce reading skills but also promote social interaction and peer learning.

Reading comprehension should be taught in an environment where students understand the value of reading, see themselves as successful readers, have choices in their learning, and collaborate with peers to enhance comprehension. These strategies help create a positive and motivating reading environment that encourages active engagement with texts.

K–3 + | English Learners | EBP | Intensive Small-Group Reading Interventions

Recommendation K–3 + (if needed): Provide focused, intensive small-group interventions for English learners determined to be at risk for reading problems. (Strong)

Source: IES Practice Guide, What Works Clearinghouse | *Effective Literacy and English Language Instruction for English Learners in the Elementary Grades* (Gersten et al., 2007)

+While this EBP is recommended for grades K–3 in the practice guide, the Department would also recommend this practice in grades above that as needed.

The IES practice guide recommends providing intensive small-group reading interventions for ELs who are identified as being at risk for reading difficulties. The instruction should focus on the five core elements of reading: phonological awareness, phonics, reading fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. These interventions should be delivered through explicit, direct instruction in small, homogeneous groups of 3-6 students for at least 30 minutes per day.

1. Use programs that provide multiple opportunities for students to respond and practice reading words and sentences, along with clear feedback
2. Group students based on their reading skill level, and allow those making rapid progress to move to higher-performing groups.
3. Teachers and interventionists need training on how to implement these programs effectively, with emphasis on fast-paced, interactive instruction. Ongoing coaching is essential for success.
4. While students may receive multiple services, coordination is essential to ensure that reading development remains a priority.

This approach helps students overcome language challenges and achieve strong reading skills.



Educator Resources:
AIM Coaching | Helping Your Students Become Self-Regulated Readers (U.S. DOE, IES, 2021)

Reading Rockets | Seven Strategies to Teach Students Text Comprehension (Adler, n.d.)



Family and Caregiver Resources:
Reading Rockets | Comprehension: Activities for Your Kindergartener

Reading Rockets | Comprehension: Activities for Your First Grader

Reading Rockets | Comprehension: Activities for Your Second Grader

AIM Coaching | Helping Your Child Become a Self-Regulated Reader (U.S. DOE, IES, 2021)

Perkins School for the Blind | Eight tips to introduce reading to your young child who is blind (2024)

Grades K–3: Writing Foundations | Standards

Kindergarten students are learning how to print letters and numbers with help from an adult. They will practice forming many upper and lowercase letters and numbers correctly, paying attention to size, lines, and spacing between words and letters. They are also starting to practice basic printing.

In **First Grade**, students are expected to print letters and numbers independently and neatly. They will form both uppercase and lowercase letters and numbers correctly, with the right size and spacing. They will also become faster and more accurate in their printing.

In **Second Grade**, students should print on their own for different tasks and purposes. They will continue to improve their printing skills, becoming faster and more accurate. They will also start learning how to write in cursive.

In **Third Grade**, students will focus on writing in cursive. They will practice forming both uppercase and lowercase cursive letters neatly and correctly, and work on writing in cursive accurately and quickly.

Grades K–3: Writing Standards–Writing Types

In **Kindergarten**, students begin their writing journey by using a mix of drawing, speaking, and writing to express their ideas. They might write about a book they like, share information about a topic, or tell a story about something that happened to them. With help from teachers and peers, they practice adding details to strengthen their writing and explore a variety of digital tools to create and share their work. They also start learning how to work on group projects and gather information from books or their own experiences.

By **First Grade**, students start writing opinion pieces, explaining their thoughts and providing reasons to support them. They also work on informative writing, where they share facts about a topic, and narrative writing, where they tell stories with clear sequences of events. With adult guidance, they focus on their writing topics, respond to suggestions from classmates, and use digital tools to publish their writing. Additionally, they participate in research projects and use their own experiences or provided sources to answer questions.

In **Second Grade**, students continue to develop their writing skills by producing opinion, informative, and narrative pieces. They start connecting their ideas with linking words like “because” and “also” and work on adding details to their writing. They focus on a topic and revise and edit their work with help from adults and peers. Students also participate in group research projects and use both print and digital sources to find information to answer questions or write reports.

In **Third Grade**, students improve their ability to write opinion pieces, informative texts, and narratives. They use facts, details, and examples to support their ideas and learn to organize their writing more clearly. With guidance, they plan, revise, and edit their work and use technology to publish it. Students also engage in short research projects and practice taking notes from both print and digital sources.

The Writing Process

All grade levels are expected to engage in the writing process at some level, with support from teachers, adults, and their peers.

The writing process is a systematic approach that helps writers develop their ideas into a coherent and polished piece of writing. It typically begins with prewriting, where the writer engages in brainstorming and planning. This stage involves generating ideas, conducting research, and organizing thoughts to form a foundation for the writing. Once ideas are solidified, the writer moves on to drafting, which focuses on putting ideas into text. During drafting, the writer concentrates on expressing ideas without worrying too much about perfection or errors.

After drafting, the writer enters the revising stage. This phase is about refining the content, improving the clarity, and ensuring logical flow and coherence. Revising often involves reorganizing paragraphs,

adding more depth, or simplifying complex ideas to better communicate the writer's intentions. Following revision, editing takes place, where the emphasis is on correcting grammar, punctuation, spelling, and ensuring adherence to language conventions. This stage focuses on the technical aspects of writing to enhance readability and correctness.

Finally, in the publishing stage, the writer shares their work with an audience. This may involve submitting an assignment, publishing an article, or sharing informally online. While these stages represent a linear progression, the process is often recursive, with writers returning to earlier stages, such as revising or redrafting, as they refine their work. Each step plays a vital role in producing well-developed writing that effectively communicates the writer's message.

Grades K–12 | EBP | Evidence Based Practices for Writing Programs and Instruction

Overview of Evidence Based Practices for Writing Programs and Instruction

Source: CEEDAR Center | Evidence-Based Practices for Writing Instruction (Document No. IC-5) (Troia, 2014)

Troia (2014) provides an overview of ten key components and corresponding instructional practices that combined create a strong vision for evidence-based writing instruction. The intent of this document was to provide an innovation configuration map to evaluate syllabi for courses for preservice educators; however, this document can also be used to provide administrators, literacy coaches, educators, and caregivers with a stronger understanding of evidence based writing instruction. Throughout the rest of the guide, there will be specific evidence-based practices called out in the EPB boxes and subsequent descriptions. Readers will note that many of the following EBPs will re-surface again in other areas.

1. **Writing as an Essential Part of the Curriculum**

   Practice 1.1: Providing Extra Time for Writing–Writing should be a daily component of the learning process. By allocating significant time for writing, students develop fluency and improve their writing skills. When writing is integrated into multiple subjects, students can build on their skills consistently. Extra writing time supports long-term improvements in writing performance as it allows students to practice writing in various contexts, whether it's personal reflection, summarizing lessons, or addressing academic topics.

   Practice 1.2: Free Writing–Free writing encourages students to write freely without focusing on structure, grammar, or other technical aspects. The goal is to help students develop a habit of writing regularly and to allow them to express thoughts creatively. Free writing promotes fluency and can serve as a gateway to more structured writing by allowing students to overcome writer's block and think through ideas in a non-restrictive format.

2. **Varied Approaches to Teaching Writing**

   Practice 2.1: Process Writing Instruction–This approach focuses on guiding students through the entire writing process, from brainstorming and drafting to revising and finalizing their work. It emphasizes the iterative nature of writing, where students refine and improve their work over time. Teachers provide students with the tools to approach writing in stages and emphasize feedback and revision as crucial components of writing improvement.

   Practice 2.2: Comprehensive Writing Instruction–A holistic approach to writing that covers various aspects of writing—grammar, structure, clarity, and style. This practice ensures that students receive well-rounded instruction that addresses multiple facets of writing, helping them grow as writers across different genres and purposes. Instruction is personalized to meet the needs of each student.

Practice 2.3: Strategy Instruction–Teaching specific strategies for each part of the writing process (planning, drafting, revising, etc.) helps students approach writing systematically. For example, students may learn techniques for brainstorming ideas, structuring paragraphs, or revising their work to improve coherence and clarity. These strategies empower students to independently apply them in various writing tasks.

3. **Instruction Focused on Process Elements**

   Practice 3.1: Teaching Prewriting, Planning, and Drafting–Planning is a critical stage in writing, as it allows students to organize their thoughts and outline their ideas before drafting. This practice teaches students how to generate ideas, organize them logically, and create a roadmap for their writing. Prewriting activities can include brainstorming, mind mapping, and outlining.

   Practice 3.2: Teaching Revising and Editing–After drafting, students need to review and refine their work. This practice teaches students how to evaluate their writing for clarity, coherence, and structure. Editing focuses on correcting grammar, punctuation, and spelling, while revising involves improving content and flow. These two stages help students create high-quality, polished writing.

4. **Instruction Focused on Product Elements**

   Practice 4.1: Paragraph Structure Instruction–Students learn how to write clear, cohesive paragraphs with a topic sentence, supporting details, and concluding sentences. This practice focuses on ensuring students understand the function of each part of a paragraph and how to structure their thoughts logically within it.

   Practice 4.2: Text Structure Instruction–This practice teaches students the organizational structure of various text types, such as essays, reports, and stories. Understanding text structures helps students organize their writing according to its purpose—whether argumentative, narrative, or informative.

   Practice 4.3: Vocabulary Instruction–Teaching students how to use a rich and varied vocabulary enhances the quality of their writing. This practice includes direct instruction on the meanings and uses of words, as well as techniques for selecting precise words to enhance clarity and style.

   Practice 4.4: Creativity/Imagery Instruction–This practice encourages students to incorporate creative techniques such as imagery, metaphors, and similes to enrich their writing. It helps students learn how to engage readers' senses and emotions through descriptive and vivid language.

   Practice 4.5: Text Models–Teachers use examples of well-written texts to model effective writing strategies. These texts serve as blueprints for students, demonstrating good organization, clear arguments, effective transitions, and the use of appropriate language.

5. **Utilizing Technology in Writing Instruction**

   Practice 5.1: Using a Word Processor–Teaching students to use word processors helps them organize their writing more efficiently. Word processors provide tools for drafting, revising, and formatting text, which streamline the writing process. They also facilitate collaborative writing and feedback.

   Practice 5.2: Technology Applications–Using digital tools like concept mapping software, grammar checkers, and automated feedback systems helps students engage with the writing process in new ways. These tools offer personalized feedback, assist in organizing ideas, and support language development.

6. **Effective Assessment and Feedback**

   Practice 6.1: Utilizing Rubric–Rubrics provide clear criteria for assessing student writing. They help students understand what is expected of them and enable teachers to give focused, constructive feedback. Rubrics can address various aspects of writing, such as structure, grammar, style, and content.

   Practice 6.2: Feedback–Timely, specific feedback helps students identify areas for improvement. Teachers should focus on providing actionable feedback that highlights strengths and suggests concrete revisions to enhance the quality of students' writing.

   Practice 6.3: Construct Representation and Scoring in Writing Assessment–This practice involves evaluating students' writing over time and using varied assessment methods, such as peer reviews and self-assessments, to provide a comprehensive picture of their writing development.

7. **Writing Skills**

   Practice 7.1: Transcription Skills Instruction–This practice focuses on improving students' handwriting and typing skills, which are crucial for writing fluency. Well-developed transcription skills allow students to focus on the content and ideas rather than the mechanics of writing.

   Practice 7.2: Grammar and Usage Instruction–While grammar instruction alone has a limited effect on writing, when integrated with writing tasks, it helps students produce clearer, more grammatically correct writing.

   Practice 7.3: Sentence-Combining Instruction–Sentence combining teaches students to combine shorter sentences into more complex ones, improving their ability to express ideas clearly and fluently. This practice helps students develop both writing complexity and syntactic understanding.

   Practice 7.4 and 7.5: Decreasing Spelling and Grammar/Usage Errors–Teaching spelling and grammar through focused exercises improves writing accuracy and helps students write more effectively.

8. **Learning Through Writing**

   Practice 8.1: Taking Notes–Note-taking is a critical skill that helps students organize and synthesize information. This practice supports students in writing because it helps them extract key points from text and organize them for later use in written assignments.

   Practice 8.2: Summarization Instruction–Summarizing requires students to condense complex information, making it easier to understand and remember. This practice enhances both reading comprehension and writing skills by encouraging students to focus on key ideas.

   Practice 8.3: Inquiry Instruction–Inquiry-based writing helps students gather information, analyze it, and synthesize it into written work. This practice fosters critical thinking and writing skills by encouraging students to explore topics in depth.

   Practice 8.4: Writing in Response to Text–Writing in response to reading helps students reflect on and connect with the text. This practice improves comprehension by encouraging students to think critically about what they read and express their thoughts clearly.

   Practice 8.5: Writing to Learn–Writing about what students learn helps deepen their understanding of the material. This practice involves writing tasks that promote critical thinking, reflection, and synthesis, all of which support learning.

9. **Promoting Independent and Reflective Writers**

Practice 9.1: Self-Regulation and Metacognitive Reflection–Teaching students to set goals, monitor their progress, and reflect on their writing enhances their independence. Metacognitive reflection helps students assess their strengths and weaknesses and identify strategies for improvement.

Practice 9.2: Setting Product Goals–Encouraging students to set clear goals for their writing allows them to focus their efforts and track their progress. This practice helps students stay motivated and organized.

10. **Promoting a Supportive Writing Environment**

Practice 10.1: Peer Collaboration–Writing activities that involve peer collaboration encourage students to share ideas, give feedback, and learn from each other. This practice fosters a sense of community and helps students develop social and academic writing skills.

Practice 10.2: Conferencing–Writing conferences provide opportunities for one-on-one feedback between teachers and students. This practice allows for tailored instruction and provides a space for discussing individual writing challenges and progress.

Practice 10.3: Teacher Modeling–Teachers model good writing habits, demonstrating how to approach writing tasks, brainstorm ideas, and revise work. This provides students with concrete examples of effective writing strategies.

Practice 10.4 and 10.5: Authentic and Relevant Writing Tasks and Motivation–Assigning meaningful writing tasks that are relevant to students' lives increases engagement and motivation, leading to better-quality writing.

Practice 10.6: Adaptations–Differentiated instruction ensures that all students, regardless of their writing abilities, receive the support they need to succeed in writing tasks. This may include providing additional time, resources, or targeted feedback.

These practices collectively support the development of strong writing skills by focusing on various aspects of writing, from planning and drafting to revision and assessment. They also emphasize the importance of collaboration, feedback, and motivation in the writing process.

K–5 | EBP | Importance of Writing Daily

Recommendation (K–5): Provide daily time for students to write (minimal)

Source: IES Practice Guide, What Works Clearinghouse | *Teaching Elementary School Students to Be Effective Writers* (Graham et al., 2012)

Devoting at least one hour each day to writing instruction is essential for students to develop their writing skills. Graham et al. (2018) suggest that adequate time for writing practice is crucial for students to gain confidence, refine their abilities, and effectively apply writing strategies. Although studies have not conclusively proven that daily writing opportunities lead to better writing outcomes compared to less frequent practice, one study showed that extra instructional time improved students' writing quality. Additionally, time for writing practice must be paired with specific, targeted instruction to be effective. Just as students cannot become better readers without reading, they cannot become better writers without writing.

The recommended one hour of writing time beginning in first grade should include at least 30 minutes of instruction on various writing techniques, strategies, and skills, tailored to students' developmental levels. The remaining 30 minutes should be dedicated to writing practice, where students can apply what they've learned. Writing practice doesn't have to be confined to dedicated writing lessons—it can also be integrated into other content-area instruction, such as science and social studies, to reinforce writing skills while enhancing students' understanding of other subjects.

It is important to note that one hour of writing does not need to occur in one singular block of time. It can be spread across the school day. Ideally, teachers should integrate writing tasks into other lessons, like reading to maximize writing practice. Teachers should be integrating writing into their reading lessons. Students can be writing before, during and/or after reading to help make connections to the text, demonstrate their comprehension, or extend their thinking. For instance, writing about graphs in math or journal entries in history can help students think critically about content while honing their writing skills. By consistently dedicating time to writing, students have opportunities to develop both their writing abilities and their capacity to think critically about the content they are learning.

K–5 | EBP | Teach the Writing Process

Recommendation (K–5): Teach students to use the writing process for a variety of purposes. (Strong)

Source: IES Practice Guide, What Works Clearinghouse | *Teaching Elementary School Students to Be Effective Writers* (Graham et al., 2012)

This recommendation is extensive and is broken into two parts.

Part A: Teach Students the Writing Process

1. **Teach students strategies for the various components of the writing process.**

   Writing strategies can range from brainstorming, creating an outline, imitating an author's form, testing out sentences orally, having a peer listen and read along as the author reads aloud, using a special practice called "author's chair," and the COPS editing strategy.

2. **Gradually release writing responsibility from the teacher to the student.**

   Teachers need to follow the gradual release of responsibility instructional model to support students as they are introduced to writing strategies, new genres, and aspects of the writing process.

   - The **Gradual Release of the Brainstorming Strategy** begins with the teacher providing background knowledge to the students. The teacher explains the purpose and benefits of brainstorming, emphasizing how it helps generate a variety of ideas for writing without worrying about their quality. For example, the teacher might say, "What you write will be more interesting for others to read if you have a lot of good ideas, so you should take the time to write down all your ideas before you get started." This introduction sets the stage for why the strategy is useful and relevant.
   - Next, the teacher describes the strategy in detail, outlining how it works. The explanation includes the importance of listing ideas freely, without judgment, and highlights how brainstorming can uncover ideas that may not have been immediately obvious. The teacher reinforces that the focus is on quantity rather than quality at this stage.
   - The teacher then models the strategy by thinking aloud and writing down ideas on a given topic. During this demonstration, the teacher solicits additional ideas from students, encouraging them to contribute to the brainstorming process. This collaborative element helps students see the strategy in action and understand how to apply it themselves.
   - After modeling, students move into collaborative practice. Working in pairs or small groups, they brainstorm ideas for a topic while the teacher monitors their progress and provides feedback. This step allows students to practice the strategy in a supportive environment, ensuring they are on track and understand the process.

- The next phase involves guided practice, where students work individually to brainstorm, but with teacher assistance available as needed. The teacher reinforces the key elements of brainstorming and helps students overcome any challenges they may encounter.
- Finally, students transition to independent practice, where they apply the brainstorming strategy on their own. The teacher encourages them to decide when and how to use brainstorming to support their writing tasks. Reminders are provided in future lessons when students face challenges in planning their writing. By following these steps, students gradually take ownership of the strategy, using it confidently and independently to enhance their writing.

3. **Guide students to select and use appropriate writing strategies.**

   When students are first learning writing strategies, teachers should clearly explain when, how, and why to use them throughout the writing process. After students can independently use various strategies, teachers should guide them in selecting appropriate ones for different tasks. A classroom chart listing strategies alongside their corresponding uses can be helpful. Students can add new contexts for strategy use and apply them across subjects. Setting goals for using strategies, followed by reflection on adjustments needed for different writing purposes, helps reinforce application. For example, outlining is useful for reports, brainstorming for narratives, and audience goals enhance persuasive writing. Students should evaluate their strategy use and seek ways to improve it further.

4. **Encourage students to be flexible in their use of the components of the writing process.**

   Writing demands adaptability. The process is not linear; students should move freely between stages such as planning, drafting, revising, and editing as needed. This flexibility allows for multiple revisions and edits to refine their message. Teachers should structure activities that encourage students to navigate between the components of writing, helping them think critically and enhance clarity in their work.

   Implementing these practices in the classroom will help students develop a clear understanding of the writing process and the flexibility needed to write effectively across different contexts. By teaching writing as a process, providing students with various writing experiences, and gradually releasing responsibility, teachers can cultivate strong, independent writers who can adapt their skills to a variety of writing tasks and audiences.

Part B: Teach Students to Write for a Variety of Purposes

1. **Help students understand the different purposes of writing.**

   Students should understand the purpose of different genres to choose the most appropriate one for their writing. When teaching a genre, teachers should focus on its purpose and how specific features align with that goal. It's helpful to connect these genres to real-life scenarios. For example, a persuasive letter aims to convince the reader by presenting strong reasons and supporting evidence. Teachers can provide examples like writing to persuade parents to allow a friend over or convincing the principal to approve a field trip. Although genres have specific purposes (describe, narrate, inform, persuade), they are versatile and can serve multiple functions.

2. **Expand students' concept of audience**

   To help students grasp the role of the audience in writing, teachers should create activities targeting different audiences. Without this, students may view writing as solely for the teacher. Teachers and students can brainstorm potential audiences, with students selecting the most

suitable for their topic. Writing can range from persuasive letters to various audiences (parents, companies) to narratives for younger students. Sharing writing with its intended audience helps students adjust tone and language, viewing writing as authentic communication.

3. **Teach students to emulate the features of good writing.**

   Students should be introduced to a variety of good examples of writing, such as published books, teacher-written samples, and even their peers' work. These examples should match what the lesson is focused on and be at the right reading level for the students. These model texts can show important elements like story structure, word choice, and how sentences are built. Teachers can read the texts out loud or have students read them to spot these writing techniques. By looking closely at how good writing works, students can practice copying those techniques in their own writing. For example, after reading a part of Charlotte's Web where the author uses detailed descriptions of sights, smells, and sounds, students can try writing their own descriptions of a place. Simple activities like replacing words in a sentence with similar ones or using a story template can help younger kids practice writing, while older kids might take ideas from what they read and use them to write something unique. By learning from these examples, students can improve how they write and express their ideas in their own words.

4. **Teach students techniques for writing effectively for different purposes.**

   Students need to learn specific writing techniques for different types of writing tasks. For example, a technique called TREE (Topic sentence, Reasons, Ending, Examine) is great for writing persuasive essays. In TREE, students plan their essay by stating their belief, listing reasons to support it, providing examples, and writing a conclusion. Teachers should first explain and model these techniques before gradually helping students use them independently. By practicing these strategies, students can write more effectively for their purpose and audience.

Teaching the writing process is essential for developing skilled and flexible writers, particularly in the elementary grades. By following the recommendations outlined in the IES Practice Guide, educators can ensure that students are equipped with a range of strategies to approach different stages of writing, from brainstorming and planning to revising and editing. The gradual release of responsibility model allows students to progressively take ownership of their writing, enabling them to confidently apply strategies independently. Additionally, understanding how to tailor writing for different purposes and audiences enriches students' communication skills, making their writing more purposeful and effective. Most importantly, encouraging students to view writing as a process—where flexibility and revision are key—teaches them to think critically and refine their work. This approach helps students see writing not only as a means of expression but also as an ongoing, creative process where improvement is always possible. By mastering the components of the writing process, students develop the skills necessary to become thoughtful, adaptable writers capable of tackling any writing task.

Considerations for Students with Disabilities

For students with disabilities that affect their ability to write, educators can provide various supports to ensure full participation in writing activities. One key tool is the alternative pencil, which can include on-screen keyboards, eye-gaze systems, or switches that allow students to select letters and words without using fine motor skills. Speech-to-text software enables students to verbalize their thoughts, which are then converted into written text, while assistive technology devices, such as tablets or communication boards, allow for different input methods, including touchscreens and adaptive keyboards. Adapted keyboards with larger keys or custom layouts, along with grips and writing aids, help students who struggle with traditional writing tools by improving comfort and grip. Slant boards or writing stands provide better writing angles for students with posture or motor issues, and partner-assisted writing involves having a peer or teacher write on behalf of the student while they dictate. For more severe physical limitations, eye-gaze or head-controlled systems enable students to select letters

using their eye or head movements. Word prediction software can speed up the writing process by suggesting words as the student writes, reducing the physical demands of writing, and portable word processors like AlphaSmart offer simplified, lightweight options for students who need less complex devices. There are a variety of supports that allow students with disabilities to engage in writing and literacy tasks effectively, helping them express their ideas and participate fully in the classroom.

Evidence Based Writing Interventions for Students with Learning Disabilities

Kokkali & Antoniou (2024) completed a meta-analysis of almost 40 years of research.

Key Findings:

- Strategy Instruction: Teaching students specific writing strategies, such as planning, drafting, and revising, was found to have a substantial positive impact on their writing performance.
- Self-Regulation Techniques: Interventions that incorporated self-regulation components, enabling students to monitor and manage their writing processes, were particularly effective.
- Use of Technology: Integrating technological tools, such as word processors and specialized software, facilitated improvements in writing fluency and organization.
- Collaborative Writing: Engaging students in collaborative writing activities promoted idea generation and enhanced overall writing quality.
- Feedback and Reinforcement: Providing timely and specific feedback, along with positive reinforcement, contributed to significant gains in students' writing skills.

The meta-analysis found that the effectiveness of writing interventions was consistent across elementary, middle, and high school students. This suggests that the identified instructional strategies are broadly applicable and beneficial for students with learning disabilities, irrespective of their grade level.

The meta-analysis underscores the importance of employing evidence-based instructional practices tailored to the unique needs of students with learning disabilities. By implementing targeted interventions that focus on strategy instruction, self-regulation, technology integration, collaboration, and effective feedback, educators can significantly enhance the written expression abilities of these students.

COPS Editing Strategy

Grades 2–6

Ask the COPS editing questions:

- Did I **C**apitalize the first word in sentences and proper names?
- How is the **O**verall appearance of my paper?
- Did I use commas and end-of-sentence **P**unctuation?
- Did I **S**pell each word correctly?

Educator Resources:
ERLC | Literacy Instruction for Students with Significant Disabilities | Access to Writing (2016)

IRRC | Developing Writers in the Classroom: Daily Writing Time and Multipurpose Writing (Knight, 2017)

IRRC | Prewriting Strategies May Reduce Apprehension Towards Writing (Will, 2022)

Reading Rockets | How to Teach Summarizing

Family and Caregiver Resources:
Reading Rockets | Writing Activities for Your Kindergartener

Reading Rockets | Writing Activities for Your First Grader

Reading Rockets | Writing Activities for Your Second Grader

K–5 | EBP | Teach Handwriting, Spelling, and Word Processing

Recommendation (K–5): Teach students to become fluent with handwriting, spelling, sentence construction, typing, and word processing. (Moderate)

Source: IES Practice Guide, What Works Clearinghouse | *Teaching Elementary School Students to Be Effective Writers* (Graham et al., 2012)

Similar to reading, where the goal is to have the foundational skills become automatic so that students can focus on comprehending a text, in writing, students need to become fluent in the foundational skills so they can focus on idea development when composing texts. Spelling skills impact students' writing because they will often select words they cannot spell (Graham, 1999 as cited in Graham et al., 2012). Sentence construction is the foundation of all writing. Students need to be able to compose sentences that vary in length and complexity in order to generate interest in their writing and express their meaning. In our age of technology, educators, parents, and caregivers need to ensure that students can take advantage of the technologies available to them to help them compose texts, especially with most professional and technical careers relying on persons having effective typing skills.

1. **Teach very young writers how to hold a pencil correctly and form letters fluently and efficiently.**

   Teach young writers the correct pencil grip and efficient letter formation. Start by showing students how to hold the pencil comfortably between the thumb, forefinger, and middle finger to prevent fatigue. Demonstrate how to form letters efficiently, avoiding unnecessary strokes, and use diagrams with numbered arrows for guidance. Encourage students to practice writing letters from memory, gradually increasing the time between seeing and writing the letter. Short practice sessions of 5-8 repetitions are effective, but ensure that students also apply their handwriting in real writing tasks to build fluency.

2. **Teach students to spell words correctly.**

   Teachers should focus on helping students spell frequently used words. It is important to integrate spelling instruction into writing activities. Students should also focus on learning words they often misspell or want to use in their writing. Teachers can teach spelling rules, phonological awareness, and strategies like invented spelling to help students spell words during drafting and editing phases.

3. **Teach students to construct sentences for fluency, meaning, and style.**

   To help students improve their sentence construction, teachers should focus on guiding students in building strong, meaningful sentences that are grammatically correct and engaging to read. Starting in kindergarten, students should learn sentence basics such as punctuation and capitalization. Teachers can use students' oral ideas to demonstrate sentence writing, explaining how the mechanics and structure work together to convey clear meaning.

   As students advance, teachers should model how to correct and improve sentences during both drafting and revision stages. This includes addressing issues like run-on sentences, clarity, word choice, and audience appropriateness. Activities such as sentence framing, expanding, and combining help students practice constructing varied and interesting sentences. Teachers should encourage students to apply these skills in authentic writing tasks, rather than simply filling out worksheets.

   During the revision process, teachers should emphasize the importance of evaluating sentences for clarity, style, and grammatical correctness. Students should be taught to ask questions like, "Does this sentence make sense?" or "Is this suitable for the intended audience?" If a sentence is unclear or not appropriate, teachers can model how to revise it for better clarity and meaning. By practicing these revisions, students will strengthen their ability to create polished, well-constructed sentences in their writing. Older students can also peer-review each other's work, offering suggestions for improving sentence structure and clarity. This peer interaction encourages further development of critical writing skills.

4. **Teach students to type fluently and to use a word processor to compose.**

   Most professional careers and state assessments, including the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP), require students as young as 4th grade to use a computer to generate their written essays and long form responses. Students should learn to type fluently without looking at the keyboard. Typing instruction, starting as early as 1st grade, should be short, focused, and regular. By 2nd or 3rd grade, students should be able to type as fast as they can write by hand. Teachers should monitor the use of typing software to ensure correct fingering and accuracy. Alongside typing, students should also be taught how to use a word processor, including essential skills like saving files, moving text, and using editing features. Although spell checkers help, students must understand their limitations and develop proofreading skills to avoid relying solely on software.

Students may struggle with handwriting and spelling, making writing a frustrating experience. In such cases, switching to typing as the primary mode of writing, particularly when supported by an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP), can provide relief, especially with additional instruction in typing and word processor use. A common issue is that students often fail to transfer spelling skills to their writing; this can be addressed by teaching proofreading during editing and incorporating authentic writing activities where students use their spelling words in sentences. Another challenge is the ineffectiveness of isolated grammar instruction through worksheets, which doesn't always translate into improved sentence writing. Teachers should adapt their grammar lessons by using modeling and the gradual release of responsibility, ensuring students practice these skills while drafting, revising, and editing their own writing.

K–8+ | English Learners | EBP | Opportunities to Develop Written Language

Recommendation K–8+: Provide regular, structured opportunities to develop written language skills.

Source: IES Practice Guide, What Works Clearinghouse | *Teaching Academic Content and Literacy to English Learners in Elementary and Middle School* (Baker et al., 2014)

+Note: While this EBP is recommended for grades K–8 in the practice guide, the Department would also recommend this practice in grades 9–12 as needed.

The focus of this recommendation is to guide teachers in supporting English learners to engage in writing tasks that require analysis, evidence-based reasoning, and the development of academic language.

How to Implement the Recommendation

1. **Writing Assignments Linked to Content**

   Ensure that writing tasks are directly connected to the content students are learning in subjects like history, science, or literature. Assignments should aim to develop both writing and academic language skills. For example, have students write about historical events or scientific concepts, using academic vocabulary related to the content.

2. **Language-Based Supports**

   Use tools such as graphic organizers and sentence starters to help students engage with writing tasks effectively. These supports assist in organizing ideas, constructing clear and coherent sentences, and developing well-structured essays or reports. Also, emphasize language conventions like transition words, proper grammar, and subject-specific vocabulary to strengthen academic writing.

3. **Collaborative Writing Activities**

   Promote group work to encourage peer interaction and collaborative discussion. In groups, students can share ideas, revise drafts, and benefit from different perspectives and language models. For English learners, collaborating with peers of varying language proficiencies offers a supportive environment to practice academic language.

4. **Ongoing Assessment and Feedback**

   Regularly assess student writing through formative assessments to identify strengths and areas for improvement. Provide targeted, constructive feedback on specific writing skills, such as organization, grammar, and vocabulary. Align feedback with instructional objectives, ensuring students understand their progress and areas for growth. Focus on providing feedback on one or two writing aspects at a time to avoid overwhelming students.

Overall, the goal is to ensure that students not only produce written work but also develop the critical thinking and academic language necessary for success in school and beyond.

Grades K–3 Speaking and Listening Standards

In **Kindergarten**, students begin to develop foundational communication skills by participating in collaborative conversations with peers and adults, learning to follow basic discussion rules such as listening, staying on topic, and taking turns. They are encouraged to confirm their understanding of information through simple questions and responses and to seek clarification when needed. Presentation skills focus on describing familiar people, places, and events with the support of prompting

and using drawings or visual displays to enhance their descriptions. Speaking clearly and audibly, especially when retelling stories or reciting poems, is emphasized.

In **Grade 1**, students build on their earlier skills by engaging in more structured collaborative conversations. They are expected to follow agreed-upon discussion rules, contribute by building on others' ideas, and ask questions to clarify confusion. When presenting information, students are encouraged to describe people, places, and events with relevant details and use visual displays to support their ideas. Speaking in complete sentences becomes important, particularly when retelling stories, reciting poems, or participating in classroom discussions. Communication is increasingly focused on clarity and completeness.

In **Grade 2**, students deepen their collaboration and presentation abilities. They participate in conversations where they link their comments to the ideas of others and ask for clarification when needed. Their ability to describe the main topic and key details from texts or oral presentations is more developed, and they are expected to ask and answer questions to deepen understanding. In presentations, students recount experiences and tell stories with appropriate facts and descriptive details, while also creating audio recordings and adding visual elements to clarify their ideas. Clear and complete sentences continue to be emphasized when speaking.

By **Grade 3**, students are expected to engage more independently and effectively in collaborative discussions, coming prepared with information and drawing on their knowledge to contribute meaningfully. They must follow discussion rules, ask relevant questions, and explain their own ideas in light of the conversation. Their ability to identify main ideas and supporting details from various formats—such as oral presentations, visual media, or quantitative data—improves. When presenting, students provide detailed reports or recount stories with clarity and at an appropriate pace, using audio recordings and visual displays to enhance their presentations. Speaking audibly, clearly, and in complete sentences is essential, especially during formal presentations or performances.

Grades K–5 | English Learners | Peer Assisted Learning Opportunities

Recommendation K–5: Schedule Regular Peer Assisted Learning Opportunities. (Strong)

Source: What Works Clearinghouse | *Effective Literacy and English Language Instruction for English Learners in the Elementary Grades: A Practice Guide* (Gersten et al., 2007)

This recommendation advises that teachers schedule 90 minutes per week for peer-assisted learning, where students of varying ability levels or English proficiency work together on structured academic tasks. Pairing students in this way improves reading achievement, phonological awareness, vocabulary, and comprehension skills. Teachers should create structured peer-learning activities that extend previously taught material. Peer-assisted learning benefits all students, including English learners, low performers, and those with learning disabilities, by providing practice opportunities and feedback. However, it complements teacher-led instruction rather than replacing it.

Educator Resources:
University of Pittsburgh, Institute for Learning | Accountable Talk Sourcebook (O'Connor et al., 2016)

SERP Institute | About Academically Productive Talk: 1) Benefits, 2) Seven Talk Moves for Teachers, 3) Recommended First Steps, and 4) Next Steps.

SERP Institute | The Academically Productive Talk Project

What is APT?

Benefits of APT

Getting Started

Support for APT across Content Areas: Math | Language Arts | Science | Social Studies

Video Library

Teacher Tip Deck

Family and Caregiver Resources:
NAEYC | Early Childhood–K | Ideas to Spark Rich Conversations with Your Children (Strasser & Bresson, n.d.)

Center for Student Achievement Solutions | Gradual Release of Responsibility and Phonics Instruction (William, 2024)

Considerations for Students with Disabilities

To support students with disabilities in meeting the Speaking and Listening Standards for Grades K–3, considerations must be made to ensure full participation and effective communication. These accommodations should be tailored to the individual needs of each student, ensuring that they can engage in collaborative conversations, presentations, and comprehension tasks.

1. **Collaborative Conversations**

   Students with disabilities may require communication support to participate in discussions with peers and adults. This can include the use of augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices, ranging from low-tech communication boards to speech-generating devices, to allow students to express their thoughts and ideas. Visual supports, such as conversation starters or visual prompts, can help students stay on topic and follow agreed-upon rules for discussions, such as taking turns and listening to others.

2. **Clarifying Understanding**

   For students with language processing, auditory comprehension, or attention difficulties, it is important to provide strategies to confirm understanding during conversations. Teachers can offer additional wait time for responses, simplify language, or use visual aids and cues to help students grasp information. Rephrasing questions or breaking down instructions into smaller steps may also assist students in seeking clarification when they are confused.

3. **Presentation Skills**

   When students are presenting information, students with disabilities may benefit from the use of assistive technology or alternative communication methods. For example, text-to-speech software, visual aids such as drawings or charts, or multimedia presentations can provide alternative ways to present information. Flexibility in the format of presentations allows students with speech and/or motor disabilities to engage in speaking tasks without barriers. Additionally, students may need prompts or visual supports to speak clearly and audibly when retelling stories, reciting poems, or giving presentations.



Educator Resources:
CEEDAR Center | High Leverage Practice #16: Use Explicit Instruction | High Leverage Practice for Students with Disabilities (Kennedy et al., 2018) *Note: This resource is also excellent for helping all educators understand explicit instruction for all students.*

Intermediate Literacy Grades 4–5

Grade 4 | Foundational Reading Standards | Phonics and Word Recognition

In 4th grade, students will practice reading unfamiliar long words by breaking them into smaller parts using sound patterns, syllables, and word parts like roots and prefixes. This will help them read and understand new words both in sentences and on their own. In 5th grade, students will learn to read unfamiliar long words by using what they know about sounds, spelling patterns, syllables, and word parts like roots and prefixes. This helps them figure out new words both in sentences and when reading them by themselves.

Grades 4–9+ | Intervention | Build Decoding Skills with Multisyllabic Words

Intervention Recommendation | Grades 4–9+ | Build students' decoding skills so they can read complex multisyllabic words (Strong)

Source: IES Educator's Practice Guide, What Works Clearinghouse | *Providing Reading Interventions for Students in Grades 4–9* (Vaughn et al., 2022)

+While this EBP is recommended for grades 4–9 in the practice guide, the Department would also recommend this practice in grades 10–12 as needed.

As students progress through school, the complexity of words in their reading materials increases, particularly multisyllabic words, which are essential for understanding advanced texts. In early grades, students encounter simpler words, while upper elementary and middle school texts include words like "disorganization" and "equilibrium." To help students tackle these challenging words, effective word-reading skills are crucial. Struggling readers often guess words based on partial recognition rather than decoding them entirely. Teaching students strategies to break down and sound out unfamiliar multisyllabic words improves reading accuracy, comprehension, confidence, and motivation.

1. **Identify the level of students' word-reading skills and teach vowel and consonant letter-sounds and combinations, as necessary.**

   To begin, it's essential to gauge students' word-reading abilities. This can be done by assessing their performance on a word-list reading measure or asking them to read lists of regular and irregular words. Based on this information, students should be grouped by skill level. Instruction should focus on teaching vowel and consonant sounds, starting with common ones and progressing to more advanced patterns. For struggling readers, more time should be spent reviewing basic sounds, while advanced readers should move on to complex vowel teams and

multisyllabic words. The goal is to build a solid understanding of the letter-sound combinations required to read longer and more difficult words.

2. **Teach students a routine they can use to decode multisyllabic words.**

   Students need a systematic routine to break down and decode unfamiliar multisyllabic words. A recommended approach is to teach them to identify prefixes, suffixes, and vowel sounds, then break words into smaller, manageable parts. After identifying the word's components, students blend them together to form the whole word. Teachers should model this routine with examples and provide guided practice before allowing students to apply the strategy independently. This method helps students decode complex words more effectively and improves both their reading accuracy and comprehension.

3. **Embed spelling instruction in the lesson.**

   Spelling practice reinforces the letter-sound patterns that students are learning. Teachers should include activities where students spell both monosyllabic and multisyllabic words, focusing on breaking the words into parts and counting syllables. After students pronounce and spell words, they should practice encoding them in writing, with attention to vowel and consonant combinations. The goal is to strengthen the connection between decoding (reading) and encoding (spelling), which enhances students' ability to recognize and spell words automatically.

4. **Engage students in a wide array of activities that allow them to practice reading multisyllabic words accurately and with increasing automaticity.**

   To build fluency and automaticity in reading multisyllabic words, students need multiple opportunities for practice. Activities should include reading word lists aloud, reading words in sentences, and applying word-reading strategies to longer passages. Repeated practice with high-frequency vowel and consonant combinations helps students read these words effortlessly. It is important to provide varied contexts for practice, including age-appropriate texts that challenge students without overwhelming them. This regular exposure to multisyllabic words enhances students' ability to recognize them quickly and accurately in both isolated and contextualized settings.

5. **Provide frequent feedback and support to help students persevere.**

   As students practice reading complex words, it is crucial to provide consistent feedback. Teachers should affirm correct applications of the word-reading routine, clarify mistakes, and explain how to improve. If a student reads a word incorrectly, the teacher should review the routine, guide the student in correcting their mistake, and briefly discuss the word's meaning to reinforce understanding. Frequent feedback helps students build confidence in their reading skills and encourages them to persevere, even when encountering difficult words.

As students encounter increasingly complex texts, particularly multisyllabic words, strong word-reading skills become essential for comprehension and academic success. By systematically assessing students' abilities and providing targeted instruction in vowel and consonant combinations, educators can equip learners with the tools they need to tackle difficult words. A structured approach to decoding, reinforced by spelling practice and varied reading activities, helps students develop fluency and automaticity. Consistent feedback throughout this process builds their confidence and perseverance. Together, these strategies support students' growth as readers, enabling them to approach challenging texts with greater competence and motivation.

Grades 4–5: Reading Standards for Literature

In **Grade 4**, students refer to details and examples to explain explicit content and make inferences from stories, dramas, or poems. They determine a theme and summarize the text, and describe characters,

settings, or events in depth using specific details. They also determine the meaning of words and phrases, including those that reference significant characters, and explain differences between poems, drama, and prose by identifying structural elements. Students compare and contrast the point of view in different stories, including first- and third-person narration. They connect literary texts to visual or oral presentations, and compare how similar themes and topics are treated across different texts. By the end of the year, they should read and comprehend literature proficiently within the grade-level complexity band.

In **Grade 5**, students accurately quote from texts to explain explicit content and draw inferences. They determine themes, summarizing how characters respond to challenges, and compare two or more characters, settings, or events in a story based on specific details. They determine the meaning of words and figurative language such as metaphors and similes, and explain how chapters, scenes, or stanzas contribute to a story's overall structure. Students describe how a narrator's or speaker's point of view influences how events are described. They analyze how visual and multimedia elements contribute to a text's meaning, tone, or mood, and compare stories within the same genre to examine similar themes and topics. By the end of the year, they should independently and proficiently read and comprehend literature at the high end of the grade-level complexity band.

Grades 4–5: Reading Standards for Informational Texts

In **Grade 4**, students refer to details and examples to explain explicit content and make inferences from texts. They identify the main idea and summarize it using key details, and explain events or concepts in historical, scientific, or technical texts based on specific information. They determine the meaning of academic and subject-specific words and describe text structures. Students also compare firsthand and secondhand accounts to understand different perspectives. They interpret visual, oral, or quantitative information to enhance text comprehension, evaluate how authors use evidence, and synthesize information from multiple texts. By the end of the year, they should proficiently comprehend informational texts across subjects.

In **Grade 5**, students quote from texts to explain content and make inferences. They identify two or more main ideas and summarize them, explaining relationships in historical, scientific, or technical texts. They determine the meaning of academic and subject-specific words and compare text structures. Students analyze different accounts of the same event to understand perspectives, draw from multiple sources to find answers, and explain how authors use evidence to support their points. They integrate information from several texts to discuss topics and independently comprehend complex informational texts by year-end.

Grades K–5 | EBP | Integrating Literacy and Content Area Instruction

Recommendation K–5: Integrating literacy and content area instruction to support vocabulary and comprehension

Sources:

Hwang, H., Cabell, S. Q., & Joyner, R. L. (2021). *Building background knowledge: Integrating interdisciplinary connections and content-rich texts to improve reading comprehension*. Institute of Education Sciences. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED640520.pdf

Hwang, H., & Cabell, S. Q. (2022). Supporting inference-making in young readers: The role of text selection and scaffolding. *The Reading Teacher*, 76(1), 25-34. https://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/trtr.2226

Hwang, H., McMaster, K. L., & Kendeou, P. (2023). The bidirectional relationship between domain knowledge and reading comprehension: A longitudinal analysis from kindergarten to fifth grade. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 58(3), 675-696. https://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/rrq.481

The Importance of Integrating Literacy with Content Area Instruction

Integrating literacy with content area instruction enhances students' reading comprehension, vocabulary, and overall learning by embedding literacy skills into meaningful contexts. Hwang et al. (2021) demonstrate that when students engage with content-rich texts in subjects such as science and social studies, they develop stronger vocabulary (ES = 0.91) and comprehension skills (ES = 0.40). This interdisciplinary approach supports background knowledge development, a key factor in reading comprehension (Hwang et al., 2023).

When students learn to read, write, speak, and think critically within different disciplines, they deepen their understanding of both language and subject matter. This approach is particularly effective for multilingual learners, as it provides contextualized exposure to academic language and concepts (Hwang & Cabell, 2022).

How to Integrate Literacy with Content Area Instruction

1. **Use Content-Rich Texts Across Subjects**
    - Select texts that align with science, social studies, and math topics.
    - Incorporate primary sources, informational texts, and historical documents to expose students to discipline-specific vocabulary and structures.
    - Provide multimodal resources (e.g., videos, articles, and infographics) to build background knowledge.
2. **Teach Disciplinary Literacy Strategies**
    - Science: Teach students how to read scientific reports, conduct observations, and write lab reports using precise, evidence-based language.
    - Social Studies: Focus on analyzing historical texts, evaluating sources, and constructing arguments based on primary and secondary evidence.
    - Math: Encourage students to engage in word problem analysis, mathematical reasoning, and explaining their thinking in writing.
3. **Use Structured Reading Comprehension Practices**

- Teach close reading strategies where students annotate and analyze key content-related texts.
- Implement text-based discussions to deepen understanding and encourage critical thinking.
- Utilize scaffolding techniques such as anticipation guides, graphic organizers, and sentence starters to support comprehension.

4. **Promote Writing in All Content Areas**
    - Assign content-based writing tasks such as science explanations, historical essays, or math journals.
    - Use writing-to-learn strategies like quick writes, reflections, and structured summaries.
    - Provide explicit instruction in disciplinary writing conventions, such as argumentation in history or precision in scientific explanations.
5. **Support Academic Vocabulary Development**
    - Use explicit vocabulary instruction to teach content-area terms before, during, and after reading.
    - Encourage students to use context clues, word analysis, and morphology strategies to determine meanings.
    - Provide opportunities for students to apply new vocabulary in speaking and writing.
6. **Encourage Inquiry-Based Learning and Collaboration**
    - Implement project-based learning (PBL) where students research, analyze, and present findings on interdisciplinary topics.
    - Use peer-assisted learning strategies to promote discussion and comprehension of complex texts.
    - Connect literacy tasks to real-world applications, fostering student engagement and motivation.

Integrating literacy with content instruction equips students with the skills to think critically, engage with complex texts, and apply knowledge across disciplines. Educators can implement this approach by incorporating content-rich texts, disciplinary literacy strategies, structured comprehension activities, writing opportunities, and vocabulary development. When literacy is seamlessly embedded within content areas, students not only improve their reading skills but also develop deep content knowledge and academic confidence.

Grades 4–12 | EBP | Direct and Explicit Comprehension Strategy Instruction

Recommendation | Grades 4–12: Provide direct and explicit comprehension strategy instruction (Strong)

Source: IES Practice Guide, What Works Clearinghouse | *Improving Adolescent Literacy: Effective Classroom and Intervention Practices* (Kamil et al., 2008)

Text complexity increases across grade levels as students progress from simple, familiar language and topics to more sophisticated vocabulary, sentence structures, and concepts. Early texts often feature straightforward narratives with common words, while texts in higher grades introduce specialized

vocabulary, complex syntax, and abstract themes, particularly in subjects like science, history, and literature. This gradual increase in complexity requires students to develop more advanced comprehension skills and the ability to analyze, infer, and synthesize information to understand the deeper meanings and nuances of the texts they encounter.

While adolescent students may be able to decode the words on the page, many will continue to need direct, explicit instruction in comprehension strategies. Many struggling readers, especially adolescent readers, believe that reading happens like osmosis. They believe that when they read the words on the page, the information is supposed to magically appear in their brains and they are supposed to understand what they are reading. This is not how comprehension works. Good readers use comprehension strategies to make sense of texts.

Because texts are becoming increasingly complex as students move up in the grades, students who are struggling to comprehend texts need direct instruction in these strategies. Strategies such as summarizing, asking questions, drawing inferences, and using graphic organizers have been found to be particularly effective. Importantly, it's not necessarily the specific strategy that matters most, but rather the active engagement of students in the comprehension process. Successful comprehension instruction usually involves teaching multiple strategies, which leads to better comprehension outcomes compared to focusing on a single strategy.

Teachers should offer direct and explicit instruction in comprehension strategies to help students improve their reading comprehension. Comprehension strategies, such as summarizing, asking and answering questions, paraphrasing, and identifying the main idea, are tools that help readers understand texts. Direct instruction involves teachers modeling these strategies, providing guided practice with feedback, and encouraging independent use of the strategies. This approach ensures active participation from students and offers them sufficient support, or scaffolding, to successfully learn and apply these strategies. The strong evidence supporting this recommendation comes from a series of experimental studies demonstrating that teaching comprehension strategies enhances students' ability to make sense of both narrative and informational texts.

How to Implement the Recommendation

1. **Select Carefully the Text to Use When First Beginning to Teach a Given Strategy**

   Some strategies work better with specific types of texts. For instance, summarizing main ideas is easier with informational texts, while strategies like predicting are more suited to narratives. Teachers should choose texts that match the strategy being taught to ensure that students can practice effectively.

2. **Show Students How to Apply the Strategies They Are Learning to Different Texts, Not Just to One Text**

   Flexibility in applying strategies across various texts is crucial. Teachers should model how strategies, like questioning or summarizing, work in different genres—fiction, nonfiction, or content-area texts—so students can practice and apply strategies appropriately across contexts.

3. **Ensure That the Text Is Appropriate for the Reading Level of Students**

   The text's difficulty should align with students' reading levels. Too hard, and students focus on decoding instead of strategy use. Too easy, and strategies may be unnecessary. Teachers should select texts that challenge students but still allow them to practice the strategy effectively.

4. **Use Direct and Explicit Instruction for Teaching Students How to Use Comprehension Strategies**

Direct instruction includes explaining the strategy's purpose, modeling it by thinking aloud, providing guided practice with feedback, and encouraging independent practice. Students should reflect on when and how to use the strategies to ensure that the goal remains improving comprehension.

5. **Provide the Appropriate Amount of Guided Practice Depending on the Difficulty Level of the Strategies That the Students Are Learning**

   Some strategies require more practice than others. Simpler strategies, like predicting, may need brief guided practice. Complex ones, like summarizing, require more steps and support. Teachers should provide more support early on, gradually reducing it as students gain confidence.

6. **When Teaching Comprehension Strategies, Make Sure Students Understand That the Goal Is to Understand the Content of the Text**

   The goal is to understand the text, not just learn strategies. Teachers should emphasize that strategies are tools to improve comprehension. Discussions should focus on how well students understood the text and how the strategies helped them achieve that understanding.

Many teachers may lack the training to provide direct and explicit comprehension strategy instruction, as teacher education programs often do not prepare them adequately for this task. To address this, professional learning, including classroom coaching and practice in thinking aloud, can help teachers improve their ability to teach comprehension strategies. Additionally, some content-area teachers may believe that teaching comprehension strategies is not their responsibility. However, by teaching these strategies, content-area teachers can improve students' ability to comprehend academic materials, ultimately benefiting student learning in the long term. It is crucial to ensure that both teachers and students focus on the goal of comprehension rather than just the application of multiple strategies. The emphasis should always be on understanding the content of the text rather than simply using the strategies themselves.

Grades 4–12 | Summary Writing DESCRIPTION

Recommendation 4–12 | Summary Writing

Source: *Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High Schools* (Graham & Perin, 2007)

Source: *Evidence-Based Practices for Writing Instruction* (Document No. IC-5) (Troia, 2014)



Educator Resources:
PaTTAN | Teaching Summarizing to Support Comprehension and Develop Writing Skills (Sedita, 2022)

Grades 4–9+ | Intervention | Purposeful Fluency Building Activities

Intervention Recommendation | Grades 4–9+ | Provide Purposeful Fluency-Building Activities to Help Students Read Effortlessly (Strong)

Source: IES Educator's Practice Guide, What Works Clearinghouse | Providing Reading Interventions for Students in Grades 4–9 (Vaughn et al., 2022)

+ While this EBP is recommended for grades 4–9 in the practice guide, the Department would also recommend this practice in grades 10–12 as needed.

Fluency and comprehension are deeply interconnected components of reading proficiency. Fluency, often defined as the ability to read text accurately, quickly, and with appropriate expression, plays a critical role in enabling comprehension. Fluent readers can focus their cognitive resources on understanding the meaning of the text rather than decoding individual words, thus fostering better comprehension.

The IES Educator's Practice Guide includes a recommendation that emphasizes developing students' fluency through various activities like repeated reading, prosody (expression) instruction, and exposing students to a wide range of texts. The goal is to help students read effortlessly, turning their attention away from decoding individual words to comprehending the text.

How to Implement the Recommendation

1. **Provide a Purpose for Each Repeated Reading**

   Repeated reading builds fluency, but to keep students engaged, give each rereading a specific purpose. Instead of simply reading to increase speed, focus on goals like reading with expression, identifying difficult words, answering questions, or understanding key points. This purposeful approach improves both fluency and comprehension while keeping the task engaging.

2. **Focus Instruction on Reading with Prosody**

   Teach students how to read with expression (prosody) by demonstrating the importance of proper pacing, pauses, and emphasis. Use activities such as listening to audio recordings or reading in unison to practice these skills. Mark where students should pause in the text to help them understand when and how to adjust their expression. This helps students better understand the meaning of what they are reading.

3. **Provide Opportunities to Read a Wide Range of Texts**

   Regularly expose students to a variety of texts on different topics to improve fluency and comprehension. This broadens their experience with different sentence structures and vocabulary. Choose texts at the higher end of students' instructional reading level, sometimes letting them select texts based on their interests. Reading a range of materials enhances their reading stamina and fluency over time.

By incorporating these fluency-building strategies, students can improve their reading accuracy, expression, and understanding, making the overall reading process more enjoyable and effective. Pair students carefully for fluency-building activities based on skill level, ensuring that both partners can benefit from the exercise. Struggling readers can model fluency from stronger peers, even if they cannot detect all errors. Teachers should monitor pair activities and provide support as needed. To address students' dislike of timed readings, shift the focus from speed to reading with ease and confidence, using timed readings sparingly and mixing them with purposeful fluency activities. When assigning rereadings, provide clear, manageable questions so students can focus on multiple readings

rather than getting stuck on finding answers. To alleviate students' embarrassment about unfamiliar words, normalize difficulty and the use of word attack strategies. Encourage collaboration to make the task less intimidating.

Grades 4–9+ | Intervention | Use Comprehension Building Practices

Intervention Recommendation | Grades 4–9+ | Routinely use a set of comprehension-building practices to help students make sense of the text.

Source: IES Educator's Practice Guide, What Works Clearinghouse | Providing Reading Interventions for Students in Grades 4–9 (Vaughn et al., 2022)

+ While this EBP is recommended for grades 4–9 in the practice guide, the Department would also recommend this practice in grades 10–12 as needed.

This recommendation emphasizes the importance of using structured comprehension-building practices to help students with reading difficulties understand and engage with texts. These strategies are designed to teach students how to extract meaning from what they read, focusing on four major parts: building world and word knowledge, asking and answering questions, determining the gist, and monitoring comprehension.

Part A: Build students' world and word knowledge

1. **Develop world knowledge that is relevant for making sense of the passage.**

   Before reading, provide students with relevant background knowledge that helps them better understand the topic. This can be done through brief introductions, videos, or easier readings on the same topic to build familiarity. Engaging students in discussions about what they already know or showing visual aids, like images of ecosystems, helps activate prior knowledge and sparks interest in the topic.

2. **Teach the meaning of a few words that are essential for understanding the passage.**

   Identify and focus on key vocabulary that is critical for understanding the text. Briefly define and explain these essential words before and during reading. The goal is to ensure that difficult words don't become obstacles to comprehension. Reinforce word meanings through post-reading activities like discussions, writing, or using vocabulary logs.

3. **Teach students how to derive meanings of unknown words using context.**

   Help students develop strategies to figure out word meanings using context clues from surrounding sentences. Explicitly model this process by showing how to use context to infer meanings when encountering unfamiliar words. Encourage students to use context clues as their first strategy and guide them in understanding when this approach is useful.

4. **Teach prefixes and suffixes to help students derive meanings of words.**

   Introduce and teach common prefixes and suffixes, helping students understand how they alter the meanings of base words. Start with frequently encountered ones like un-, re-, or -ed, and progress to more complex ones. Encourage students to practice identifying and understanding how these word parts contribute to the overall meaning.

5. **Teach the meaning of Latin and Greek roots.**

   Latin and Greek roots are common in academic vocabulary across subjects like science and social studies. Explicitly teach these roots, providing examples and helping students create word maps to visually track related words. Understanding roots like bio- or micro- gives students tools to decode and understand unfamiliar words they encounter in texts.

Part B: Provide opportunities to ask and answer questions

1. **Explicitly teach students how to find and justify answers to different types of questions.**

   Teach students to answer three main types of questions: Right There (text-dependent), Think and Search (text-based but spread out), and Author and Me (inference-based). Start by modeling how to find direct answers in the text, then progress to more complex questions that require connecting different pieces of information or drawing from prior knowledge. Guide students in justifying their answers by showing them how to locate evidence in the text.

2. **Provide ample opportunities for students to collaboratively answer questions.**

   Encourage students to work together to answer questions, beginning with simpler Right There questions and moving to more complex Think and Search and Author and Me questions. Prompt students to search the text and justify their answers using specific text-based evidence, helping them develop deeper understanding and critical thinking skills. Ensure that all students participate and provide feedback to clarify misconceptions.

3. **Teach students to ask questions about the text while reading.**

   Encourage students to generate their own questions while reading to deepen comprehension. Start with simple Right There questions and progress to more challenging question types. Provide students with question stems to guide their practice and allow them to work in pairs or small groups to foster independent thinking and collaborative learning.

Part C: Teach students to determine the gist

1. **Model how to use a routine to generate gist statements.**

   Teaching students a structured routine to create gist statements helps break down the task into manageable steps. Start by identifying the main person, place, or thing in the text and the most important information. Encourage students to synthesize this information to form a brief gist statement in their own words. Use consistent marking strategies (highlighting, underlining) to indicate important information. Initially, model the process for students by highlighting key points and creating a sample gist statement.

2. **Teach students how to use text structures to generate gist statements.**

   Explain that text structures (e.g., problem/solution, cause/effect, compare/contrast) provide a framework for understanding the text and generating a gist. Teach students to recognize and differentiate between these structures and use them as tools to summarize the most important information. Show students how to use related questions (e.g., “What is the problem?”) to identify the main idea and important details in the text. Provide practice with different types of texts to reinforce their understanding of text structures.

3. **Work collaboratively with students to generate gist statements.**

   After modeling, involve students in creating gist statements by prompting them through each step of the routine. Encourage students to discuss and justify their choices of important information and help them distinguish relevant from irrelevant details. Use graphic organizers to track key points, and have students collaborate with partners to write gist statements. As students become more confident, gradually reduce support while continuing to guide them through the process.

Part D: Teach students to monitor their comprehension

1. **Help students determine when they do not understand the text.**

Start by having students practice with isolated sentences, some of which may not make sense, to get them used to identifying confusion. Encourage students to underline or highlight words or sections that don't make sense. Once students are comfortable identifying confusion in single sentences, move on to longer texts. After practicing, discuss the sections students struggled with and strategies to address their comprehension gaps, such as rereading or seeking clarification.

2. **Teach students to ask themselves questions as they read to check their understanding.**

   Guide students in asking themselves questions as they read to monitor their understanding. Teach them to stop periodically and ask what the section is about and whether it makes sense. If not, they should reread the section or focus on specific confusing words or concepts. Encourage students to use questions that help them focus on what the text is about or on vocabulary they may not understand. Resource 3D.1, in the IES Educator's Practice Guide (Vaughn et al., 2022, p.61) provides a set of sample questions. Then model this process by reading aloud and asking yourself questions, showing how this technique can clarify understanding.

3. **Provide opportunities for students to reflect on what they have learned.**

   At the end of each lesson, give students the opportunity to reflect on what they've learned by writing down key takeaways, areas of confusion, and strategies they used to improve understanding. Use sentence starters (provided in Resource 3D.2, in Vaughn et al., p. 61) to guide reflection, or ask students to answer comprehension questions related to the text. This reflection helps students consolidate their learning and identify areas where they need more practice or clarification.

Grades 4–9+ | Intervention | Opportunities to Make Sense of Stretch Texts

Intervention Recommendation | Grades 4–9+ | Provide students with opportunities to practice making sense of stretch text (i.e., challenging text) that will expose them to complex ideas and information (Moderate)

Source: IES Educator's Practice Guide, What Works Clearinghouse | Providing Reading Interventions for Students in Grades 4–9 (Vaughn et al., 2022)

+ While this EBP is recommended for grades 4–9 in the practice guide, the Department would also recommend this practice in grades 10–12 as needed.

Stretch texts are reading selections that are challenging for students, typically above their independent reading level but within their grasp with adequate support. These texts expose students to more complex vocabulary, sentence structures, and ideas, helping them develop deeper knowledge and reading skills. With teacher guidance, students can work through stretch texts, building the confidence and persistence needed for success in subject-area classes. The following steps outline how teachers can effectively implement stretch text instruction.

1. **Prepare for the lesson by carefully selecting appropriate stretch texts, choosing points to stop for discussion and clarification, and identifying words to teach.**

   To begin, teachers should select stretch texts that challenge students but are not overly difficult. The text should align with or slightly exceed their grade level. It's important to gradually increase the length and complexity of passages to build student confidence. Teachers should prioritize texts related to topics in subject-area classes, as this helps build students' background knowledge. Engaging texts that relate to students' interests, culture, or real-life experiences are especially effective. Teachers should identify logical stopping points to facilitate discussion and

clarification and prepare explanations for challenging vocabulary, including multisyllabic words and proper nouns.

2. **Provide significant support as the group works through a stretch text together.**

   Working through stretch texts requires significant teacher guidance. Teachers should introduce the text, pre-teach essential words, and assist students in reading difficult words aloud. During reading, teachers pause frequently at pre-selected stop points to ensure that students understand the text. This process can involve reading aloud as a group, discussing confusing words, and guiding students in making sense of the passage. By providing this consistent support, teachers help students build resilience and confidence when tackling challenging texts. Over time, students will develop the skills to approach difficult readings independently.

3. **After students demonstrate comfort with reading stretch texts with the group, provide students with electronic supports to use when independently reading stretch texts.**

   Once students become more comfortable reading stretch texts with teacher support, they can transition to working with these texts independently using electronic aids. Digital tools, such as electronic dictionaries or text-to-speech features, can help students with pronunciation and understanding difficult words. Many programs also offer comprehension questions embedded in the software to guide students through more complex passages. These supports allow students to practice their reading skills independently while still receiving guidance as needed.

Stretch text lessons, implemented 2–3 times per week for 6–10 weeks, offer a structured way to challenge students and improve their reading skills. By carefully selecting appropriate texts, providing substantial support, and gradually transitioning to independent reading, teachers can help students overcome reading challenges. Stretch texts not only build fluency and comprehension, but also foster persistence and confidence in engaging with difficult academic content.

Grades 4–5 | Language Standards

In **Grade 4**, students demonstrate mastery of standard English grammar, including the use of relative pronouns, adverbs, verb tenses, and prepositional phrases. They produce complete sentences and use correct homophones. Capitalization, punctuation, and spelling focus on commas in speech and compound sentences. Students choose precise words, distinguish between formal and informal contexts, and develop vocabulary using context clues, roots, and reference materials. They interpret figurative language, idioms, and word relationships.

In **Grade 5**, students refine their grammar skills with a focus on conjunctions, prepositions, interjections, and perfect verb tenses. They recognize shifts in verb tense and use correlative conjunctions. Punctuation rules include commas in series and addressing titles. Students expand sentences for clarity, compare English varieties, and use context clues, roots, and figurative language to deepen vocabulary understanding. They also apply logical connectors like “however” and “moreover” to enhance writing.

Grades 4–12 | EBP | Provide Explicit Vocabulary Instruction

Recommendation | Grades 4–12: Provide Explicit Vocabulary Instruction. (Strong)

Source: IES Practice Guide, What Works Clearinghouse | *Improving Adolescent Literacy: Effective Classroom and Intervention Practices* (Kamil et al., 2008)

As students advance through the grades, they encounter an increasing number of words in academic texts that are unfamiliar to them because these words often do not appear in everyday spoken language. To address the increasing amount of vocabulary students need to access content knowledge and complex texts across the disciplines, teachers need to integrate explicit vocabulary instruction into

both reading and language arts classes as well as content-area subjects like mathematics, science, social studies, language courses, and technical subjects.

Students will only learn about 15% of new words through reading. Most texts do not provide enough context for students to learn new words, and students are not exposed to the word frequently enough to convert new words to memory. Therefore, explicit vocabulary instruction embedded within the curriculum and across time ensures that students acquire the necessary academic vocabulary to be successful.

How to Implement the Recommendation

1. **Dedicate time in their lessons to explicit vocabulary instruction, adjusting for the complexity of the text and students' prior knowledge.**

   The amount of time needed will be dictated by the amount of prior knowledge students already possess in order to adequately access the text. It will also be dictated by the complexity of the text. More complex texts will require more time to unpack the vocabulary in the text. The number of words to teach per week can also vary by the age and level of the students. See the educator resources for additional support.

   Explicit instruction needs to include multiple modalities of instruction: visual, kinesthetic, auditory, and technological, and oral discussion.

2. **Provide repeated exposure to new words across different contexts and give students sufficient practice opportunities.**

   Researchers (Ausubel and Youssef, 1965 as cited in Kamil et al., 2008) note that it can take as many as 17 exposures to learn a new word. Students need to be exposed to new vocabulary repeatedly within the same lesson and across a unit of study. Words that are key to the text or are used across the unit should be selected for study within the lesson or across the unit.

3. **Offer students multiple ways to engage with and use new vocabulary, such as through discussions, writing, and extended reading.**

   Teachers should have students using the words in as many contexts throughout the lesson and unit as possible.

4. **Teach students strategies to help them become independent vocabulary learners, such as using word parts and reference materials like glossaries.**

   Students need to be taught the skills to become independent language learners, which includes knowledge of prefixes, root words, and suffixes; how to use glossaries; and how to look up words using an online reference tools and how to determine which definition best aligns with the context of the text they are reading.

Some teachers may feel pressed for time to incorporate vocabulary instruction, but even dedicating a few minutes to this each lesson can significantly enhance students' learning. Furthermore, fostering independent vocabulary learning skills in students can help maximize instructional time in the long run.

Grade 4–5 | Writing Standards (including foundational skills)

In **Fourth Grade**, students should be able to write neatly and correctly for different tasks, using the handwriting skills they have learned in previous grades. Students are expected to write opinion pieces with clear arguments, informative texts with well-organized information, and narratives with descriptive details. They work on producing writing that is appropriate for the task and audience, using editing and revising to improve their work. They also start conducting research, taking notes, and using evidence from texts to support their analysis and ideas.

In **Fifth Grade**, students will continue to write neatly for various tasks, applying all the handwriting skills they've developed, including speed and accuracy. Students further develop their writing skills by crafting detailed opinion pieces, informative texts, and narratives. They learn to structure their writing logically and support their ideas with facts and examples. They also focus on using precise language and vocabulary. Students conduct research projects, summarize information, and gather evidence from various sources to support their writing. Additionally, they use technology to publish their work and collaborate with others. Throughout the year, they write regularly for different purposes and audiences, working on both short and long-term writing projects.

Grades 4–12 | Sentence Combining DESCRIPTION

Recommendation 4–12 | Sentence Combining

Source: IES Practice Guide, What Works Clearinghouse | *Teaching Secondary Students to Write Effectively* (Graham et al., 2016)

Source: A Report to Carnegie Corporation of New York | *Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High Schools* (Graham and Perin, 2007)

Grades 4–12 | Explicitly Teach Writing Strategies DESCRIPTION

Recommendation 4–12 | Explicitly teach appropriate writing strategies using a Model-Practice-Reflect instructional cycle (strong)

Source: IES Practice Guide, What Works Clearinghouse | *Teaching Secondary Students to Write Effectively* (Graham et al., 2016)

Source: A Report to Carnegie Corporation of New York | *Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High Schools* (Graham and Perin, 2007)

While these reports are targeted for adolescent students, many of the studies and recommendations include students down to grade 4. The Department recommends that this EBP be used from grades 4–12 aligned with grade level standards and expectations.

Grades 4–12 | Integrate Writing and Reading DESCRIPTION

Recommendation 4–12 | Integrate writing and reading to emphasize key writing features.

Source: IES Practice Guide, What Works Clearinghouse | *Teaching Secondary Students to Write Effectively* (Graham et al., 2016)

Source: A Report to Carnegie Corporation of New York | *Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High Schools* (Graham and Perin, 2007)

While these reports are targeted for adolescent students, many of the studies and recommendations include students down to grade 4. The Department recommends that this EBP be used from grades 4–12 aligned with grade level standards and expectations.

Educator Resources:
Shanahan on Literacy | Why We Need to Teach Sentence Comprehension (Shanahan, 2020)

IRRC | Using Mentor Texts to Learn From the Best and Improve Students' Writing (Thompson & Reed, 2019)

IRRC | Using Timed Practice with Repeated Writing to Promote Sentence-Writing Fluency (Rodgers, 2018)

Grades 4–5 | Speaking and Listening Standards

In **Grade 4**, students engage in collaborative discussions, prepared with studied material, following discussion rules, and building on others' ideas. They ask and answer questions, contribute meaningfully, and paraphrase information from various sources. Students identify a speaker's reasons and evidence and present topics or stories clearly, using details and an organized structure. They enhance presentations with audio or visuals and adjust their speech to suit formal or informal contexts, using clear pronunciation and appropriate volume.

In **Grade 5**, students participate in discussions, prepared with material, following rules, and contributing to conversations by building on others' ideas. They ask questions, review key ideas, and summarize information from various media or texts. Students explain a speaker's points with supporting evidence and present opinions or topics logically, using relevant details. They incorporate multimedia in presentations and adapt speech to different situations, using clear pronunciation, volume, and eye contact.

Grades 4–12 | EBP | Extended Discussion

Recommendation | Grades 4–12: Provide Opportunities for Extended Discussion of Text Meaning and Interpretation (Moderate)

Source: IES Practice Guide, What Works Clearinghouse | *Improving Adolescent Literacy: Effective Classroom and Intervention Practices* (Kamil et al., 2008)

To improve students' reading comprehension, teachers should create opportunities for extended, high-quality discussions about the meaning and interpretation of texts. These discussions can take place in whole-class settings or small groups and should focus on deepening students' understanding of the author's meaning, analyzing the text critically, and connecting it to personal experiences. Effective discussions encourage students to engage with the text, defend their viewpoints, use evidence from the text, and consider the perspectives of others. The level of evidence supporting this recommendation is moderate, based on several studies that show the positive impact of discussion on reading comprehension, though more research is needed.

How to Implement the Recommendation

1. **Carefully Prepare for the Discussion**

   Teachers should choose engaging texts that lend themselves to multiple interpretations and deep analysis. In content-area classes, identify complex or ambiguous sections of the text in advance. Prepare open-ended questions that stimulate reflection and connection, encouraging students to explore deeper meanings. Tailor questions to the content area—for example, history discussions might focus on differing interpretations of events, while science discussions might evaluate evidence.

2. **Ask Follow-up Questions That Provide Continuity and Extend the Discussion**

Follow initial questions with probing ones that challenge students to explain their reasoning or consider alternative viewpoints. Encourage students to make inferences, draw connections across texts, or integrate background knowledge. Sustained discussions should move beyond simple question-and-answer formats and involve deeper thinking and elaboration.

3. **Provide a Task or Discussion Format for Small Group Discussions**

   Assign roles within groups to help structure discussions. Students might predict, clarify, or summarize key points, with others responding or offering alternative ideas. The teacher's role is to circulate among groups, guiding conversations, modeling thinking, and redirecting off-track discussions to keep students engaged with the text.

4. **Develop and Practice a Specific Discussion Protocol**

   Use a clear set of discussion guidelines that emphasize reasoning, counter arguments, and recognition of good thinking. Teachers can follow models from research, such as asking students to defend their positions and think aloud through reasoning. The goal of these discussions is not necessarily consensus but deeper engagement with the text.

To encourage student participation in discussions, teachers should select high-interest texts and create a supportive, non-threatening environment that embraces differing viewpoints. Small group discussions can help reluctant students engage more comfortably. Although extended discussions may take up class time, they are essential for developing critical thinking and comprehension skills, so teachers should prioritize key content for in-depth exploration. To guide effective discussions, teachers may need professional learning and practice, including participation in discussions themselves, to build the necessary classroom management and critical thinking skills.



Educator Resources:

University of Pittsburgh, Institute for Learning | Accountable Talk Sourcebook (Michaels et al., 2016)

SERP Institute, Academically Productive Talk | About Academically Productive Talk: 1) Benefits, 2) Seven Talk Moves for Teachers, 3) Recommended First Steps, and 4) Next Steps.

SERP Institute | The Academically Productive Talk Project

- What is APT?
- Benefits of APT
- Getting Started
- Support for APT across Content Areas: Math | Language Arts | Science | Social Studies
- Video Library
- Teacher Tip Deck

Adolescent Literacy Grades 6–12

Grades 6–12 | Reading Standards for Literature

In **Grades 6–8**, students focus on citing textual evidence to support their analysis of texts, identifying themes, and understanding plot development. They analyze word choices, figurative language, and structural elements like chapters or stanzas to comprehend the deeper meaning and tone of texts. They compare and contrast different forms of literature and mediums (e.g., reading versus viewing a performance) and evaluate how these contribute to understanding the work. By the end of grade 8,

students should be able to read and comprehend literature independently at the high end of the 6–8 text complexity band.

In **Grades 9–10**, students advance to more detailed analysis of complex characters and themes, exploring how these elements are developed and refined throughout a text. They examine word choices and their cumulative impact on tone and meaning, while also analyzing how authors structure narratives and manipulate time to create effects like tension or surprise. Students compare literary works across different artistic mediums and analyze how authors transform source material. By the end of grade 10, they should read and comprehend increasingly complex literature proficiently.

In **Grades 11–12**, students are expected to provide thorough textual analysis, examining multiple themes within a text and how they interact to create a complex narrative. They explore the nuances of an author's structural choices and their aesthetic impact. Furthermore, they analyze how point of view and techniques like irony or satire shape the text's meaning. Students also evaluate multiple interpretations of literary works and compare foundational American literature from different periods, drawing connections between themes. By the end of grade 12, they should be able to independently comprehend high-level texts across various genres.

Grades 6–12 | Reading Standards for Informational Texts

In **Grades 6–8**, students develop critical reading skills by citing textual evidence, identifying central ideas, and analyzing how individuals, events, or ideas are presented in informational texts. They focus on understanding word meanings and the impact of structure on text development. Students learn to evaluate the author's point of view and compare different mediums and texts on similar topics. By the end of grade 8, they should be able to independently read and comprehend literary nonfiction within the text complexity band for their grade level.

In **Grades 9–10**, students advance their analytical skills by examining how central ideas and complex concepts evolve in texts. They explore the influence of word choice on meaning and tone and analyze how an author structures arguments or expositions to persuade or inform. They evaluate the validity of arguments, compare multiple accounts of a subject, and analyze seminal U.S. documents. By the end of grade 10, they should independently read and comprehend high-complexity texts.

In **Grades 11–12**, students analyze more complex informational texts, citing evidence to support in-depth analysis, and examining the development of multiple central ideas and their interactions. They evaluate how authors use rhetoric to enhance arguments, analyzing the effectiveness of text structure and the power of style. They integrate multiple sources across different media, evaluate reasoning in foundational U.S. texts, and analyze historical documents for themes and rhetorical features. By the end of grade 12, they should independently read and comprehend advanced literary nonfiction.

Common comprehension strategies that help students understand and engage with texts:

- Summarizing – Condensing the main ideas and key details of a text into a brief overview.
- Questioning – Asking questions before, during, and after reading to deepen understanding.
- Predicting – Making educated guesses about what will happen next in the text based on clues.
- Inferring – Drawing conclusions and making interpretations based on evidence in the text combined with prior knowledge.
- Visualizing – Creating mental images of scenes, characters, or information while reading.
- Connecting – Relating the text to personal experiences, other texts, or real-world events.
- Clarifying – Identifying confusing parts of the text and seeking to understand them, either through rereading or using context clues.

- Determining Importance – Identifying the key ideas or themes in a text, distinguishing them from less important information.
- Synthesizing – Combining new information from the text with existing knowledge to form a new understanding or perspective.
- Monitoring Comprehension – Being aware of one's own understanding while reading and employing strategies to fix any breakdowns in comprehension.

Grades 4–12 | EBP | Direct & Explicit Comprehension Strategy Instruction DESCRIPTION

Recommendation | Grades 4–12: Provide direct and explicit comprehension strategy instruction (Strong)

Source: IES Practice Guide, What Works Clearinghouse | *Improving Adolescent Literacy: Effective Classroom and Intervention Practices* (Kamil et al., 2008)

Grades 4–9+ | Intervention | Purposeful Fluency Building Activities DESCRIPTION

Intervention Recommendation | Grades 4–9+ | Provide Purposeful Fluency-Building Activities to Help Students Read Effortlessly (Strong)

Source: IES Practice Guide, What Works Clearinghouse | *Providing Reading Interventions for Students in Grades 4–9* (Vaughn et al., 2022)

+ While this EBP is recommended for grades 4–9 in the practice guide, the Department would also recommend this practice in grades 10–12 as needed.

Grades 4–9+ | Intervention | Use Comprehension Building Practices DESCRIPTION

Intervention Recommendation | Grades 4–9+ | Routinely use a set of comprehension-building practices to help students make sense of the text.

Source: IES Practice Guide, What Works Clearinghouse | *Providing Reading Interventions for Students in Grades 4–9* (Vaughn et al., 2022)

+ While this EBP is recommended for grades 4–9 in the practice guide, the Department would also recommend this practice in grades 10–12 as needed.

Grades 4–9+ | Intervention | Opportunities to Make Sense of Stretch Texts DESCRIPTION

Intervention Recommendation | Grades 4–9+ | Provide students with opportunities to practice making sense of stretch text (i.e., challenging text) that will expose them to complex ideas and information (Moderate)

Source: IES Practice Guide, What Works Clearinghouse | *Providing Reading Interventions for Students in Grades 4–9* (Vaughn et al., 2022)

+ While this EBP is recommended for grades 4–9 in the practice guide, the Department would also recommend this practice in grades 10–12 as needed.

Grades 4–12 | EBP | Writing in Response to Texts

Recommendation | Grades 4–12: Have students write about texts they read.

Source: Carnegie Corporation Time to Act Report | *Writing to Read: Evidence for How Writing Can Improve Reading* (Graham & Hebert, 2010)

Graham and Hebert (2010) completed an extensive meta-analysis of studies to determine how writing can support reading comprehension. When students respond to the texts they read, it requires them to actively create meaning from the text by connecting the ideas in it with their own knowledge, experiences, and beliefs. By writing about a text, students are not merely recalling information; they are organizing and integrating ideas into a coherent structure, reflecting on what they have read, and transforming the content into their own words. This approach encourages personal involvement with the text, fosters critical thinking, and makes the reading process more interactive.

Writing about a text can take many forms, including summarizing, analyzing, responding to questions, or offering interpretations. These activities allow students to process and reflect on what they have learned, promoting a deeper understanding and retention of the material. For example, students might write about a text by comparing it to other works, connecting it to real-world events, or evaluating the author's argument. This form of writing helps students engage with texts beyond surface-level reading, as they are required to consider the purpose, structure, and content of the text and how it relates to other knowledge. It turns reading into a more active and reflective process, rather than a passive activity of simply absorbing information.

Overall, writing in response to texts provides a way for students to practice critical thinking, enhance comprehension, and apply what they have learned in meaningful ways. By expressing their understanding in writing, students solidify their knowledge and improve both their reading and writing skills.

Three focused methods for responding to texts

Below are key writing activities that support comprehension:

1. **Writing Personal Reactions and Analyzing the Text:** Writing about personal reactions or analyzing a text deepens understanding by requiring students to transform ideas into their own words. Extended writing activities, such as journal responses or essays, encourage critical thinking and improve comprehension.
2. **Writing Summaries:** Summarizing requires students to identify key ideas, organize thoughts, and focus on the essence of the material. This helps improve comprehension and retention, especially when students are taught specific summarization strategies.
3. **Writing Notes and Answering Questions:** Note-taking and writing responses to questions help students process and reflect on the text, reinforcing comprehension. These activities promote deeper engagement with the material and organize key ideas.

Grades 4–12 | EBP | Teach Writing Skills to Illuminate Texts

Recommendation | Grades 4–12: Teach students the writing skills and process that go into creating text

Source: Carnegie Corporation Time to Act Report | *Writing to Read: Evidence for How Writing Can Improve Reading* (Graham & Hebert, 2010)

Writing instruction improves reading comprehension, fluency, and word recognition by engaging students in similar cognitive processes for both reading and writing.

Key instructional practices include:

1. **Sentence Construction and Text Structures:** Teaching sentence combining, where students learn to create complex sentences from simpler ones, improves reading comprehension by helping students understand larger text units. Understanding and using text structures, like those in persuasive writing, further supports reading and writing development.
2. **Spelling and Sentence Construction:** Spelling instruction connects letter-sound relationships, which enhances word reading and fluency. Sentence construction practices also improve students' ability to understand and process reading materials.
3. **Writing for Enhanced Reading:** Writing activities such as summarizing, analyzing, and reflecting on texts help students internalize and connect key ideas, improving reading comprehension. Teaching writing as a process—planning, drafting, revising—simultaneously supports reading development.

Grades 4–12 | EBP | Increase the Amount of Student Writing

Recommendation | Grades 4–12: Increase how much students write.

Source: Carnegie Corporation Time to Act Report | *Writing to Read: Evidence for How Writing Can Improve Reading* (Graham & Hebert, 2010)

The Department recommends that Students write daily and across content areas. Students need to be writing about texts, about big ideas and concepts, about self-selected topics. Students need to be writing to clarify, synthesize, analyze, organize, and generate ideas. By writing students become better readers. Writing instruction helps students better comprehend reading material by requiring them to actively process and organize ideas. The act of writing enhances their ability to analyze, reflect on, and internalize the content they read. It is important to teach students how to construct, revise, and edit their writing, which, in turn, strengthens their reading comprehension and critical thinking abilities.

Grades 6–12 | Writing Standards

In **Grades 6–8**, students are expected to develop their writing skills through the creation of arguments, informative texts, and narratives. They focus on organizing ideas clearly, supporting claims with credible evidence, and using narrative techniques to build cohesive stories. The writing process includes planning, revising, and editing, with the use of technology to produce and publish their work. Research skills are emphasized, as students gather information from multiple sources, evaluate credibility, and incorporate evidence to support analysis. They write regularly over both extended and shorter time frames for a variety of purposes and audiences.

In **Grades 9–10**, students refine their ability to write arguments, informative texts, and narratives by focusing on complex ideas, clear organization, and logical evidence. They are expected to develop claims and counterclaims fairly, using credible sources and well-reasoned arguments. Their writing should demonstrate coherence through varied syntax, precise language, and appropriate transitions. Students conduct both short and sustained research projects, evaluate sources, and draw evidence from texts to support their claims. Writing tasks are designed for different purposes and audiences, with a focus on revision and the effective use of technology.

In **Grades 11–12**, students demonstrate mastery in writing arguments, informative texts, and narratives that explore complex topics with sophistication. They are expected to present precise claims, develop counterclaims with strong evidence, and use formal style and tone appropriate to their discipline. Their writing includes thorough research projects, using credible primary and secondary sources while avoiding plagiarism. They evaluate sources for credibility and relevance and apply advanced research skills. Writing occurs over varied time frames, with opportunities for revision and reflection, and is tailored to a range of audiences and purposes.

Grades 4–12 | Explicitly Teach Writing Strategies

Recommendation | Grades 4–12: Explicitly teach appropriate writing strategies using a Model-Practice-Reflect instructional cycle (strong)

Source: IES Practice Guide, What Works Clearinghouse | *Teaching Secondary Students to Write Effectively* (Graham et al., 2016)

Source: Carnegie Corporation Time to Act Report | *Writing to Read: Evidence for How Writing Can Improve Reading* (Graham & Hebert, 2010)

While these reports above are targeted for adolescent students, many of the studies and recommendations include students down to grade 4. The Department recommends that this EBP be used from grades 4–12 aligned with grade level standards and expectations.

Source: CEEDAR Center | Evidence-Based Practices for Writing Instruction (Document No. IC-5) (Troia, 2014)

Teaching adolescents cognitive strategies for planning, revising, and editing, is essential for enhancing their strategic thinking and the quality of their writing. Graham and Perin (2007), in *Writing Next's* meta-analysis demonstrated an effect size of 0.82 for this instructional practice. Writing strategy instruction involves teaching students specific, structured approaches to each phase of the writing process, such as brainstorming ideas, organizing thoughts, drafting, revising, and editing.

Explicit instruction in writing strategies significantly improves writing quality, especially for students with difficulties, by enhancing organization, clarity, and effectiveness. These strategies promote critical thinking by teaching students how to approach writing tasks systematically and select appropriate methods for different audiences. For struggling writers, strategy instruction breaks down the process into manageable steps, boosting confidence and fostering independence. Additionally, these strategies are transferable across disciplines, allowing students to apply them in subjects like science and social studies, improving their overall academic performance.

How to Implement the Recommendation

1a. Explicitly teach appropriate writing strategies

1. **Explicitly teach strategies for planning and goal setting, drafting, evaluating, revising, and editing.**
2. **Instruct students on how to choose and apply strategies appropriate for audience and purpose.**

   Explicitly teach strategies for planning, goal setting, drafting, evaluating, revising, and editing to guide students through the writing process. Since writing is iterative, students may work through these components in different orders, using strategies that are either general or genre-specific. Teach students to choose and apply strategies based on the assignment's audience and purpose. After learning various strategies, students should evaluate their strategy choices, considering what works best for each task and audience. Reflecting on their choices fosters critical thinking and adaptability, allowing students to modify strategies for different contexts and improve their writing skills.

1b. Use a Model-Practice-Reflect instructional cycle to teach writing strategies.

The Model-Practice-Reflect approach helps students observe strong writers, practice emulating effective writing, and reflect on their work to internalize writing strategies. This method ensures students can apply their skills in new contexts, with teachers gradually shifting responsibility until students can use strategies independently. This approach uses a gradual release instructional model to support

students as they learn to emulate a more expert writer and engage collaboratively with their peers. The ultimate goal is to have students using writing strategies independently.

How to Implement the Recommendation

1. **Model strategies for students.**

   Teachers and peers can model effective writing strategies by demonstrating and verbally describing their use during different parts of the writing process. This modeling helps students understand the thought process behind selecting and applying each strategy and shows how each one contributes to writing effectively. Teachers can include statements that explain errors and their corrections, illustrating common challenges and solutions. When introducing a new writing strategy, teachers should carefully model each step, and if students struggle, additional modeling may be needed. Teachers can also display strategy lists in the classroom and encourage students to share their strategy use during assignments. In small groups, students can model their strategies for peers, allowing for collaborative learning. The intensity of modeling should be adjusted based on student needs, with more support provided to those struggling. As students master strategies, teachers should gradually reduce modeling, enabling students to apply strategies independently. Teacher modeling needs to occur in all content areas so that students can adapt their writing strategies across the disciplines.

2. **Provide students with opportunities to apply and practice modeled strategies.**

   Students need time to apply what they have seen modelled by a teacher or peer. Students should apply these strategies to texts they are writing for legitimate purposes in class. If a teacher has modeled how to write and integrate dialogue into a narrative, students should then immediately apply that strategy into their own writing and narratives. If a science teacher has modeled how to use evidence and statistics to back up a position in a position paper, students should immediately practice using evidence and statistics they have found to support their own positions–or a collaborative piece of writing–and practice integrating it.

3. **Engage students in evaluating and reflecting upon their own and peers' writing and use of modeled strategies.**

   Once students have applied the strategies they have learned, they need to spend time reflecting on how they did with that application. Students need to determine how well the strategy helped them meet their writing goal, or how it helped them convey their idea to their audience. Reflective practice helps students see how they have grown, and maintain a goal-oriented mindset in the classroom. Students can also use rubrics and exemplar texts to reflect on their writing and use language from the rubric as a way to talk about their own texts.

Considerations for Students with Disabilities or Striving Writers

Adjust the strategy for students based on their level. For example, some students may struggle working to revise an entire essay. Instead, have them focus on revising one paragraph at a time, or an introduction or conclusion. Then, they can work up to working to revise an entire essay as a whole.

Grades 4–12 | Integrate Writing and Reading

Recommendation 4–12 | Integrate writing and reading to emphasize key writing features.

Source: IES Practice Guide, What Works Clearinghouse | *Teaching Secondary Students to Write Effectively* (Graham et al., 2016)

Source: A Report to Carnegie Corporation of New York | *Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High Schools* (Graham & Perin, 2007)

While these reports are targeted for adolescent students, many of the studies and recommendations include students down to grade 4. The Department recommends that this EBP be used from grades 4–12 aligned with grade level standards and expectations.

Integrating reading and writing strengthens both skills. Writers improve when they consider their audience, and reading with the writer in mind enhances comprehension. This integration helps students develop meta-knowledge, domain knowledge, text features, and procedural knowledge. Writing across disciplines, like lab reports in science or persuasive essays in history, provides practice in various writing forms and improves reading comprehension, critical thinking, and content knowledge.

How to Implement the Recommendation

1. **Teach students to understand that both writers and readers use similar strategies, knowledge, and skills to create meaning.**

   To strengthen both reading and writing skills, students should learn that the strategies, knowledge, and skills used by readers and writers are interconnected. By recognizing these connections, students can transfer reading strategies to their writing and vice versa. For example, when reading a text with a cause/effect structure, students should be able to identify key signal words like “because” or “effect,” which they can then apply when writing about cause-and-effect relationships. Explicitly teaching these connections helps students understand how writers craft meaning, using strategies such as sensory details in narratives to engage readers. Similarly, when students are writing, they can incorporate techniques like vivid descriptions to create meaning for their audience. Cognitive-strategy sentence starters can also help structure students’ thinking and writing. These tools guide them in focusing on key aspects of writing, such as generating ideas, evaluating content, or reflecting on the text’s message. By making these connections clear, students are equipped to use strategies effectively in both reading and writing tasks across disciplines.

2. **Use a variety of written exemplars to highlight the key features of texts.**

   Exemplar texts serve as valuable models for teaching key features of effective writing. Teachers can use these examples—whether from published authors, peers, or themselves—to highlight critical writing elements such as organization, word choice, tone, structure, and grammar. For instance, when studying argumentative writing, students can examine an exemplar that clearly illustrates how to use supporting evidence to back up claims. Teachers can emphasize these features using techniques like color-coding to make them visually distinct (e.g., highlighting claims in yellow). As students read these exemplars, they should focus on the strategies used by the author and analyze how different text features contribute to the overall message. Once students understand these key features, they can emulate them in their own writing. Additionally, presenting exemplars with varying levels of quality allows students to distinguish between effective and less effective writing, helping them learn how to improve their own work. This practice, combined with the use of rubrics and checklists, ensures that students are aware of the expectations for their writing and can self-assess their progress. Graham and Perin (2007) in Writing Next note that studying model texts has an effect size of 0.25).

K–8+ | English Learners | EBP | Opportunities to Develop Written Language DESCRIPTION

Recommendation K–8+ | Provide regular, structured opportunities to develop written language skills.

Source: *Teaching Academic Content and Literacy to English Learners in Elementary and Middle School* (Baker et al., 2014)

+While this EBP is recommended for grades K–8 in the practice guide, the Department would also recommend this practice in grades 9–12.

Grades 6–12 | Language Standards

In **Grades 6–8**, students develop a strong command of English grammar and usage, including proper use of pronouns, verbals, and sentence structure. They learn to apply punctuation correctly and spell accurately, using reference materials when necessary. Language is explored through varying sentence patterns and maintaining consistent style and tone. Vocabulary acquisition focuses on understanding word meanings using context, Greek and Latin roots, and reference tools, while also interpreting figurative language and analyzing word relationships. Students expand their academic and domain-specific vocabulary, applying it effectively in writing, speaking, and comprehension.

In **Grades 9–10**, students refine their grammar skills, focusing on parallel structure, complex sentence forms, and the proper use of punctuation such as semicolons and colons. They deepen their understanding of how language functions in different contexts, making effective choices for meaning and style. Vocabulary strategies emphasize context clues, word patterns, and consulting reference materials. Students analyze figurative language, explore nuances in word meanings, and develop the vocabulary needed for college and career readiness.

In **Grades 11–12**, students are expected to master complex grammar and usage rules, recognizing that language conventions can change over time. They use advanced punctuation for grammatical accuracy and emphasis and vary syntax for stylistic effect. Vocabulary skills involve interpreting figures of speech and understanding the nuances of words with similar denotations. Students demonstrate independence in acquiring domain-specific vocabulary, applying it to complex reading, writing, and speaking tasks at a college and career readiness level.

Grammar Instruction

Recent research on grammar instruction has shifted focus toward more contextualized, integrated approaches rather than traditional, isolated grammar lessons. According to a meta-analysis by Graham and Perin (2007), explicit and systematic instruction in parts of speech and sentence structure showed a negative, albeit small, effect on writing quality across students of various ability levels. Specifically, traditional grammar instruction did not enhance the quality of students' writing and even yielded negative results when applied to low-achieving writers (Saddler & Graham, 2005). These findings challenge the common practice of emphasizing grammar rules in isolation as a core component of writing instruction.

In contrast, alternative methods such as sentence combining have shown positive effects on writing quality. Sentence combining allows students to practice syntactic skills by combining simpler sentences into more complex ones, ultimately improving their writing. Additionally, teaching grammar within the context of writing by focusing on its functional and practical application rather than treating it as a standalone topic, yields stronger results in improving writing quality (Graham & Perin, 2007).

Overall, these studies indicate that while grammar instruction remains important, methods such as sentence combining and context-driven grammar teaching are more effective than traditional approaches for improving students' writing quality.

Grades 4–12 | Sentence Combining

Recommendation 4–12 | Sentence Combining

Source: *Teaching Secondary Students to Write Effectively* (Graham et al., 2016)

Source: *Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High Schools* (Graham and Perin, 2007)

While these reports are targeted for adolescent students, many of the studies and recommendations include students down to grade 4. The Department recommends that this EBP be used from grades 4–12 aligned with grade level standards and expectations. (Burchinal et al., 2022)

Sentence combining is an evidence-based writing strategy that involves teaching students to join simple sentences into more complex ones. The goal is to help students improve their syntactic skills, enhance sentence variety, and develop clearer, more coherent writing. By combining shorter, choppy sentences into more sophisticated structures, students not only refine their sentence-level writing but also develop a better understanding of sentence construction, grammar, and meaning.

Sentence combining enhances both students' syntactic abilities and the overall quality of their writing. It provides students with a structured approach to understanding how sentences can be expanded and enhanced, contributing to greater sentence fluency and cohesion in their writing.

Why It Works:

1. **Improves Syntax:** Sentence combining helps students understand the relationships between different parts of a sentence (subjects, predicates, clauses) and how to connect them meaningfully.
2. **Encourages Sentence Variety:** By practicing combining simple sentences, students learn how to create more varied sentence structures, which enhances the complexity and readability of their writing.
3. **Promotes Understanding of Writing Conventions:** Students improve their grasp of grammatical structures and punctuation while learning to make their writing more engaging and effective.
4. **Supports Writing across Disciplines:** This strategy is versatile and can be applied across various content areas, helping students produce more sophisticated writing in subjects like science, history, and literature.

To use sentence combining effectively, teachers typically start with simple sentences and gradually encourage students to combine them using conjunctions, relative clauses, or other grammatical tools. Over time, students practice combining sentences in different ways to enhance clarity and variety. For example, a teacher might present two simple sentences: "The dog ran fast. It was chasing a ball." Students would then combine them into a more complex sentence, such as: "The dog ran fast because it was chasing a ball." This activity helps students internalize the mechanics of sentence construction and apply them independently.

Sentence combining is a powerful, evidence-based practice that improves students' syntactic skills and the overall quality of their writing. By learning how to combine sentences effectively, students gain a better understanding of grammar and writing conventions, leading to clearer, more effective communication. This strategy is particularly beneficial for struggling writers and can be applied across various academic disciplines.

Sentence combining can lead to significant improvements in writing, particularly for students with learning disabilities and struggling writers. Saddler and Graham (2005) demonstrated that students who

received instruction in sentence combining wrote more complex and grammatically correct sentences compared to those who did not. This approach has also been found to be more effective than traditional grammar instruction in helping students enhance the overall quality of their writing (Graham & Perin, 2007).



Educator Resources:
Shanahan on Literacy | Why We Need to Teach Sentence Comprehension (Shanahan, 2020)

"Children often learn new words incidentally from context. However, according to a meta-analysis of the literature, the probability that they will learn new words while reading is relatively low—about 15 percent. Therefore, although incidental learning helps students develop their vocabulary, additional explicit instructional support needs to be provided as part of the curriculum to ensure that all students acquire the necessary print vocabulary for academic success." (IES Practice Guide, Kamil et al., 2008, pp. 11–12)

K–8+ | EBP | English Learners | Academic Vocabulary Across Several Days DESCRIPTION

Recommendation | Grades K–8+: Teach a set of academic vocabulary words intensively across several days using a variety of instructional activities. (Strong)

Source: *Teaching Academic Content and Literacy to English Learners in Elementary and Middle School* (Baker et al., 2014)

+Note: While this EBP is recommended for grades K–8 in the practice guide, the Department would also recommend this practice in grades 9–12.

Grades 4–12 | EBP | Provide Explicit Vocabulary Instruction DESCRIPTION

Recommendation | Grades 4–12: Provide Explicit Vocabulary Instruction. (Strong)

Source: IES Practice Guide, What Works Clearinghouse | *Improving Adolescent Literacy: Effective Classroom and Intervention Practices* (Kamil et al., 2008)

Educator Resources:

AdLit | *Explicit Vocabulary Teaching Strategies* [Video] (Curtis, 2014)

AdLit | Linking the Language: A Cross-Disciplinary Vocabulary Approach (Ebbers, n.d.)

Anita Archer | Vocabulary Instruction [Video Demonstrating Explicit Vocabulary Instructional Routine] (2014)

The Reading League Florida | *Teaching Reading is Complex: Techniques and Decisions* [Webinar] (Diamond, 2022)

Grades 6–12 | Speaking and Listening Standards

In **Grades 6–8**, students engage in collaborative discussions, presenting and building on ideas, and responding to questions with elaboration and detail. They learn to interpret information from various media formats, analyze speakers' arguments, and present claims logically with multimedia support. Speech is adapted to different contexts, ensuring proper eye contact, volume, and pronunciation in both formal and informal tasks.

In **Grades 9–10**, students advance by actively participating in discussions, incorporating research and evidence to support their ideas. They evaluate information from multiple sources and assess the validity of arguments and rhetoric. Presentations are structured clearly, with strategic use of digital media, and speech is adapted to different contexts, demonstrating a strong command of formal English.

In **Grades 11–12**, students refine their discussion skills, synthesizing multiple perspectives and resolving contradictions in collaborative settings. They integrate media to make informed decisions, evaluate the reasoning and rhetoric of speakers, and present clear, persuasive arguments. Their speech adapts seamlessly to formal and informal contexts, using effective multimedia tools and maintaining clarity and precision.

Grades 4–12 | EBP | Extended Discussion

Recommendation | Grades 4–12: Provide Opportunities for Extended Discussion of Text Meaning and Interpretation (Moderate)

Source: IES Practice Guide, What Works Clearinghouse | *Improving Adolescent Literacy: Effective Classroom and Intervention Practices* (Kamil et al., 2008)

This description of this EBP was described in a previous section and can be found here.



Educator Resources:
University of Pittsburgh, Institute for Learning | Accountable Talk Sourcebook (O'Connor et al., 2016)

SERP Institute | About Academically Productive Talk: 1) Benefits, 2) Seven Talk Moves for Teachers, 3) Recommended First Steps, and 4) Next Steps.

SERP Institute | The Academically Productive Talk Project

What is APT?

Benefits of APT

Getting Started

Support for APT across Content Areas: Math | Language Arts | Science | Social Studies

Video Library

Teacher Tip Deck

Grades K–8+ | EBP | English Learners | Integrate Oral and Written Language Instruction Across Content Areas

Recommendation | Grades K–8+: Integrate oral and written English language instruction into content-area teaching. (Strong)

Source: IES Educator's Practice Guide, WWC | *Teaching Academic Content and Literacy to English Learners in Elementary and Middle School* (Baker et al., 2014)

+Note: While this EBP is recommended for grades K–8 in the practice guide, the Department would also recommend this practice in grades 9–12.

Integrating oral and written English language instruction into content-area teaching is essential for helping students master complex academic material while building critical language skills. As academic standards rise, students are expected to engage with challenging texts, participate in discussions, and express their understanding through writing. These demands are especially important for English learners, who must simultaneously acquire language proficiency and comprehend grade-level content. The following strategies provide effective ways for teachers to enhance content instruction by incorporating language development.

1. **Strategically use instructional tools—such as short videos, visuals, and graphic organizers—to anchor instruction and help students make sense of content.**

   Teachers can use short videos, visuals, and graphic organizers to anchor lessons and help students grasp content more effectively. For instance, brief video clips or images related to the

subject matter can engage students and provide a common experience to facilitate understanding. Graphic organizers like Venn diagrams or cause-effect charts help students map out relationships and structures within the content. These tools not only make abstract concepts more concrete but also encourage active learning through discussions and collaborative exercises. Using these strategies helps bridge gaps in comprehension and fosters more effective content-area learning.

2. **Explicitly teach the content-specific academic vocabulary, as well as the general academic vocabulary that supports it, during content-area instruction.**

   Explicitly teaching key academic vocabulary is essential to help students understand content material in subjects like science, social studies, and literature. Teachers should focus on both content-specific terms and general academic vocabulary, explaining their meanings through examples, non-examples, and visuals. This helps students not only grasp subject-specific terminology, but also comprehend how common academic words function across disciplines. Introducing words gradually, with plenty of context and practice, ensures that students can integrate them into their speaking, writing, and reading vocabularies. This method enhances understanding and helps students navigate complex academic content more effectively.

3. **Provide daily opportunities for students to talk about content in pairs or small groups.**

   Facilitating regular, structured discussions in pairs or small groups allows students to process new content while practicing their language skills. These interactions give students the chance to articulate their thoughts, clarify their understanding, and rehearse ideas before presenting them to the whole class. By grouping students with different levels of English proficiency, teachers enable peer learning, where more advanced students model language and content understanding. Frequent opportunities to discuss topics, use content vocabulary, and respond to questions foster deeper learning and improve language proficiency of all students.

4. **Provide writing opportunities to extend student learning and understanding of the content material.**

   Writing activities are a powerful tool for reinforcing content understanding and promoting language development. Teachers can assign writing tasks that require students to apply newly learned vocabulary and concepts, such as responding to prompts, summarizing readings, or explaining scientific processes. These activities help students synthesize information, practice academic language, and deepen their grasp of content. Writing can range from short responses to more extended essays, with opportunities for revision and reflection, allowing students to demonstrate their learning and solidify their understanding of the material.

Focusing on integrating explicit language instruction within content areas benefits all students but is essential for English learners. By using instructional tools, teaching key academic vocabulary, promoting structured discussions, and incorporating writing tasks, educators can make challenging content more accessible and ensure that students develop the language skills needed for academic success. These practices are crucial in preparing students for future academic achievement and life beyond the classroom.

Grades 4–12 | EBP | Increase Student Motivation and Engagement

Recommendation | Grades 4–12: Increase Student Motivation and Engagement in Literacy Learning (Moderate)

Source: IES Practice Guide, What Works Clearinghouse | *Improving Adolescent Literacy: Effective Classroom and Intervention Practices* (Kamil et al., 2008)

There are many ways to improve the literacy environment for all students, especially for students who may not perceive themselves as skilled readers. Educators can increase student motivation and engagement by creating a supportive environment that encourages confidence in reading abilities, views mistakes as opportunities for growth, and offers meaningful feedback on reading strategies (Kamil et al., 2008). Teachers should also make literacy experiences relevant to students' interests, real-world events, or daily lives.

How to Implement the Recommendation

1. **Establish Meaningful and Engaging Learning Goals**

   Set clear content-related goals that focus on important ideas within a discipline. Encourage students to set personal goals to foster ownership of their learning. Monitor progress and provide explicit feedback that helps students stay motivated and engaged.

2. **Provide a Positive Learning Environment that Promotes Autonomy**

   Give students some control over their learning by offering choices in reading materials and activities. Allowing students autonomy fosters deeper engagement, increases their sense of responsibility for learning, and improves comprehension.

3. **Make Literacy Experiences Relevant to Students' Lives**

   Incorporate texts and topics that relate to students' interests or current events. Design instruction around real-world applications that connect literacy with students' everyday lives, making learning more engaging and relevant.

4. **Implement Conditions that Support Motivation and Learning**

   Encourage goal setting, self-directed learning, and collaboration to increase engagement. Integrate content across subjects and use conceptual themes that connect literacy with other disciplines, such as science or social studies, to create more meaningful learning experiences.

Disciplinary Literacy

Disciplinary literacy refers to the specialized ways of reading, writing, thinking, and communicating that are unique to specific academic disciplines. Unlike general literacy, which focuses on basic reading and writing skills, disciplinary literacy emphasizes the specific literacy practices required to understand and create knowledge within a particular field, such as history, science, mathematics, or literature. This approach recognizes that each discipline has its own set of conventions, vocabulary, and methods for constructing and communicating knowledge, and that students must be taught these unique skills to engage deeply with content.

Disciplinary literacy is critical because it equips students with the tools to think critically and solve problems within different academic domains. For example, reading a historical text requires the ability to analyze primary sources and understand the context, while reading a scientific article involves interpreting data and understanding experimental methods. Teaching these skills helps students not only to understand the content more deeply but also to think like experts in those fields.

Shanahan and Shanahan (2008) highlight the importance of moving beyond general literacy instruction to focus on the specific literacy demands of each discipline, arguing that as students progress through school, they need more specialized instruction tailored to the ways professionals in each field read, write, and think. This perspective is supported by other scholars, who emphasize that disciplinary literacy instruction can help close achievement gaps by providing all students with access to the specialized skills needed to succeed in various academic and professional domains (Fang, 2012; Moje, 2008).

Lee and Spratley (2010) also show that disciplinary literacy instruction can improve students' engagement and motivation by making learning more relevant to their interests and future careers. Buehl (2017) further underscores that teachers across all content areas need to be equipped with the knowledge and strategies to teach the specific literacy skills required in their disciplines.

In summary, disciplinary literacy is an approach that focuses on the unique literacy practices of different academic disciplines. It helps students develop the specialized skills needed to understand and create knowledge within those fields, thus preparing them for success in both academic and professional settings.

Grades 6–12 | Reading and Writing Standards for Literacy in Science and Technical Subjects

Reading

The Reading Standards for Literacy in Science and Technical Subjects 6–12 guide students through increasingly complex analysis and understanding of scientific and technical texts. In **Grades 6–8**, students focus on citing evidence, determining central ideas, and following multistep procedures. They analyze technical terminology, the structure of texts, and the author's purpose. They integrate visual data with text and distinguish between fact, reasoned judgment, and speculation. By the end of grade 8, students are expected to proficiently comprehend technical texts independently.

In **Grades 9–10**, students advance their ability to analyze specific evidence and complex processes. They follow complex multistep procedures, analyze relationships between concepts, and evaluate scientific claims based on evidence. They also compare findings from various sources, including their own experiments. By the end of grade 10, students should independently comprehend texts at the 9–10 complexity level.

By **Grades 11–12**, students analyze science and technical texts at an even deeper level, paying close attention to distinctions in reasoning and evidence. They summarize complex ideas clearly, follow complex procedures, and evaluate unresolved issues in scientific texts. Students integrate multiple sources to synthesize information, corroborate or challenge conclusions, and read and comprehend complex technical texts proficiently by the end of grade 12.



Leader Resources:
International Literacy Association | Content Area and Disciplinary Literacy: Strategies and Frameworks [Literacy Leadership Brief] (2017)



Educator Resources:
International Literacy Association | *Content Area and Disciplinary Literacy: Strategies and Frameworks* [Literacy Leadership Brief] (2017)

Education Week | *Teaching Content and Supporting Reading Through 'Disciplinary Literacy'* [video] (Shanahan, 2024)

CEEDAR Center | Course Enhancement (elearning) Module | Disciplinary Literacy (2023)

Grades 4–12 | EBP | The Importance of Developing Cross-Disciplinary Reading Strategies

Recommendation Develop cross-disciplinary reading strategies in which generic reading strategies are used to comprehend a variety of types of texts across content areas.

Source: Carnegie Corporation | *Reading in the Disciplines: The Challenges of Adolescent Literacy* (Lee & Spratley, 2010)

To support students in becoming proficient, flexible readers who can navigate complex texts educators across disciplines need to emphasize the need for cross-disciplinary reading strategies. As students advance through school, they encounter increasingly specialized texts that require discipline-specific literacy practices (Lee & Spratley, 2010). Many students do not realize that reading is a complex mental process that requires the use of a multitude of strategies to make sense of complex texts, especially as they shift from one discipline to another. Many educators will also make the incorrect assumption that students entering their classrooms come with these foundational skills.

Without explicit instruction in how to read and interpret these texts, students—particularly those from historically marginalized backgrounds—may struggle to access and engage with content across academic domains.

Without explicit instruction in these cross-disciplinary reading strategies, students may misapply general reading approaches, such as summarization or predicting, in ways that do not align with the demands of the text type.

Content-area texts vary significantly in structure, language, and cognitive demands. Lee and Spratley (2010) emphasize that successful comprehension requires students to move beyond general reading strategies and instead develop disciplinary literacy skills that reflect how experts in different fields engage with texts. For example:

- Science texts require students to interpret graphs, data tables, and procedural descriptions while integrating conceptual explanations.
- History and social studies texts often present multiple perspectives and primary source documents, requiring critical analysis of bias and context.
- Mathematics texts demand attention to symbolic notation, problem-solving explanations, and multi-step reasoning.
- Literary texts involve close reading of narrative structures, figurative language, and authorial intent.



Educator Resources:

IRIS Center | Secondary Reading Instruction (Part 1): Teaching Vocabulary and Comprehension in the Content Areas [e-learning module] (Vanderbilt University, 2025)

IRIS Center | Secondary Reading Instruction (Part 2): Deepening Middle School Content-Area Learning with Vocabulary and Comprehension Strategies [e-learning module] (Vanderbilt University, 2025)

AdLit | Teach the Seven Strategies of Highly Effective Readers (McEwan, 2007)

SERP Institute | Reading to Learn in Science 1) Comprehension of Science Texts; 2) Reading and Science Education; 3) The Challenges of Science Texts, & 4) Strategies for the Classroom (2025).

Writing

The Writing Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects 6–12 expect students to write arguments and informative texts tailored to specific disciplines. In **Grades 6–8**, students write arguments supported by logical reasoning and evidence and produce clear and coherent explanations of technical processes or historical events. They are introduced to short research projects and are expected to gather information from credible sources while avoiding plagiarism.

In **Grades 9–10**, students refine their arguments and explanations, using discipline-specific language and integrating visual elements such as charts and figures. They are expected to conduct both short and sustained research projects, synthesizing information from multiple sources. By the end of grade 10, their writing should reflect strong command of structure, style, and argumentation appropriate to their audience.

For **Grades 11–12**, the emphasis is on producing highly sophisticated arguments and informative texts that demonstrate deep understanding of complex topics. Students must be able to integrate evidence from various sources, including primary and secondary texts, and use advanced research techniques to evaluate the credibility of information. Writing becomes more nuanced, with a focus on addressing audience biases and demonstrating comprehensive knowledge of the topic. By the end of grade 12, students are expected to produce well-reasoned, thoroughly researched, and clearly articulated writing across various disciplines.

Grades 4–12 | Explicitly Teach Writing Strategies DESCRIPTION

Recommendation 4–12 | Explicitly teach appropriate writing strategies using a Model-Practice-Reflect instructional cycle & Explicit (strong)

Source: IES Practice Guide, What Works Clearinghouse | *Teaching Secondary Students to Write Effectively* (Graham et al., 2016)

Source: A Report to Carnegie Corporation of New York | *Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High Schools* (Graham & Perin, 2007)

Grades 4–12 | Writing for Content Area Learning

Recommendation 4–12 | Writing for content area learning

Source: A Report to Carnegie Corporation of New York | *Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High Schools* (Graham & Perin, 2007)

Source: CEEDAR Center | Evidence-Based Practices for Writing Instruction (Document No. IC-5) (Troia, 2014)

Graham and Perin (2007), in *Writing Next*, note that writing is an effective tool for improving students' understanding of discipline specific material. The effect size is 0.23. The results were strong for grades 4–12. Troia (2014) also includes it in his report, *Evidence-Based Practices for Writing Instruction*, "Writing in response to texts" as an evidence based practice that falls under the category, "Learning Through Writing" (p. 30). Writing in response to content learning has also been called "writing to learn."

Writing to Learn

Writing to learn is an instructional approach that emphasizes the use of writing as a tool to help students deepen their understanding of content and improve their learning process. In this approach, writing is not just seen as a way to demonstrate knowledge, but as a means of engaging with and internalizing new information. By writing about what they are learning, students are encouraged to clarify their thoughts, organize information, and reflect on their understanding of concepts. This method

promotes active learning and critical thinking, as it requires students to synthesize information and articulate it in their own words.

Writing to learn can take many forms, such as journaling, summarizing readings, answering questions, or reflecting on concepts learned in class. The goal is to make the writing process an integral part of learning, allowing students to process and retain information more effectively. It is particularly useful across disciplines, as students can write about science experiments, historical events, or literary analysis, helping them engage with the material on a deeper level. By regularly using writing as a tool for learning, students strengthen both their writing and cognitive skills, ultimately improving their ability to think critically and communicate effectively.

Writing in Response to Text

Troia (2014) includes "writing in response to texts" as an additional evidence-based practice and a specific type of writing to learn instructional practice. Troia includes a few key examples of activities that are effective that support students to write about texts:

Exit Slips with an Open-Ended Prompt: Exit slips are quick reflection activities where students write a brief response about a text to a prompt at the end of a lesson. The open-ended nature of the prompt encourages students to reflect on their learning, ask questions, or express thoughts about the material. Teachers should expect students to use textual evidence in their responses. This tool helps teachers assess student understanding, identify areas of confusion, and guide future instruction.

Content-Area Journal: A content-area journal is a reflective writing tool used across subjects (such as science, history, or literature) where students record and reflect on key concepts, ideas, and their understanding of the content. It can include summaries, questions, personal reflections, and connections to other topics. This journal helps students deepen their understanding of the subject matter while enhancing writing and critical thinking skills.

Double-Entry Journal: In a double-entry journal, students divide a page into two columns. On one side, they record quotes, facts, or important points from the text or lesson. On the other side, they write their reactions, questions, or analysis related to the information. This tool promotes active reading, encourages students to think critically about the material, and fosters deeper engagement with the content.



Educator Resources:
AdLit | Reading and Writing Strategies: Double-Entry Journals (2025)

AdLit | Reading and Writing Strategies: Exit Slips (2025)

Grades 4–12 | Word Processing

Recommendation 4–12 | Word Processing

Source: A Report to Carnegie Corporation of New York | *Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High Schools* (Graham & Perin, 2007)

Source: CEEDAR Center | Evidence-Based Practices for Writing Instruction (Document No. IC-5) (Troia, 2014)

In our technologically infused world, it is ever so important that students know how to effectively use technological tools to communicate. Even more importantly, technology can diminish barriers for striving writers. Using word-processing equipment can be highly beneficial for low-achieving writers. This type of instruction involves students working collaboratively on writing assignments using personal laptops or learning to type compositions with teacher guidance. Word-processing software allows

students to easily add, delete, or move text, producing neat and legible work. Recent software versions also include spell checkers, further supporting writing quality. Studies indicate that word processing consistently improves writing quality compared to handwriting. For general students, the effect size is moderate (0.51), but it is stronger for low-achieving writers (0.70). Overall, word processing is an effective tool for enhancing writing quality, particularly for students in grades 4 to 12.



Educator Resources:
AdLit | Assistive Technology for Students with Disabilities: Q&A with Dr. Todd Cunningham (2025)

Grades 4–12 | Summary Writing

Recommendation 4–12 | Summary Writing

Source: A Report to Carnegie Corporation of New York | *Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High Schools* (Graham & Perin, 2007)

Source: CEEDAR Center | Evidence-Based Practices for Writing Instruction (Document No. IC-5) (Troia, 2014)

Graham and Perin (2007), in *Writing Next*, note that summary writing has a strong effect size of 0.82. Troia (2014) also includes "Summarization Instruction" in his report, Evidence-Based Practices for Writing Instruction, as an evidence based practice that falls under the category, "Learning Through Writing" (p. 27).

Teaching summary writing is an essential skill for helping students synthesize information, identify key points, and communicate ideas concisely. The goal of summary writing is to capture the main ideas or essential elements of a text while omitting unnecessary details or personal opinions. This process requires students to engage deeply with the material, discerning what is most important and how best to convey that information clearly and accurately.

The importance of teaching summary writing lies in its ability to enhance comprehension, critical thinking, and writing skills. As students summarize texts, they must identify and understand the core concepts, which improves their ability to retain and apply knowledge. Summarizing also encourages students to process information actively, making it easier to grasp complex ideas and organize their thoughts. Moreover, summary writing is a valuable skill across disciplines, as students often need to summarize research articles, historical events, or literary works. By mastering summary writing, students learn to distill vast amounts of information into concise, coherent content, a skill that is useful not only for academic success but also for real-world communication in professional settings.



Family and Caregiver Resources:
IRRC | Supporting Your Children's and Teens' Home Learning: Writing and Objective Summary (Zimmermann, 2020)

Grades 4–12 | Inquiry Activities

Recommendation 4–12 | Inquiry Activities

Source: A Report to Carnegie Corporation of New York | *Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High Schools* (Graham & Perin, 2007)

Source: CEEDAR Center | Evidence-Based Practices for Writing Instruction (Document No. IC-5) (Troia, 2014)

Inquiry-based writing instruction engages students in activities that help them develop ideas and content for writing by analyzing immediate, concrete data through observation, experimentation, textual analysis, and presentations. This approach improves writing quality by sharpening students' inquiry skills and encouraging active exploration of evidence. Effective inquiry instruction includes authentic, student-centered questions, collaborative learning, real-world application, integration of the scientific process, and purposeful teacher facilitation. Key characteristics of successful inquiry activities in writing include setting a clear goal, analyzing concrete data, using specific strategies for investigation, and applying insights to writing tasks.

Grades 4–12 | Collaborative Writing

Recommendation 4–12 | Collaborative Writing

Source: A Report to Carnegie Corporation of New York | *Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High Schools* (Graham & Perin, 2007)

Source: CEEDAR Center | Evidence-Based Practices for Writing Instruction (Document No. IC-5) (Troia, 2014)

Collaborative writing is an instructional practice where students work together to plan, draft, revise, and edit a written text. This approach enhances writing quality, engagement, and deeper learning. Collaborative writing supports students in developing critical thinking skills, improving writing mechanics and structure, and fostering communication and teamwork skills (Graham & Perin, 2007). Storch (2013) examined peer interactions during collaborative writing and found that students improved grammatical accuracy and syntactic complexity through peer discussions for English Learners.

Key Components of Collaborative Writing

1. Peer Interaction and Discussion – Students engage in meaningful discussions about content, organization, and language use, leading to more developed ideas and refined writing.
2. Co-Construction of Text – Rather than working in isolation, students collaboratively draft sections of a text, integrating multiple perspectives and improving overall coherence.
3. Explicit Roles and Responsibilities – Effective collaborative writing involves structured roles such as brainstorming leader, drafter, reviser, and editor to ensure balanced participation.
4. Scaffolded Support – Teachers provide explicit instruction, modeling, and feedback to guide students through the collaborative writing process.
5. Technology Integration – Digital tools such as Google Docs, wikis, and discussion boards facilitate real-time collaboration, peer review, and iterative revision.

Benefits of Collaborative Writing for Secondary Students

- Improved Writing Quality: Students produce higher-quality writing when engaging in collaboration, particularly in terms of content development, organization, and grammatical accuracy.
- Increased Engagement and Motivation: Working with peers fosters a sense of responsibility and investment in the writing process, leading to greater motivation.
- Enhanced Critical Thinking: Collaborative writing requires students to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize ideas, strengthening their analytical abilities.
- Stronger Revision Practices: Students engaged in collaborative writing receive immediate peer feedback, leading to more effective revision and editing.
- Support for All Learners: Collaborative writing provides opportunities for scaffolding, peer modeling, and oral rehearsal of ideas before writing.

Implementation Strategies

- Structured Peer Review: Students provide specific feedback on peers' writing using rubrics and guided questioning.
- Collaborative Writing Assignments: Groups create shared writing products, such as narratives, persuasive essays, or research reports.
- Use of Digital Collaboration Tools: Platforms like Google Docs, Padlet, and collaborative annotation tools enable students to co-write, revise, and provide feedback in real time.
- Teacher-Guided Instruction: Educators model effective collaboration, set clear expectations, and provide scaffolds such as sentence starters and graphic organizers.

Overall, collaborative writing is an evidence-based instructional approach that enhances writing proficiency, engagement, and higher-order thinking for secondary students. By structuring writing tasks to encourage peer interaction, co-construction of text, and real-time feedback, educators can leverage the benefits of collaboration to improve student writing outcomes.

Importance of Integrating Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Listening in Literacy, ELA, and Across Content Area Instruction

The integration of reading, writing, speaking, and listening is essential for effective literacy instruction in English Language Arts (ELA) and across content areas. These interconnected skills form the foundation of communication and critical thinking, enabling students to engage deeply with content, express their ideas effectively, and build comprehension across disciplines. Instruction integrating these modalities enhances student learning, fosters engagement, and improves overall literacy outcomes (Applebee & Langer, 2013; Graham et al., 2018; Shanahan, 2016a, 2016b; Snow, 2010).

1. **Enhancing Comprehension and Critical Thinking**

   When students engage in reading, writing, speaking, and listening together, they develop a deeper understanding of content. Reading exposes students to new ideas and language structures, writing allows them to synthesize and articulate their thoughts, speaking promotes discussion and idea refinement, and listening enables them to engage with different perspectives. This integration fosters analytical thinking as students evaluate, question, and interpret information (Applebee & Langer, 2013; Graham et al., 2018). Integrating literacy practices across disciplines leads to improved content knowledge and critical thinking skills, particularly in STEM fields (Goldman et al., 2016).

2. **Strengthening Communication Skills**

   Effective communication requires proficiency in all four literacy domains. Writing improves clarity and precision in expression, while speaking builds confidence in verbal articulation. Listening and reading support the ability to interpret and respond thoughtfully. Across content areas, students must be able to discuss mathematical reasoning, analyze historical documents, explain scientific processes, and construct evidence-based arguments, making literacy integration crucial for academic success (Graham & Hebert, 2011; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). When students are taught to read and write in conjunction with oral discussions, they develop stronger argumentation skills, an essential component of academic discourse (Murphy et al., 2009).

3. **Increasing Engagement and Collaboration**

   Integrating reading, writing, speaking, and listening in instruction allows students to interact with content in multiple ways, catering to different learning styles and needs. Classroom discussions, collaborative writing, peer review, and debates encourage active participation, deeper engagement, and a sense of ownership over learning. These interactive elements support social-emotional development by fostering respectful dialogue and critical questioning (Snow, 2010). Research on dialogic teaching suggests that when students engage in structured discussions, they develop deeper comprehension and are more likely to transfer knowledge to new contexts (Alexander, 2020).

4. **Supporting Language Development and Writing Proficiency**

   For all students, including English learners and struggling writers, literacy integration provides opportunities to develop vocabulary, syntax, and language fluency. Speaking and listening activities, such as discussion-based learning and oral storytelling, build linguistic confidence, which translates into improved writing skills. Reading widely exposes students to different text structures and genres, supporting their ability to write across disciplines (Applebee & Langer, 2013). Graham et al. (2012) found that writing about texts significantly improves reading comprehension, reinforcing the idea that literacy skills develop best when integrated.

5. **Preparing Students for Real-World Applications**

   Beyond the classroom, reading, writing, speaking, and listening are essential life and workplace skills. Whether composing professional emails, presenting ideas in meetings, analyzing reports, or engaging in collaborative problem-solving, individuals rely on all four literacy skills to communicate effectively. Strong literacy integration prepares students for post-secondary education and career readiness, with employers emphasizing the importance of written and verbal communication in nearly every field (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2022).

Integrating reading, writing, speaking, and listening across ELA and content areas enhances comprehension, critical thinking, engagement, and communication skills. By designing instruction that interweaves these modalities, educators create a more holistic and meaningful learning experience that supports students' literacy development across disciplines and prepares them for future success.

Resources to support the integration of Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Listening



Educator Resources:

WordGen Series of Free Materials through the SERP Institute

WordGen Weekly | Grades 6–8 | Academic Language Strategies for Today's Youth [Integrated Resources] ((SERP Institute, 2025)

Word Generation Weekly is a supplemental curriculum designed to enhance students' academic language and argumentation skills through discussable social and civic dilemmas. Each of the 72 one-week units includes 15- to 20-minute activities across ELA, science, social studies, and math, incorporating five target academic vocabulary words. Middle schools typically implement the program across grades six through eight simultaneously, fostering whole-school engagement. Schools reinforce vocabulary through principal announcements, assemblies, and teacher-parent communication, encouraging discussions at home.

WordGen Elementary | Grades 4–5 | Elementary Content-Area Literacy Development (SERP Institute, 2025)

WordGen Elementary for Grades 4 and 5 is a series of twelve two-week units designed to build students' academic vocabulary and background knowledge through daily 40–50 minute lessons. The program promotes 21st-century learning skills such as argumentation, evidence-based reasoning, and perspective taking. Each unit introduces five to six high-utility academic words and incorporates content-area literacy activities like video newscasts, Reader's Theater, word study, informational texts, writing, and situational math. Lessons begin with multimedia elements that frame high-interest topics for reading, discussion, debate, and writing using the target vocabulary.

Science Generation | Grades 6–8 | Middle School Science Units that Support Disciplinary Literacy (SERP Institute, 2025)

Science Generation (SciGen) is a curriculum designed for 6th–8th grade science instruction, either as a replacement or supplement to standard materials. It integrates reading, writing, discussion, and argumentation to explore key scientific questions while incorporating 5–10 academic vocabulary words per week. Each unit includes daily 40–50 minute science lessons, with cross-disciplinary activities to reinforce learning. By connecting scientific concepts to students' lives, SciGen enhances background knowledge and equips students with skills for scientific argumentation.

Social Studies Generation | Grades 6–8 | Disciplinary Literacy Strategies in Action with adaptations for English learners (SERP Institute, 2025)

Social Studies Generation (SoGen) is a curriculum designed for 6th–8th grade social studies instruction, organized into three six-week sequences. It can be used as a primary resource or supplement, incorporating reading, writing, discussion, and argumentation on key historical and social concepts. Each week-long unit includes daily 40-50 minute lessons, highlighting 5–10 academic vocabulary words, with supplementary cross-disciplinary activities. Students analyze multiple texts from differing perspectives, building knowledge and argumentation skills by identifying claims, reasons, and evidence. By connecting historical conflicts to students' lives, SoGen enhances their ability to engage in critical discussions and informed debates.

Considerations for Students with Significant Disabilities

Importance of Presumed Competence for Students with Significant Disabilities in Literacy Instruction

When making instructional decisions for students with significant disabilities and complex communication needs, it is essential to adopt an approach grounded in presumed competence. This approach is based on the understanding that all students, regardless of the nature or severity of their disabilities, have the potential to learn, grow, and contribute meaningfully to their communities. Presuming competence means we assume intellectual ability and desire to learn in each student, even when there may be limited or unclear evidence of their capabilities.

As Erickson and Koppenhaver (2020) highlights, students with significant cognitive disabilities vary widely in their abilities; some may be able to read and write with fluency and comprehension, while others may struggle with fundamental academic concepts. Still, others may not yet have developed intentional communication skills and rely heavily on caregivers for support in navigating the world around them. Despite these differences, all students can benefit from literacy instruction when provided with the right supports and opportunities at the right time (Erickson & Koppenhaver, 2020).

Presumed competence shapes every aspect of a student's educational experience, from decisions about instructional methods and communication systems to social inclusion and future planning. The criterion of the "least dangerous assumption" guides this perspective: in the absence of definitive data, we should assume competence, because this assumption leads to the least harmful consequences (Jorgensen, 2005). This means giving all students, including those with significant disabilities, meaningful opportunities for reading and writing instruction, and assuming they want to learn and express themselves in the world (Biklen, 2012).

The philosophy of presumed competence compels us to use creativity, persistence, and innovation in designing learning environments that honor each student's capacity to participate fully in their own education. As Biklen (2012) states, "We begin by presuming competence."

Erickson and Koppenhaver (2020) reinforce this belief in the universal potential for literacy, noting that intelligence is not the primary factor in determining whether a child can read and write. All students, regardless of ability, can learn to use literacy to improve their lives and the lives of those around them.

> "We don't think the intelligence issue matters when it comes to literacy. All children can learn to read and write, can become people who matter to the people around them and can use reading and writing in ways that improve their lives."
>
> —Karen Erickson and David Koppenhaver (2015)

10 Elements to Support Students with Significant Disabilities to Read and Write

Every student, regardless of ability, has the right to access high-quality literacy instruction. This includes students with significant disabilities, who may require specialized support to read and write. These students benefit from a framework that presumes competence, promotes meaningful engagement, and provides the necessary accommodations and interventions. Comprehensive literacy instruction for students with significant disabilities is not only possible but essential for their full participation in school, community, and life.

The following outlines 10 key factors advanced by Erickson and Koppenhaver (2020) in *Comprehensive Literacy for All: Teaching Students with Significant Learning Disabilities to Read and Write*, which is a cornerstone text for the professional learning support aligned with Iowa's Specially

Designed Instruction (SDI) Framework for Students with Disabilities (Department, 2018). These factors contribute to successful literacy learning for students with significant disabilities. By leveraging knowledgeable professionals, ensuring effective communication, and creating engaging and flexible learning environments, educators can help all students reach their literacy potential. The elements presented here emphasize the importance of collaboration, high expectations, and individualized approaches to ensure that every student, regardless of disability, is given the opportunity to thrive as a reader and writer.

By fostering a culture of inclusion and competence, we can unlock the potential of every learner and build a literacy-rich future for all.

Here is a brief summary of each of the key elements:

1. **Knowledgeable Others**
   Students with significant disabilities need support from a team of knowledgeable individuals, including teachers, families, speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, and assistive technology specialists. These professionals collaborate to provide the necessary interventions, accommodations, and belief in the student's abilities, allowing them to thrive in literacy instruction. The success of literacy education depends on the collective efforts and problem-solving capabilities of these teams.

2. **Means of Communication and Interaction**
   Effective communication is central to literacy. Students must have reliable systems to express ideas, ask questions, and interact with others. Assistive technology, AAC (augmentative and alternative communication), or other systems allow them to participate fully in classroom activities such as peer discussions, summarizing ideas, and expressing reading preferences. Communication systems should be tailored to individual needs to foster active participation in literacy learning.

3. **Repetition with Variety**
   Repetition is essential for skill acquisition but must be varied to keep students engaged and prevent disengagement. By using different contexts, teaching strategies, and activities to revisit literacy concepts, educators can help students build their independence and adapt their learning to various situations. This could involve revising texts, shared reading, word wall lessons, or sentence-building activities that encourage flexible thinking.

4. **Cognitive Engagement**
   Literacy learning requires active mental engagement, which involves thinking, reasoning, and applying judgment. Students are more likely to stay engaged when they are given choices, are encouraged to share their work, and can connect with the material. Educators can enhance cognitive engagement by allowing students to make predictions, share their writing, and explore writing topics that interest them.

5. **Cognitive Clarity**
   Students need to understand why they are learning something and why it is important. Setting clear purposes for reading or writing tasks helps students connect the material to their existing knowledge and experiences. Cognitive clarity ensures students comprehend the relevance of their tasks, making them more engaged and motivated to learn.

6. **Personal Connection to the Curriculum**
   Helping students connect literacy to their lives and interests increases motivation. This could involve allowing students to choose writing topics, selecting guided reading texts relevant to

their experiences, or offering self-directed reading options that reflect their interests. Building personal connections helps students see the value of literacy and fosters deeper engagement.

7. **Encouragement of Risk-Taking**
   Learning often involves risk-taking, and students with disabilities need a supportive environment where they feel safe to make mistakes. Educators can create a safe space by accepting nontraditional communication, encouraging a variety of reading choices, and praising effort and strategy use over outcomes. When students feel supported, they are more willing to take risks, which accelerates their learning.

8. **Comprehensive Instruction**
   Comprehensive literacy instruction addresses all aspects of reading and writing, from phonemic awareness to fluency and comprehension. Teachers must plan instruction that covers the full range of literacy skills, meeting the needs of all students. Despite time constraints, prioritizing various learning opportunities in reading and writing helps ensure that students receive a well-rounded education.

9. **Significant Time Allocation**
   Literacy instruction for students with disabilities often lacks sufficient time. To address this, educators should allocate significant time for comprehensive literacy instruction that integrates a variety of literacy activities, ensuring students receive enough exposure and practice to grow in their reading and writing skills.

10. **High Expectations**
    Presuming competence and maintaining high expectations are key to fostering student success. Assuming that all students can develop literacy skills encourages the use of a wide range of teaching strategies, such as shared reading, predictable chart writing, and independent reading, to help students reach their full potential.

Iowa Comprehensive Literacy Framework

The literacy framework presented is designed to support universal instruction for all students within Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), a comprehensive, evidence-based approach to education that promotes high-quality instruction and intervention. Ensuring high quality, evidence-based universal instruction for all students is the key to improving literacy achievement for all students and is the anchor of any MTSS (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017). At the core, the framework emphasizes high expectations for all students while ensuring access to learning opportunities (Andrews & Gutwein, 2017; De Boer et al., 2018; Timmermans & Ribie-Davies, 2018; TNTP, 2018) This is achieved through the collaborative efforts of educators, families, and communities, creating a system that fosters student success.

A foundational element of this framework is the use of high-quality instructional materials, which align with rigorous academic standards and are carefully sequenced to promote deep learning (Steiner, 2017). These materials are supplemented by evidence-based instructional practices, enabling teachers to address the needs of all learners through strategies proven effective by research (NICHD, 2000). Professional learning plays a critical role, fostering reflective teaching practices and continuous professional growth (Borko, 2004; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone & Garet, 2015; Guskey, 2002).

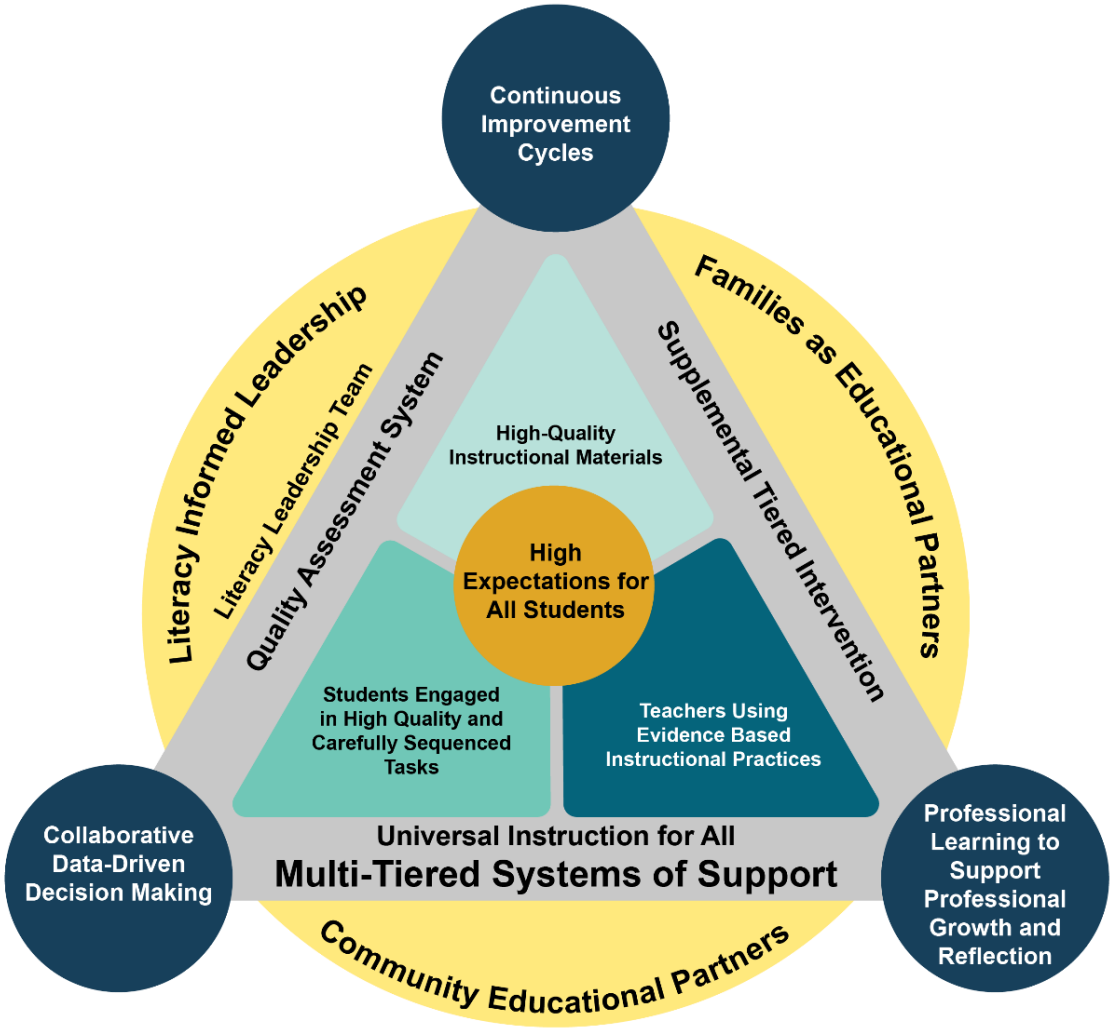
The framework also prioritizes collaborative, data-driven decision-making, emphasizing the use of continuous improvement cycles (Bryk et al., 2015; LeMahieu, et al 2017; Park et al., 2013). This approach ensures that instructional strategies remain responsive to students' progress, as data systems inform both intervention and enrichment opportunities (Buffum, Mattos, & Mallone, 2018; Buffum, Mattos, & Webber, 2018). To further support all learners, the framework incorporates supplemental tiered interventions, which provide additional layers of support for students who require it.

As part of this work, it is also important to involve families as educational partners in implementing these interventions, fostering alignment between home and school (Epstein, 2011).

Integral to the framework is a quality assessment system that monitors student progress and informs instruction at all levels. Effective assessment practices engage students in meaningful tasks that are aligned with instructional goals, enhancing their motivation and outcomes (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Heritage, 2010; Wiliam, 2018). Furthermore, the framework underscores the need for literacy-informed leadership, with leaders forming literacy teams to integrate literacy across subject areas and sustain a culture focused on literacy improvement. Leadership practices rooted in literacy positively influence teacher efficacy and student achievement (Bean & Dagen, 2020).

Finally, family and community partnerships are central to this framework, empowering families to participate actively in their children's learning and leveraging community resources to enhance educational outcomes. Family engagement plays a significant role in improving student achievement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

By interweaving professional learning, community collaboration, and data-informed practices, this framework ensures effective learning environments for all students. Centering literacy as a foundational skill, the framework equips students for academic and personal success.



Core Beliefs About Instruction

1. All students need to be held to high expectations through engagement with standards-aligned, grade-level material (high quality instructional materials), and HQIM can improve student achievement (Chiefs for Change, 2017; International Literacy Association (ILA), 2019).
2. Quality instruction helps improve student achievement; therefore, improving teachers' pedagogy and knowledge is important for improving student achievement.
3. Students need to be engaged in a comprehensive literacy program that includes high quality, carefully sequenced tasks.
4. Job-embedded professional learning and literacy coaching are essential for improving student achievement by empowering educators with the skills, knowledge, and ongoing support needed to implement effective, evidence-based literacy practices. Professional learning should focus on integrating evidence based practices with curricular content (HQIM) (Chiefs for Change, 2017).
5. Multi-tiered systems of support are essential for ensuring that all students receive the appropriate attention and data informed instruction they need when they need it.
6. Literacy-informed leaders (principals and superintendents) can have a significant impact on student performance (Bean & Dagen, 2020; ILA, 2019).
7. Literacy leadership teams are essential to fostering an environment of continuous improvement and supporting literacy achievement within schools.
8. Family and community partnerships are crucial for improving student literacy achievement by providing a supportive and collaborative environment that extends beyond the classroom.
9. Students' backgrounds, experiences, and strengths are valuable assets that enrich the learning environment.

Iowa Comprehensive State Literacy Plan Recommendations

The Iowa Comprehensive State Literacy Plan provides a structured framework designed to ensure that all students receive high-quality literacy instruction and the necessary supports to become proficient readers. The framework is built on multiple interconnected components, each playing a crucial role in fostering literacy development. At the heart of this plan is a commitment to literacy-informed leadership, Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), high-quality instruction, and family and community engagement, all reinforced by professional learning and teacher preparation to sustain excellence in literacy education.

A strong foundation for literacy begins with literacy-informed leadership, ensuring that administrators, school leaders, and educators have the knowledge and skills to guide and implement effective literacy practices. Leadership is key to creating a culture of literacy, where data-driven decision-making and evidence-based instruction are prioritized. With knowledgeable leaders in place, schools can effectively implement quality and coherent Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) that provide all students with the appropriate level of instruction and intervention. This systematic approach ensures that literacy instruction is tiered, data-driven, and responsive to students' needs.

To effectively support students at all levels, quality assessment systems are essential for monitoring progress, identifying needs, and informing instruction. These assessment tools provide educators with actionable data that guides decisions about intervention and instructional strategies. Effective universal instruction serves as the core of the framework, ensuring that all students receive evidence-based literacy instruction grounded in the science of reading. By providing a strong universal foundation, schools can reduce the number of students who require intervention and support those who need additional help with more targeted instruction.

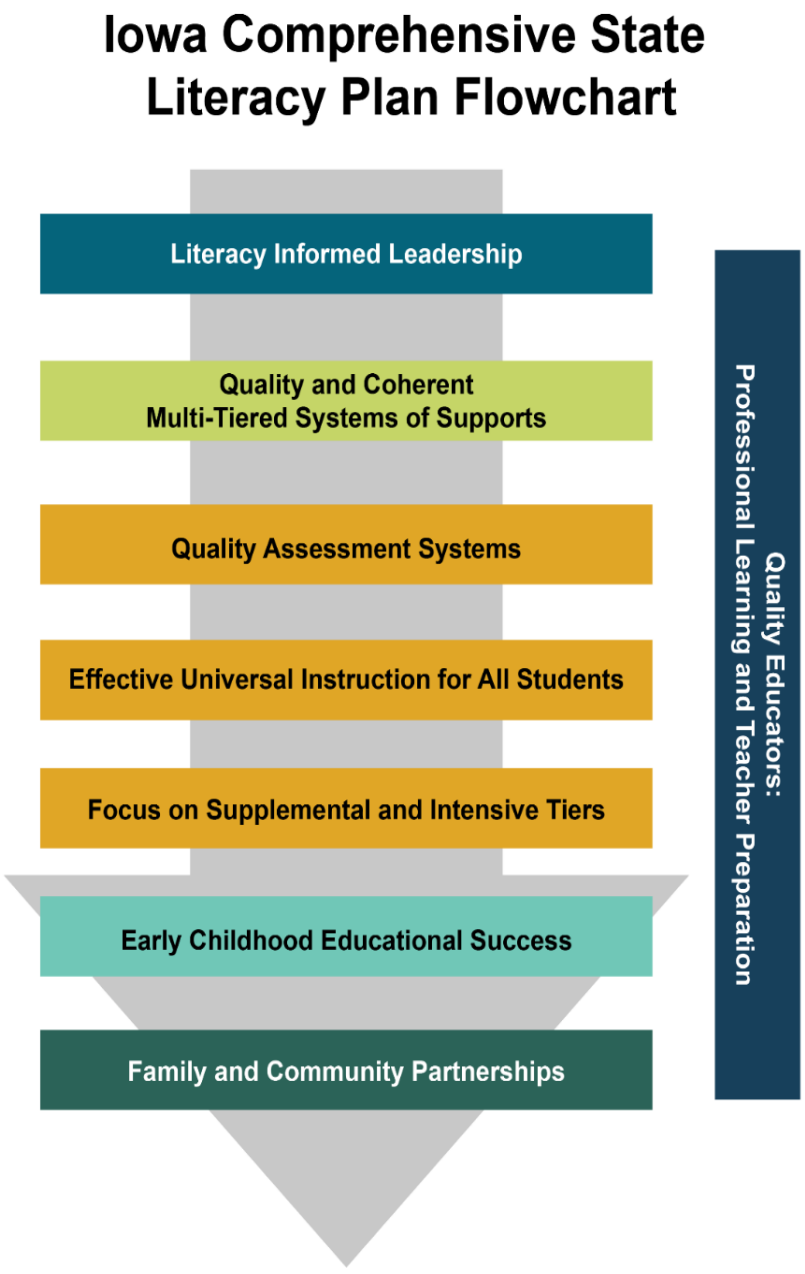
For students who require extra literacy support, the framework emphasizes the importance of supplemental and intensive tiers of intervention. These targeted supports ensure that students struggling with reading receive instruction aligned with research-based strategies in smaller group settings or individualized instruction. The use of structured literacy approaches and systematic interventions helps bridge gaps and accelerate student progress.

Recognizing that literacy development begins at an early age, the framework prioritizes early childhood educational success as a key component. Providing high-quality early learning experiences ensures that young learners develop the foundational skills necessary for later literacy success. Additionally, family and community partnerships are critical in reinforcing literacy development beyond the classroom. Engaging families, caregivers, and community organizations in literacy efforts creates a shared responsibility for student success and supports reading development in home and community settings.

Throughout this framework, a critical supporting element is the ongoing professional learning and teacher preparation that equips educators with the skills, knowledge, and research-based strategies needed to deliver effective literacy instruction. High-quality professional learning opportunities ensure that teachers remain informed, prepared, and adaptable to meet the literacy needs of all students.

By integrating literacy leadership, high-quality instruction, assessment, intervention, early childhood education, and community engagement, the Iowa Comprehensive State Literacy Plan establishes a comprehensive and sustainable approach to literacy success. Through intentional collaboration and evidence-based practices, the plan ensures that all students have the opportunity to develop the literacy skills necessary to thrive in school and beyond.

Note: The professional learning component is threaded throughout each of the first four components and is indicated as follows within the recommendation callouts: **Professional Learning |**



Literacy-Informed Leadership

Effective leadership is foundational to the success of literacy initiatives. Literacy-informed leaders at all levels, from superintendents to principals, are equipped with knowledge and strategies to support high-quality literacy instruction. By guiding schools to adopt evidence-based practices and by fostering a culture of literacy, these leaders are essential in ensuring that literacy goals align with the highest standards. Their leadership also promotes accountability, collaboration, and continuous improvement across districts and schools.

The beginning step of Iowa's Comprehensive State Literacy Plan is to support the development of Literacy Informed Leadership across districts and schools in Iowa. High literacy achievement is directly linked to the strength of district and school leadership. Superintendents, principals, and other instructional leaders play a crucial role in shaping literacy instruction by setting a clear vision grounded in evidence-based literacy research and best practices. Their leadership influences assessment practices, instructional strategies, Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), and professional learning opportunities, all of which contribute to a cohesive, research-driven literacy approach.

Among these leaders, principals hold a particularly significant position. Principals are second only to teachers in their impact on student achievement, highlighting their critical role in shaping literacy instruction, fostering professional learning, and ensuring that literacy initiatives are sustained over time (Fullan & Pinchot, 2018; Grissom et al., 2021; Leithwood et al., 2008). When school and district leaders possess deep knowledge of literacy research, they are better equipped to prioritize effective instructional practices, align literacy initiatives with student needs, and create the conditions necessary for meaningful literacy gains.

A key strategy for ensuring system-wide literacy improvement is the formation of Literacy Leadership Teams (LLTs), which serve as a structured approach to collaborative literacy leadership (Ippolito & Bean, 2019; Terry et al., 2023). These teams, composed of principals, literacy coaches, reading specialists, district leaders, and teachers, drive literacy improvement efforts by ensuring that instructional practices remain aligned with research and responsive to student needs. LLTs promote shared responsibility for literacy achievement, fostering a culture where educators collectively engage in professional learning, data analysis, and instructional refinement (Morgan & Clonts, 2008; Stosich et al., 2019). This approach reflects a distributed leadership model, in which leadership is shared across multiple roles rather than resting solely with administrators, which is a key component of the Internal Coherence Framework, which highlights that schools with strong collaborative leadership structures are more likely to implement sustainable literacy reforms (Education Northwest, 2021; Forman et al., 2017; Stosich et al., 2019).

To ensure targeted and effective literacy leadership, schools and districts must engage in Comprehensive Literacy Needs Assessments. These assessments provide critical insights into student literacy outcomes, instructional strengths and weaknesses, professional learning needs, and intervention effectiveness. By systematically reviewing literacy instruction, intervention models, instructional materials, and MTSS implementation, leaders can make strategic, data-driven decisions that support improved reading achievement and access to literacy resources.

Following a thorough needs assessment, schools should develop Literacy Leadership Plans to outline clear, measurable goals for literacy improvement. These plans provide a structured roadmap for enhancing literacy instruction, professional learning, assessment practices, and intervention supports over time. By aligning literacy initiatives with state standards, research-based practices, and the science of reading, Literacy Leadership Plans ensure that educators have the tools and guidance needed to implement effective instruction and interventions.

Ultimately, literacy-informed leadership and the development of LLTs foster a culture in which literacy is a shared priority. When leadership is collaborative, strategic, and data-driven, educators are empowered to implement high-quality literacy instruction, students receive the necessary supports to

achieve reading proficiency, and schools sustain literacy improvements over time (ILA, 2019; Ippolito & Bean, 2019; Terry et al., 2023).

Recommendations

1. Bolster the literacy knowledge of superintendents and school administrators through professional learning experiences.
    - Attend Iowa LETRS® Administrator training.
    - Review the Iowa Standards Professional Learning Opportunities recordings and content to support implementation of the revised 2024 Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects.
    - Utilize state resources such as:
        i. Iowa Literacy Educator Preparation Workbook
        ii. Iowa Dyslexia Handbook
    - Utilize national resources such as:
        i. International Dyslexia Association's Knowledge and Practice Standards (2018)
        ii. International Literacy Association Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals (2017) (2018) (purchase required).
    - Join a cohort of the National Institute for School Leadership (NISL) training (offered to CLSD grantees).
2. Develop district and/or school-level Literacy Leadership Team (LLT).
    - **Professional Learning |** Identify key literacy learning resources to explore and study as a team.
    - **Professional Learning |** Develop a set of resources and learning activities to support teacher learning.
3. Complete a Comprehensive Literacy Needs Assessment of the current system (aligned with the district SAMI results), including instruction in literacy courses, interventions, and content areas, including support for ELs, instructional materials, and MTSS plans (CLSD grant work).
4. Develop a five- to eight-year Local Literacy Plan.

Recommendations Overview

To effectively implement a comprehensive, research-based literacy framework, school and district leaders must engage in high-quality professional learning and systematic planning. The following state recommendations outline essential learning experiences, professional learning opportunities, and strategic planning efforts that will support schools in strengthening literacy instruction and ensuring alignment with Iowa's literacy standards, MTSS framework, and evidence-based practices.

These recommendations emphasize administrator training, engagement with state and national literacy standards, collaboration through professional learning communities, and data-driven decision-making. By participating in structured training programs such as Iowa LETRS® Administrator training and National Institute for School Leadership (NISL) cohorts, education leaders can build deep expertise in literacy instruction, assessment, and intervention strategies. Additionally, the development of Local Literacy Leadership Teams (LLTs) and comprehensive literacy planning efforts will help schools create long-term, sustainable literacy improvement strategies.

By implementing these recommendations, schools and districts will be equipped with the knowledge, tools, and collaborative structures needed to ensure that all students receive high-quality literacy instruction and have the opportunity to become proficient readers. The following sections provide an

overview of each recommendation, detailing their purpose, implementation strategies, and expected impact.

1. Bolstering Literacy Knowledge of Superintendents and Administrators

The Iowa CSLP recommends few key professional learning opportunities for administrators to help them bolster their literacy knowledge and also develop their abilities to advance change within and across a system.

Iowa LETRS® Administrator Training

The first is to attend an Iowa LETRS® Administrator training. The LETRS® (Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling) training for administrators is designed to empower educational leaders with the knowledge and skills necessary to support effective literacy instruction and drive systemic improvements in reading outcomes. Focused on the science of reading, the training provides administrators with a comprehensive understanding of foundational literacy components, including phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. By connecting research to classroom practices, LETRS® equips leaders with the “why” behind effective reading instruction, enabling them to guide teachers in implementing evidence-based strategies with fidelity.

Through LETRS® training, administrators learn to create a school-wide or district-wide vision for literacy, fostering a culture centered on evidence-based practices and collaborative accountability for student outcomes. They gain insights into observing, coaching, and providing constructive feedback to ensure that effective literacy practices are consistently integrated into classrooms. In addition, administrators are trained in data-driven decision-making, learning how to analyze literacy data to monitor student progress, guide instructional adjustments, and address systemic barriers to literacy success.

The training also aligns with Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), equipping administrators to ensure strong Tier 1 instruction and effective Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions. LETRS® emphasizes the role of professional learning, helping administrators design and sustain meaningful training for teachers while advocating for and allocating resources to support literacy initiatives. Moreover, the training focuses on creating systems that sustain improvements over time, embedding literacy practices into long-term goals to ensure lasting impacts on student achievement.

Ultimately, LETRS® training for administrators aims to develop literacy leaders who can champion the science of reading, close achievement gaps, and ensure that all students become proficient readers. By equipping administrators with the tools to foster a literacy-focused culture, LETRS® supports the creation of environments where every student has the opportunity to thrive.

Iowa Standards Professional Learning Opportunities

The second recommendation is to review the Iowa Standards Professional Learning Opportunities (updated 2025) recordings and content to support implementation of the revised 2024 Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects. The sessions help educators understand and implement the updated standards, covering key topics such as foundational literacy skills, the Shifts in ELA/literacy instruction, depth of knowledge, and provide a K-12 vertical progression for English Language Arts. For administrators, these sessions are valuable for guiding instructional leadership, aligning curricula, identifying professional learning needs, and ensuring consistent implementation of the standards across schools, ultimately supporting high-quality literacy instruction throughout the district.

School principals need to be aware of the standards for English Language Arts (ELA) and literacy because these standards provide a clear framework for the skills and knowledge students must develop in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language use. Understanding these standards enables principals to set clear instructional expectations, ensuring alignment between classroom practices and state or national guidelines for literacy instruction. This awareness allows principals to

support teachers in implementing evidence-based practices and selecting high-quality instructional materials that meet these standards. Additionally, principals can identify areas where teachers need professional learning, providing targeted training to enhance their effectiveness. Familiarity with the standards also helps principals interpret assessment data and monitor student progress, ensuring that interventions are appropriately targeted to address literacy challenges. Principals can create a school environment where all students, regardless of background, have access to rigorous and meaningful learning opportunities. In this way, principals act as literacy leaders, driving academic success and preparing students for real-world challenges.

Principals play a critical role in leading and fostering effective literacy instruction in schools (ILA, 2017, 2019). The ILA outlines several key areas where principals must focus their efforts to ensure literacy success for all students. These areas include supporting staff development, collaborating with literacy professionals, promoting school-wide literacy initiatives, and ensuring that all students have access to a robust literacy curriculum. Below is a summary of the main standards and competencies that guide principals as literacy leaders.

National Standards

Additional resources include International Dyslexia Association's Knowledge and Practice Standards (2018) and the *Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals 2017* (International Literacy Association, 2017). *Please note that this book must be purchased from ILA*.

These standards outline practices related to the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required for educators specializing in literacy instruction. These standards ensure that literacy professionals are well-prepared to support students in developing strong reading and writing skills through evidence-based practices.

Key Components of the Standards:

1. Literacy professionals must have a deep understanding of reading and writing development, including the science of reading, language acquisition, and the role of literacy in learning across disciplines.
2. Effective literacy educators design and implement comprehensive, research-based literacy instruction that meets the needs of all learners. They select and use high-quality instructional materials (HQIM) aligned with standards.
3. Literacy professionals use a variety of assessments to diagnose student strengths and challenges, inform instruction, and monitor progress. They apply data-driven decision-making to support differentiated instruction.
4. A strong emphasis is placed on ensuring literacy instruction meets the needs of all students, including multilingual learners and those with disabilities, including those with dyslexia.
5. Literacy educators create engaging and supportive literacy-rich environments teaching phonological and phonemic awareness, phonics and word recognition, fluent reading of text, vocabulary, listening and reading comprehension, and written expression.
6. Ongoing professional learning is essential for literacy educators to stay informed on best practices, collaborate with colleagues, and engage in leadership roles within their schools and districts.

These standards guide literacy educators at all levels—including classroom teachers, reading specialists, literacy coaches, and administrators—to ensure that they are well-equipped to improve student literacy achievement.

National Institute for School Leadership (NISL) training

The National Institute for School Leadership (NISL) is a leadership development program designed to enhance the skills of school leaders, such as principals and superintendents, to improve educational outcomes. Based on the What Works Clearinghouse, one study by Nunnery et al. (2011)

using a quasi-experimental design with 1,227 schools in Grades 3–8 in Massachusetts demonstrated moderate evidence (Tier 2) of the NISL program on student achievement in both ELA and mathematics (Nunnery et al, 2011). The program aims to boost student achievement by strengthening the leadership capabilities of educational leaders by focusing on strategic thinking, instructional leadership, and data-driven decision-making skills. The NISL program includes a series of modules covering topics like educational leadership, effective teaching practices, and change management, delivered through a blend of face-to-face workshops, online learning, and coaching sessions. The curriculum, which is research-based and aligns with national standards for school leadership, addresses areas such as school culture, instructional leadership, talent management, and community engagement. School leaders who have completed the program report increased confidence and competency in their roles. The NISL program was selected as one of the evidence-based practices to support the CLSD grant leadership development component, CLSD subgrant participating principals may select to join a NISL cohort as part of their professional learning journey.



Leader Resources:

International Literacy Association | Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals (2017)

International Literacy Association | Meeting the Challenges of Early Literacy Phonics Instruction (2019)

International Literacy Association | Principals as Literacy Leaders (2019)

The Reading League Website

The Reading League website is a valuable resource for literacy leaders and principals seeking to implement evidence-based reading instruction. It offers clear, research-aligned guidance grounded in the science of reading, along with professional learning opportunities, implementation tools, and practical frameworks to support school-wide literacy improvement. By bridging research and practice, the site helps leaders build instructional coherence, support teacher development, and advance equitable literacy outcomes for all students.

The Reading League | PaTTAN Literacy Symposium | Leadership: A Key for Literacy Equity [Video–75 minutes] (Murray & Finn, 2022)

The Reading League | Defining Guide Video Series: A Call to Action for School Leaders (Dunn, 2022)

2. Literacy Leadership Teams

Literacy Leadership Teams (LLT) further support literacy improvement by fostering collaboration and ensuring research-based practices in classrooms. These teams guide the school-wide literacy mission, promote shared responsibility, and model effective practices through collaborative learning (Morgan & Clonts, 2008; Stosich et al., 2019). This distributed leadership framework encourages commitment from all staff, aligning with the Internal Coherence Framework for sustainable literacy initiatives (Forman, et al., 2017; Stosich et al., 2019). Ultimately, literacy-informed leadership and LLTs cultivate a culture where literacy is a collective commitment, improving student outcomes (Ippolito & Bean, 2019).

LLTs play a critical role in improving literacy achievement in schools by fostering collaboration and distributing leadership. LLTs help build a school-wide commitment to literacy improvement and extend the reach of literacy coaches (Morgan & Clonts, 2008). A well-structured LLT creates opportunities for dialogue among faculty members, fostering a culture of critique and collaboration that transforms literacy practices (Morgan & Clonts, 2008). They work to develop a shared vision for literacy instruction, establish common goals, coordinate the MTSS process, stay grounded in current research, analyze and monitor data, and organize professional learning for staff. This collaborative approach ensures that literacy becomes a collective responsibility rather than an individual teacher's task.

LLTs typically include administrators, teachers, and literacy coaches, they may even include parents and students. These teams ensure that literacy improvement efforts are not limited to the efforts of a single coach or administrator but are instead a shared, school-wide initiative. This shared approach encourages commitment from all stakeholders and fosters a school culture that prioritizes literacy. The concept of instructional leadership teams aligns with the "internal coherence framework" proposed by Stosich et al. (2019), which emphasizes that successful instructional leadership requires direct involvement with teachers in literacy, curriculum development, and assessment. This approach promotes collaboration and collective professional growth.

By establishing LLTs and promoting collaboration, school leaders ensure that literacy is not just an instructional priority but a school-wide commitment. This approach not only improves student literacy outcomes, but also enhances the overall culture of learning within the school.



Leader Resources:
AdLit | School Literacy Team Planning Guide | National Association of Secondary School Principals

> "The literacy leadership team must be the voice of reason and support and take a positive perspective on change. Difficult issues must be discussed at the table, not in the parking lot. Discussions must not only honor each teacher's level of professional knowledge but also motivate all teachers to study, practice, and refine their craft of teaching literacy. (Cobb, 2005)

3. Comprehensive Literacy Needs Assessment

Literacy leaders and literacy leadership teams play a critical role in completing comprehensive literacy needs assessments (CLNA) as a foundational step before developing a literacy plan. This process allows leaders to gather and analyze data to understand the strengths, challenges, and missed learning opportunities in current literacy practices and outcomes. A well-conducted CLNA ensures that the resulting literacy plan is tailored to the unique needs of the school or district, grounded in evidence, and aligned with broader educational improvement goals. In Iowa, the CLNA process will align with the Iowa Self-Assessment of MTSS Implementation (SAMI) framework, ensuring coherence and consistency

with the state's approach to supporting academic and behavioral success through Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS).

A comprehensive literacy needs assessment includes several key components. First, it involves collecting and analyzing quantitative data, such as literacy achievement scores, progress monitoring results, and assessment data across all student groups. This helps identify trends, disparities, and areas requiring intervention. Second, it incorporates qualitative data through surveys, interviews, and focus groups with stakeholders, including teachers, students, families, and community members. This feedback provides insights into perceptions of current practices and areas for improvement. Third, the assessment evaluates instructional practices, curriculum alignment, professional learning opportunities, and resource allocation to determine their alignment with evidence-based literacy practices. Fourth, it examines systemic supports, such as leadership commitment, collaboration structures, and MTSS implementation, to assess the capacity for sustaining literacy improvement.

By engaging in the CLNA process, literacy leaders and teams create a data-informed foundation for their literacy plan. This ensures that the plan addresses identified needs and supports high-quality instruction for all students. Aligning the CLNA with the Iowa SAMI framework strengthens the integration of literacy initiatives into a broader MTSS structure, creating a cohesive and strategic approach to improving literacy outcomes across the state.

4. Local Literacy Plan

Local Literacy Plans (LLPs) are essential for aligning a school's unique context with the overarching goals of Iowa's Comprehensive Literacy Plan. These localized plans act as actionable roadmaps, enabling schools to implement evidence-based literacy practices that address specific student needs and foster continuous improvement. A critical starting point for developing an effective LLP is conducting a comprehensive literacy needs assessment. This assessment provides a data-driven foundation, helping schools analyze student performance, identify literacy strengths and areas for growth, evaluate teacher capacity, and address barriers such as access issues. By grounding the planning process in a thorough understanding of the current state of literacy, schools can ensure that their plans are tailored, strategic, and impactful.

LLPs are explicitly designed to align with Iowa's Comprehensive State Literacy Plan, incorporating key elements that ensure consistency and focus. These plans include a strategy to advance literacy leadership by developing and sustaining literacy leadership teams. Such teams, composed of school leaders, instructional staff, and other stakeholders, play a vital role in monitoring, refining, and implementing the plan. Additionally, the plans integrate a MTSS framework, which includes a quality assessment system to guide data-driven decision-making, ensure effective universal instruction for all students, and focus on supplemental and intensive tiers of support. These tiers rely on evidence-based practices to address the needs of learners, ensuring all students receive the instruction and interventions necessary for success.

A strong emphasis is placed on early childhood educational success, recognizing its foundational importance in achieving long-term literacy outcomes. High-quality instructional materials and resources are central to these efforts, and professional learning opportunities are embedded in the plans to build educator capacity and ensure the effective implementation of best practices.

Family and community partnerships remain a critical component of LLPs. Schools are encouraged to develop strategies to partner with families and community organizations on literacy initiatives, foster a culture of shared responsibility, and extend literacy support beyond the classroom.

Additionally, these LLPs should promote partnerships with post-secondary institutions to strengthen the pipeline students to attain college and career readiness and earn college credits in high school. These partnerships can help high schools create a stronger vision of college- and career-ready expectations and reduce the likelihood that students need to take remedial ELA courses as they enter postsecondary

higher education institutions. Collaborations with colleges and universities can support schools in aligning literacy efforts with broader workforce and educational goals.

Each site-based literacy plan also includes a robust progress monitoring and evaluation process, using clearly defined metrics to assess effectiveness and drive continuous improvement. These plans are actively monitored and evaluated by literacy leadership teams to ensure fidelity of implementation and alignment with both school-level and statewide goals.

Once developed, site-based literacy plans serve as dynamic tools for guiding instruction, fostering collaboration, and driving sustained improvement. They provide a shared framework that fosters communication and accountability among educators, families, and community stakeholders. By evidence-based practices and the unique needs of all students, site-based literacy plans ensure that Iowa's Comprehensive State Literacy Plan is operationalized effectively, delivering high-quality literacy instruction and support to every student. Through the integration of family, community, and post-secondary partnerships, these plans create a cohesive and forward-thinking approach to achieving literacy excellence across the state.

State Resources

1. Guide for developing Local Literacy Teams, sets of resources for teams to study, and study guides (To Be Developed—TBD—CLSD grant work).
2. Comprehensive Literacy Needs Assessment Template that coincides with the SAMI (TBD, CLSD grant work).
3. **Professional Learning |** Provide a list of Literacy Professional Learning support providers who have been trained to complete literacy audits (TBD, CLSD grant work).
4. Asynchronous webinars that teach districts, community schools, and early childhood education programs how to create local literacy plans (TBD, CLSD grant work).
5. Local literacy plan templates (TBD, CLSD grant work).
6. Iowa's Literacy and Evidence-Based Clearinghouse on the Department website (TBD, CLSD grant work).
7. Monthly publication of Literacy News You Can Use.

Quality and Coherent Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)

Quality and coherent Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) are essential for ensuring that all students receive the literacy instruction and interventions necessary to meet grade-level expectations. At both the district and school levels, a well-structured MTSS framework provides a coordinated and data-driven approach to literacy instruction, helping educators deliver evidence-based teaching practices that support student success. MTSS is not just a system of interventions; it is a proactive and responsive framework that ensures every student has access to high-quality literacy instruction and timely, targeted support.

The Iowa MTSS framework (Department, n.d.) is made up of five components.



Source: Iowa MTSS Framework from ESSA Support Site (Department, n.d.)

Leadership

There is initial and ongoing administrator and staff consensus to develop and implement practices within MTSS.

A leadership team is established to support consensus, infrastructure, implementation, and sustainability of practices within MTSS.

Assessment and Data-Based Decision Making

- Initial and ongoing administrator and staff consensus is in place to develop and implement practices within MTSS.

Universal Tier

- The Universal Tier is evaluated to determine if it is sufficient.
- When the Universal Tier is not sufficient, specific needs are identified and addressed.
- A plan is in place to address identified Universal Tier needs.
- Implementation of Universal Tier actions is monitored over time.
- Universal Tier actions are evaluated for effectiveness.

Supplemental and Intensive Tiers

- Students who need support beyond the Universal Tier are identified.
- The necessary Targeted and/or Intensive Tier Supports are determined to meet the needs of identified students.
- Targeted and/or Intensive supports are implemented based on student needs.
- Implementation of Targeted and Intensive Tier supports is monitored over time.
- Targeted and Intensive Tier supports are evaluated for effectiveness.

Infrastructure

- An effective structure is in place to provide ongoing professional learning and coaching to support all staff members.
- An effective evaluation system is in place to assess the implementation of practices within MTSS and their impact on student achievement.
- A sustainable infrastructure supports the long-term implementation of MTSS practices.

For MTSS to be effective and sustainable, it must be coherent, systematic, and embedded within the daily instructional practices of schools. District leaders play a critical role in establishing policies, allocating resources, and supporting professional learning to create a strong foundation for MTSS implementation. At the school level, administrators, literacy leadership teams, and teachers must work collaboratively to analyze student data, refine instruction, and ensure that interventions are delivered with fidelity. A high-functioning MTSS framework promotes a culture of continuous improvement, where instructional decisions are informed by data, research, and student needs rather than reactive or isolated efforts.

Within the Iowa State Comprehensive Literacy Plan, the Department has highlighted three essential components of a high-quality and coherent MTSS framework to advance literacy achievement and support for all students.

1. **A Quality Assessment System**
   A comprehensive, balanced assessment system is the foundation of effective MTSS implementation. A well-defined assessment system includes universal screening, diagnostic assessments, progress monitoring, and formative assessments, ensuring that educators have real-time, actionable data to guide instruction and intervention decisions.
2. **Effective Universal Instruction for All Students**
   High-quality Tier I instruction provides standards-aligned, evidence-based literacy instruction to all students, including advanced instruction for students achieving beyond grade level. Effective universal instruction ensures that most students can achieve proficiency through strong core instruction, reducing the number of students needing additional intervention. Instruction must be explicit, systematic, and differentiated, incorporating high-quality instructional materials (HQIM) to support all learners.
3. **Focused Support for Supplemental and Intensive Tiers of Instruction**
   When students require additional support beyond universal instruction, structured Tier II (supplemental) and Tier III (intensive) interventions must be in place. These interventions should be data-driven, evidence-based, and implemented with fidelity, ensuring that students receive the right level of support at the right time. Progress monitoring must be ongoing to evaluate intervention effectiveness and adjust instruction as needed.

By integrating these three components, Iowa's MTSS framework ensures that all students—regardless of background or ability—receive the instruction and support they need to become proficient readers and writers. A strong statewide commitment to MTSS empowers districts and schools to implement systematic and effective literacy instruction, ultimately improving student outcomes and ensuring that every child in Iowa has the opportunity to succeed.

Quality Assessment System

A comprehensive and coherent assessment system is essential to ensuring all students in the state receive high-quality, evidence-based literacy instruction and the necessary interventions to support their success. Within Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), assessment and data-based decision-making serve as critical components for identifying student needs, guiding instruction, and monitoring progress (Gersten et al., 2009). A well-defined and consistently implemented assessment system supports access to literacy learning and ensures that all students—regardless of background, ability, or prior achievement—receive timely, targeted, and effective support.

A strong assessment system foundation is the backbone of effective literacy instruction. To support educators in using data effectively, all staff must have a clear understanding of the purpose and implementation of literacy assessments. A well-defined system ensures that assessments provide reliable, valid, and actionable data to inform instruction and intervention at all levels—universal, targeted, and intensive. This requires professional learning opportunities to help educators interpret assessment results and apply data-driven strategies to improve student literacy outcomes.

The state's literacy plan emphasizes the need for a comprehensive balanced assessment system that is integrated into instructional decision-making. This system includes universal screening to identify students who may require additional literacy support, ensuring early identification and intervention. When screening data indicates a need for further evaluation, diagnostic assessments provide deeper insights into students' specific literacy strengths and challenges, allowing for targeted instruction. Progress monitoring ensures that student response to intervention is systematically tracked, enabling educators to adjust instruction based on real-time data. Additionally, summative assessments evaluate overall student achievement and the effectiveness of literacy initiatives at the school, district, and state levels. A comprehensive approach to literacy assessment ensures that multiple data points are used to make informed decisions, preventing an over-reliance on any single measure.

To maximize the impact of assessment data, the state literacy plan prioritizes data-based decision-making as a core component of effective literacy leadership and instructional practice. Schools and districts must establish collaborative data review processes where educators analyze student performance trends, determine instructional adjustments, and allocate resources effectively. A key focus of the state's literacy efforts is ensuring that tiered literacy support is responsive and flexible, with data informing decisions about the intensity and duration of interventions. Additionally, access considerations must guide data analysis to ensure that all students, including those from historically underserved populations, receive high-quality literacy instruction that meets their needs.

By embedding assessment and data-based decision-making within a statewide MTSS framework, this literacy plan ensures that educators at all levels use data to drive continuous improvement. A coherent and well-supported assessment system empowers schools and districts to make informed instructional decisions, leading to stronger literacy outcomes for all students.

Recommendations

1. Administer an approved universal screener (Department, 2024a) three times a year.
2. Identify and implement diagnostic assessments to support the more targeted, supplemental, and intensive tiers of instruction.
3. Implement an assessment or system of assessments for monitoring student growth and progress on supplemental and intensive tiers of instruction.
4. Use formative assessments to make day-to-day instructional decisions.
5. Develop quarterly curriculum-based and/or standards-aligned assessments to measure students' grade-level performance.

6. Ensure that learning communities are in place to engage in data-based discussions and decision-making.

Recommendations Overview

Iowa's assessment and data-use recommendations provide Local Education Agencies (LEAs) with a structured framework for implementing a comprehensive and responsive literacy assessment system within a MTSS framework. These recommendations ensure that schools use data to identify student needs, inform instruction, and monitor progress to improve literacy outcomes statewide. A well-balanced assessment system is a key factor in effective literacy instruction as it enables educators to make informed decisions that support student learning (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Gersten et al., 2009; Shanahan, 2016a, 2016b).

1. Administer an Approved Universal Screener Three Times a Year

Universal screening is the first step in ensuring early identification of students at risk for reading difficulties. Schools must administer a state-approved universal screener three times per year (fall, winter, and spring) to assess all students' foundational literacy skills. These assessments provide a broad snapshot of student performance, helping educators detect potential reading challenges and intervene before missed learning opportunities become significant hurdles for students to overcome. Early screening becomes an important evidence-based practice to identify readers not yet proficient and prevent long-term literacy difficulties (Catts et al., 2015). By systematically screening students at multiple points throughout the year, schools can track progress and make timely instructional adjustments that align with students' developmental literacy needs (Gersten et al., 2009).

2. Identify and Implement Diagnostic Assessments to Support Targeted, Supplemental, and Intensive Instruction

Once universal screening identifies students in need of additional support, diagnostic assessments play a crucial role in pinpointing specific literacy skill deficits. These assessments provide in-depth insights into areas such as phonemic awareness, decoding, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary, allowing educators to design targeted interventions within Tier II (supplemental) and Tier III (intensive) instruction. Diagnostic assessments are most effective when directly linked to instruction (Paris & Paris, 2001), helping teachers differentiate instruction based on student needs. Without diagnostic assessments, interventions may be too broad and ineffective, failing to address the root causes of reading difficulties. By using assessments that identify students' precise areas of struggle, educators can tailor instruction for maximum impact (Gersten et al., 2009).

3. Implement an Assessment System for Monitoring Student Growth and Progress in Supplemental and Intensive Tiers

For students receiving supplemental and intensive interventions, ongoing progress monitoring is essential to ensure that instruction is effective and responsive. Schools should implement a structured system of assessments that allows for biweekly or monthly tracking of student progress in Tier II and Tier III interventions. Progress monitoring tools, such as curriculum-based measures (CBMs), provide frequent data points to assess student response to intervention (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). This approach allows educators to determine whether interventions should be maintained, modified, or intensified. Progress monitoring data can be used systematically to guide instructional decision-making, ensuring that students do not remain in ineffective interventions for extended periods (Gersten et al., 2009).

English Learners | EBP | Assessment | Screen for Reading Proficiency and Monitor Progress

Recommendation K–5 (Assessment): Conduct formative assessments with English learners using English language measures of phonological processing, letter knowledge, and word and text reading. Use these data to identify English learners who require additional instructional support and to monitor their reading progress over time. (Strong)

Source: What Works Clearinghouse | *Effective Literacy and English Language Instruction for English Learners in the Elementary Grades: A Practice Guide* (Gersten et al., 2007)

Gersten et al. (2007) highlight the importance of using specific assessments to identify the specific support needed for individual English learners to become proficient in English. These assessments focus on phonological processing, letter and alphabetic knowledge, and reading abilities.

Key Recommendations:

1. Phonological Awareness: Early measures like phoneme segmentation, blending, and rhyming help identify potential reading challenges in kindergarten and first grade.
2. Alphabetic Knowledge: Assessing how well students recognize letters and understand the alphabetic principle is crucial for early identification.
3. Word Reading: Evaluating the ability to read single words and connected text helps monitor reading progress and fluency.
4. High-Frequency Words: Teaching and assessing regular words (words that follow a regular phonics pattern) and irregular high-frequency words (words that do not follow a regular phonics pattern) can support reading fluency, especially for English learners.

For students in grades 2 to 5, oral reading fluency is a valid indicator of progress and helps determine whether students are catching up with their monolingual peers. Regular progress monitoring can help guide instructional adjustments. The guide suggests using formative assessment data to modify instruction and provide intensive support when necessary, with recommendations for ongoing teacher training to effectively use this data.

Early identification through systematic assessments and consistent progress monitoring can ensure that schools know what specific reading support English learners need. Schools should not delay assessments based on oral proficiency but rather provide targeted interventions early to foster reading success.

4. Use Formative Assessments to Make Day-to-Day Teaching Decisions

Formative assessments are a powerful tool for real-time instructional adjustments and should be embedded into daily instruction. These assessments include quick checks for understanding, exit tickets, informal observations, and student self-assessments, providing immediate feedback to both teachers and students. Unlike summative assessments, which measure learning at the end of a unit or school year, formative assessments are ongoing and dynamic, helping educators tailor instruction based on students' needs. Effective formative assessment practices improve student achievement by allowing teachers to make timely interventions and foster student engagement in their learning (Heritage, 2010). When used consistently, formative assessments support differentiated instruction and scaffolding, ensuring that all students receive the necessary support to develop strong literacy skills.

Characteristics of High-Quality Classroom-Based Formative Assessments

Classroom-based formative assessments are essential instructional tools that provide real-time insights into student understanding, allowing educators to adjust instruction accordingly. Unlike summative assessments, which evaluate learning at the end of an instructional period, formative assessments

occur frequently, are embedded within daily instruction, and are designed to improve student learning through ongoing feedback and instructional adjustments. High-quality formative assessments support student motivation, engagement, and self-regulation while ensuring targeted and responsive teaching.

1. **Frequent, Short-Cycle Assessments**
   Effective formative assessments are short-cycle and frequent, occurring throughout instruction rather than at the end of a unit. This continuous feedback loop allows teachers to respond quickly to student misconceptions, provide scaffolding, and make immediate instructional adjustments. Frequent assessments help reduce cognitive overload for students, breaking down complex tasks into manageable learning steps. Additionally, frequent assessments promote motivation by helping students track their incremental progress, reinforcing the idea that effort leads to growth and success.

2. **Flexible and Varied Assessment Methods**
   Classroom-based formative assessments can take multiple forms, depending on instructional goals and student needs. They are defined by their purpose rather than format and should allow students to demonstrate their understanding in different ways. Common methods include:
   - Performance Tasks: Engaging students in real-world applications of literacy through writing assignments, projects, and problem-solving exercises.
   - Classroom Discussions and Peer Interactions: Encouraging student-led discussions fosters deeper comprehension and provides opportunities for students to articulate their reasoning.
   - Higher-Order Questioning: Teachers can use complex, text-based questions to assess student understanding and encourage critical thinking. Instruction that emphasizes the use of quality, open-ended, text-based questions significantly improves reading comprehension.
   - Classroom Quizzes and Tests: When used formatively, short assessments followed by feedback and reteaching can be valuable tools for identifying missed learning and refining instruction.

   Using a variety of assessment methods ensures comprehensive insight into student learning.

3. **Clear, Well-Defined Learning Targets**
   For formative assessments to be effective, they must be aligned with clearly defined learning goals. In a standards-based environment, assessment targets should be closely tied to state literacy standards to ensure that instruction is focused on essential skills. However, for students who are significantly below grade level, assessment targets should be adjusted to match their instructional needs while still aiming for long-term grade-level proficiency.

   Teachers must be deeply familiar with learning progressions—the step-by-step development of skills students must master to reach a literacy standard—to provide effective formative assessments. Without a clear understanding of these progressions, assessments may fail to provide meaningful data on student learning trajectories.

   Detailed Feedback and Actionable Instructional Adjustments
   The effectiveness of formative assessments depends on the quality of feedback students receive. Feedback should be:
   - Specific and Descriptive rather than evaluative, focusing on strengths and areas for improvement.
   - Timely, allowing students to make immediate revisions and apply feedback to new learning tasks.
   - Task-Oriented, rather than focused on ability, helping students understand how to improve instead of simply marking errors.

High-quality feedback is actionable, meaning it should directly inform next instructional steps. This requires teachers to have a deep understanding of learning progressions, so they can recognize how a student's current performance aligns with literacy development and adjust instruction accordingly.

4. **Student Involvement in Self- and Peer-Assessment**
   Engaging students in self- and peer-assessment is a critical component of high-quality formative assessment. Students who set their own learning goals and evaluate their progress become more independent, self-regulated learners.

   Strategies for student involvement include:
   - Developing Scoring Rubrics Together: Allowing students to participate in creating rubrics for writing or project-based tasks increases transparency and motivation.
   - Peer Feedback and Review: Encouraging students to review and provide feedback on each other's work fosters collaboration and deepens understanding of assessment criteria.
   - Self-Reflection and Goal Setting: Students should be encouraged to reflect on their own progress and set goals for improvement. Self-assessment promotes higher levels of engagement and achievement.

   By incorporating student ownership into the assessment process, educators build student confidence and encourage deeper learning engagement.

5. **Alignment with Literacy Development and Learning Progressions**
   Effective formative assessments align with the cognitive and developmental stages of literacy acquisition. Key influences on adolescent literacy development, including:
   - Fluency and Accuracy in Reading Texts.
   - Background Knowledge and Vocabulary Comprehension.
   - Higher-Order Comprehension Strategies, including inferencing and text analysis.

   Because literacy standards become increasingly complex beyond the early grades, formative assessments must reflect progressions of skills, ensuring that students build toward grade-level literacy standards. However, students receiving intensive intervention may need formative assessments that are aligned with their current skill level, with the goal of gradually closing literacy gaps.

High-quality classroom-based formative assessments are frequent, flexible, and embedded within instruction, providing ongoing feedback that informs teaching and enhances student learning. These assessments must be aligned with clear learning targets, offer meaningful feedback, and actively involve students in the assessment process. Formative assessment, when implemented effectively, increases student engagement, self-regulation, and literacy achievement. By using a variety of assessment methods and ensuring alignment with developmental literacy progressions, educators can create a responsive learning environment that supports all students in reaching their literacy potential.



Leader Resources:
NWEA | Four Formative Assessment Practices that Make a Difference in Classrooms (n.d.)

Carnegie Corporation | Informing Writing: The Benefits of Formative Assessment (Graham et al., 2011)

5. Develop Quarterly Curriculum-Based and/or Standards-Aligned Assessments to Measure Grade-Level Performance

In addition to formative assessments, curriculum-based and/or standards-aligned assessments provide a broader view of student progress relative to grade-level literacy expectations. These assessments, administered at regular intervals throughout the school year help schools evaluate instructional effectiveness, measure student learning against state standards, and identify areas where students may need additional support. Standards-aligned assessments ensure that instruction remains focused on grade-level expectations, helping identify missed learning opportunities before students fall significantly behind. By incorporating quarterly benchmarks, schools create multiple checkpoints that allow for data-driven instructional planning at the classroom, school, and district levels.



Family and Caregiver Resources:
Reading Rockets | What is Curriculum-Based Measurement and What Does It Mean to My Child (McLane, n.d.)

Reading Rockets | Fact Sheet: Benefits of Curriculum-Based Measurement (McClane, n.d.)

6. Ensure That Learning Communities Engage in Data-Based Discussions and Decision-Making

Effective data-driven instruction requires collaboration among educators, making Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) or data teams essential for analyzing assessment results and making informed decisions. Schools with strong collaborative data practices show greater gains in student achievement because educators engage in continuous reflection and improvement. These teams regularly review student data, discuss instructional strategies, and adjust teaching practices based on findings. By fostering a culture of shared responsibility for literacy success, schools ensure that assessment data is actively used to drive instruction rather than being collected without meaningful application.

State Resources

1. FastBridge, an assessment suite from Renaissance Learning, to support the implementation of Early Literacy Iowa and MTSS.
2. Guide for additional Literacy Assessments Meeting the Requirements of 279.68/ELI. (Department, 2024a).
3. Central location for district and school data: Iowa School Performance Profiles (ISPP). (Department, 2024b).
4. Iowa's Panorama Student Success to be used for an MTSS data platform.
5. Every Student Succeeds Act: Iowa School Performance Profile Data Review Guide (via Department, ESSA Support website, Data Review section, n.d.). This data review guide supports schools in the annual review and analysis of ISPP data. It provides basic steps and guiding questions to support teams in review and initial interpretation.
6. ESSA Data Review for Designated Schools online learning module (Department, n.d.) that can be used to support the data review process.

Additional Resources

Leader Resources:

Department MTSS Website (Department, n.d.)

Literacy Assessments Meeting the Requirements of 279.68/ELI for universal screening and progress monitoring 2024-2025 school year (Department, 2024a)

Gold and myIDGIs (Department, 2020)

Division of Early Childhood | Position Statement on Multi-tiered System of Support Framework in Early Childhood (Council of Exceptional Children, 2021)

Center on Instruction | Assessment to Guide Adolescent Literacy Instruction (Torgesen & Miller, 2009)

Iowa Department of Education | Best Practices in Assessment Literacy (2024)

CLAS Network | Assessment For Learning vs. Assessment Of Learning (2015)

Cambridge | Getting Started with Assessment For Learning (2025)

Carnegie Corporation | *Measure for Measure: A Critical Consumer's Guide to Reading Comprehension Assessments for Adolescents* | [AdLit: Summary] (Morsy, et al., 2010)

Effective practices for English Learners: Brief 2, Assessment and data-based decision-making (Project ELITE, Project ESTRE2LLA, & Project REME, 2015)

Family and Caregiver Resources:

National PTA | Position Statement on Assessments (2021)

Effective Universal Instruction for All Students

In the Iowa CSLP, Universal Tier I instruction is the foundation of a MTSS framework, ensuring that every student receives high-quality, evidence-based literacy instruction. This tier provides rigorous, standards-aligned instruction designed to meet the varied learning needs of all students, from those requiring additional support to those who perform above grade level or are identified as gifted. Universal instruction is not a one-size-fits-all approach but rather a responsive and dynamic system that prioritizes engagement, differentiation, and accessibility, ensuring that every learner has the opportunity to reach their full potential (Foorman et al., 2016; TNTP, 2018).

At the heart of Universal Tier I MTSS is the commitment to delivering rigorous and responsive instruction, tailored to meet the full range of student needs. This core instructional framework is essential for promoting literacy growth and proficiency from early childhood through graduation. When instruction is explicit, systematic, and evidence-based, student outcomes improve across all levels of achievement (Foorman et al., 2016).

For students performing at or above grade level, high-quality universal instruction must include opportunities for enrichment, acceleration, and deeper learning experiences. Without appropriate challenge, these students risk stagnation, disengagement, and underachievement (Timmermans & Rubie-Davies, 2018). Effective Tier I instruction must be dynamic and flexible, ensuring that students who master concepts quickly are continuously challenged through activities such as:

- Deeper Inquiry and Complex Text Analysis: Encouraging students to engage in higher-order thinking, debate, and textual critique.
- Project-Based and Inquiry-Based Learning: Providing real-world literacy applications that extend beyond traditional instruction.
- Flexible Grouping and Advanced Differentiation: Ensuring students work with peers at similar cognitive levels while being exposed to new perspectives and challenges.
- Acceleration Pathways: Allowing advanced learners to move beyond grade-level expectations by exploring more complex texts, writing projects, and cross-disciplinary literacy applications.

For gifted and high-achieving students, Universal Tier I instruction should not be redundant or repetitive but stimulating and engaging, fostering critical thinking and independent learning skills that will prepare them for future academic success (Callahan et al., 2015).

To ensure rigor and coherence across all classrooms, Universal Tier I instruction must incorporate high-quality instructional materials (HQIMs) systematically aligned with Iowa's state standards. HQIMs provide consistency, clarity, and comprehensiveness, ensuring all students receive continuous access to grade-level instruction. Importantly, these materials should be representative of a variety of experiences, and adaptable to meet the unique needs of advanced learners and students who require additional scaffolding (Paris & Alim, 2017).

Additionally, for students performing above grade level, HQIMs should offer opportunities for independent exploration, guiding students toward deeper literary analysis, research-based projects, and interdisciplinary connections that enrich their learning experience.

High Expectations in Tier I Instruction

Quality Tier I instruction is grounded in the belief that all students—regardless of background, ability, or prior achievement—can reach high levels of literacy proficiency. A strong Universal Tier must do the following:

- Maintain High Expectations for Every Student: Literacy success is not determined by past performance but by access to high-quality instruction, expert teaching, and engaging content. Educators must adopt a growth mindset and provide rigorous, meaningful challenges to all students (Timmermans & Rubie-Davies, 2018; TNTP, 2018).
- Ensure That Educators Receive Ongoing Professional Learning: Well-trained educators are the key to implementing effective literacy instruction. Iowa's literacy plan prioritizes continuous professional learning and coaching, equipping teachers with the knowledge and strategies needed to differentiate instruction, integrate literacy across content areas, and foster a culture of reading and writing (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).
- Provide Continuous Access to Literacy Resources: Every student should have access to engaging, thoughtful, and relevant reading materials that reflect their lived experiences and challenge them intellectually (Paris & Alim, 2017).

A strong and coherent Universal Tier I instructional framework ensures that all students, regardless of their literacy level, receive rigorous and meaningful literacy instruction. By providing high-quality, differentiated, and evidence-based instruction, Iowa's literacy plan ensures that students who need additional support are identified early, and that students performing above grade level or who are gifted receive the enrichment and acceleration necessary to sustain their engagement and academic growth. The goal of Universal Tier I instruction is to cultivate an environment of literacy instruction and materials that empower all students to develop the skills, confidence, and critical thinking abilities needed for lifelong success.

Recommendations

1. Bolster universal instruction by integrating high-leverage, evidence-based practices across all levels of instruction and all disciplines in all educational entities from birth to grade 12.
2. Implement evidence-based, universal, Tier I support for ELs and students with reading disabilities across literacy and content area classrooms from grades PK–12.
3. Adopt a set of HQIMs for literacy and ELA aligned with comprehensive literacy instruction and Iowa's Academic Standards for ELA and Literacy. (Department, 2024e).
4. Engage in regular data-based decision-making conversations to analyze the impact of the universal materials and instruction.
5. **Professional Learning |** Ensure that learning communities are in place to provide educators with collaborative structures for engaging in continuous improvement conversations around new materials, curriculum, lesson plans, and student work.
6. **Professional Learning |** Provide curriculum-based coaching for educators.

Recommendations Overview

Universal Tier I instruction serves as the foundation of Iowa's Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), ensuring that all students receive rigorous and evidence-based literacy instruction from birth through grade 12. To create a coherent and effective literacy system, districts and schools must implement high-leverage instructional practices, support various learners, adopt high-quality instructional materials (HQIMs), engage in data-driven decision-making, and invest in professional learning. These recommendations provide a structured approach to continuous improvement, ensuring that every student, regardless of background or ability, receives the high-quality literacy instruction they need to thrive.

1. Bolster Universal Instruction by Integrating High-Leverage, Evidence-Based Practices Across All Levels of Instruction and Across All Disciplines, in All Educational Entities from Birth to Grade 12

A strong Universal Tier relies on the systematic integration of high-leverage instructional practices across all subject areas and grade levels, including explicit instruction, scaffolding, student discourse, and formative assessment as high-impact teaching strategies that improve literacy outcomes. These practices should not be limited to English Language Arts but should be embedded across disciplines, ensuring students develop literacy skills in science, mathematics, social studies, and other content areas.

Implementing these instructional strategies across all educational entities—from early childhood programs to high school classrooms—creates a seamless and developmentally appropriate literacy trajectory. When literacy-rich environments are present in early childhood settings, young learners are more likely to develop strong foundational reading skills. In upper elementary, middle, and high school, embedding literacy instruction across disciplines strengthens students' ability to analyze complex texts, engage in academic discourse, and build critical thinking skills. A unified approach to instruction across birth to grade 12 ensures that literacy growth is continuous, cumulative, and supported throughout a student's educational journey.

This guide is filled with the Iowa Department of Education's vision for Comprehensive literacy and evidence based practices to support universal instruction and corresponding resources.

2. Implement Evidence-Based, Universal, Tier I Support for English Learners (Els) and Students with Disabilities Across Literacy and Content Area Classrooms from Grades PK–12

Schools must implement evidence-based supports for English learners and students with disabilities in both literacy and content area instruction. Without appropriate support, students often face systemic barriers that limit their ability to engage with rigorous, grade-level instruction.

Instructional strategies must include explicit vocabulary instruction, structured academic discussions, and scaffolded reading and writing tasks as outlined throughout the evidence-based section of this plan. Strategically embedding language development within content-area instruction—rather than separating Els into remedial programs—produces better literacy and academic outcomes.

Similarly, students with disabilities require Universal Design for Learning (UDL) strategies, explicit phonics and comprehension instruction, and flexible learning supports to fully engage in literacy-rich instruction. Providing high expectations with appropriate accommodations ensures that students with disabilities develop grade-level literacy skills while receiving the individualized support they need. Schools that embed evidence-based instructional strategies within Tier I instruction promote a culture of high achievement for all learners.

This guide provides the Iowa Department of Education's vision for Comprehensive literacy and evidence based practices for Els and students with disabilities and corresponding resources.

3. Adopt a Set of HQIMs for Literacy and ELA Aligned with Comprehensive Literacy Instruction and Iowa's Academic Standards for ELA and Literacy

The adoption of high-quality instructional materials (HQIMs) ensures that literacy instruction is consistent, standards-aligned, and research-based across all grade levels. HQIMs serve as the foundation for systematic and explicit literacy instruction, providing teachers with structured lessons that integrate best practices in reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

When schools adopt evidence-based HQIMs, students benefit from instruction that is coherent, relevant, and developmentally appropriate. Without a strong, shared curriculum, instructional variability can result in missed learning opportunities and skill development across classrooms and inconsistent access to rigorous instruction. HQIMs alongside effective instruction ensures that every student, regardless of their classroom placement or school, receives high-quality literacy instruction.

Additionally, HQIMs must ensure that students see themselves represented in the curriculum (Paris & Alim, 2017). By selecting curricular materials that reflect a variety of voices, perspectives, and experiences, schools foster a literacy environment that enhances students' engagement in reading and writing.



Leader Resources:
Reading League | Curriculum Evaluation Guidelines: K-5 English Language Arts (2023)

Reading League | Curriculum Evaluation Guidelines: Reviewer Workbook | (2023)
Access the website, click the link, and it will force you to make a copy.

4. Engage in Regular Data-Based Decision-Making Conversations to Analyze the Impact of the Universal Materials and Instruction

To ensure that universal instruction and HQIMs effectively support student learning, schools must integrate data-driven instructional decision-making into their professional practices. Data should not be collected solely for compliance purposes but should drive meaningful instructional adjustments that improve student outcomes (Gersten et al., 2009; Hamilton et al., 2009). When educators regularly

analyze student performance data, they can identify trends, challenges, and missed learning opportunities that impact literacy growth. This process includes reviewing universal screening results, formative assessments, and progress monitoring data to determine whether Tier I instruction effectively meets the needs of all students (Hamilton et al., 2009).

Additionally, data analysis should inform decisions about professional learning, curriculum selection, and resource allocation to support continuous improvement (Hamilton et al., 2009). The use of multiple data sources ensures that instructional decisions are based on a comprehensive understanding of student needs rather than isolated assessment results. Schools should incorporate a cycle of instructional inquiry, in which educators collect and analyze data, develop hypotheses about student learning needs, and adjust instruction accordingly (Hamilton et al., 2009).

By embedding data-driven decision-making into teacher collaboration, schools can foster a culture of reflective practice, ensuring that instructional strategies are continuously refined to maximize literacy achievement. Professional learning communities that engage in ongoing data discussions are more likely to implement effective instructional practices that drive student success (Hamilton et al., 2009). When educators use student achievement data to guide instruction, they create learning opportunities that ensure all students receive the support they need to develop literacy proficiency.

System Level | EBP | Data Based Decision Making

Recommendations Grades K–12 | Data-Based Decision-Making

1. Make data part of an ongoing cycle of instructional improvement
2. Teach students to examine their own data and set learning goals
3. Establish a clear vision for schoolwide data use
4. Provide supports that foster a data-driven culture within the school
5. Develop and maintain a districtwide data system

Source: IES Practice Guide, What Works Clearinghouse | *Using Student Achievement to Support Instructional Decision Making* (Hamilton et al., 2009)

Hamilton et al. (2009) provide five key recommendations for how educators can effectively utilize data to improve student outcomes. These recommendations emphasize the importance of a structured and systemic approach to data use, ensuring that decisions about instruction are informed by multiple sources of student achievement data.

The recommendations outlined in the IES guide are essential for creating a data-driven decision-making framework that leads to more effective instruction and improved student achievement. By making data use a regular part of instructional practice, educators can proactively address missed learning opportunities rather than reacting to them after students have fallen behind. Teaching students to engage with their own data further enhances learning by increasing motivation and personal accountability. A clear vision for data use at the school level ensures consistency, while providing necessary supports helps teachers build confidence in using data to inform instruction. Finally, a districtwide data system enables efficient tracking of student progress and supports responsive instruction by ensuring that all educators have access to the same high-quality information.

Key Recommendations

1. **Make Data Part of an Ongoing Cycle of Instructional Improvement**
   Schools should establish a continuous process of collecting, analyzing, and using student data to refine instructional strategies. This approach allows educators to adjust their teaching based on real-time student performance, ensuring that interventions and lesson planning are responsive to actual learning needs. By embedding data analysis into regular instructional practice, teachers can identify trends, monitor student progress, and make informed adjustments.

2. **Teach Students to Examine Their Own Data and Set Learning Goals**
   Encouraging students to engage with their own achievement data fosters a sense of ownership and motivation in their learning process. When students analyze their performance and set personal learning goals, they develop metacognitive skills that enhance their ability to self-regulate and take responsibility for their academic progress. This practice not only improves student motivation but also enables teachers to tailor their instruction to individual needs.
3. **Establish a Clear Vision for Schoolwide Data Use**
   A shared commitment to data-driven decision-making at the school level is essential for successful implementation. School leaders should develop a structured plan that defines how data will be collected, analyzed, and used to guide instruction. This vision should be communicated clearly to educators, ensuring that data use is aligned with instructional goals and that all staff members understand their roles in the process.
4. **Provide Supports That Foster a Data-Driven Culture Within the School**
   Schools should create an environment where educators are supported in using data effectively. This includes professional learning, structured collaboration time, and the presence of data coaches or facilitators who can help teachers interpret data and translate findings into instructional action. A strong data culture ensures that teachers feel confident in using student data to make meaningful instructional decisions.
5. **Develop and Maintain a Districtwide Data System**
   A comprehensive data management system at the district level ensures that schools have access to accurate, timely, and relevant data. Such systems should integrate various sources of student achievement data and be designed for ease of use by educators. Having a well-structured data system enhances consistency across schools and supports evidence-based decision-making at all levels.

In sum, these recommendations provide a comprehensive framework for integrating student achievement data into everyday teaching and learning. By following these guidelines, schools can foster a culture of continuous improvement, ensuring that data is used not just for compliance or accountability, but as a powerful tool for enhancing instruction and supporting student success.

5. Professional Learning | Ensure That Learning Communities Are in Place to Provide Educators with Collaborative Structures for Engaging in Continuous Improvement Conversations Around New Materials, Curriculum, Lesson Plans, and Student Work

Educators need ongoing professional learning and collaboration to effectively implement HQIMs, refine instructional strategies, and address students' evolving literacy needs. One of the most effective ways to support this continuous improvement is through Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) or Collaborative Learning Communities (CLCs), where educators can regularly engage in discussions about curriculum, lesson planning, and student work. Structured professional learning communities enhances teacher practice and improves student literacy outcomes (DuFour et al., 2016; Vescio et al., 2008).

PLCs provide educators with structured time to analyze student progress, reflect on instructional effectiveness, and collaborate on best practices (DuFour et al., 2016). These professional learning structures ensure that HQIMs are implemented with fidelity and that teachers receive peer support in navigating instructional challenges. Studies have found that PLCs help teachers align their instruction to curriculum standards, ensuring more consistent and effective teaching strategies across classrooms (Lomos et al., 2011). Additionally, when PLCs focus on data-driven instruction, teachers are better equipped to tailor their literacy instruction to meet student needs (Gallimore et al., 2009).

The impact of PLCs extends beyond instructional planning. Sustained teacher collaboration leads to higher teacher efficacy and more effective literacy instruction, as educators engage in structured inquiry cycles to refine their approaches based on student performance data (Louis et al., 2010; Saunders et

al., 2009). Studies also indicate that coaching and mentoring within PLCs further enhance professional learning, particularly when literacy specialists or instructional coaches guide teachers in implementing evidence-based literacy strategies (Neuman & Cunningham, 2009). These findings align with research on job-embedded coaching, which has been shown to increase teacher effectiveness and improve student literacy achievement when sustained over time (Kraft et al., 2018).

Another essential element of PLCs is lesson study and peer observation, where teachers engage in structured cycles of planning, observing, and refining literacy instruction based on collective feedback (Cheung et al., 2014; Dudley, 2015; Lewis & Hurd, 2011). This process encourages a deeper understanding of HQIMs and promotes the use of research-based instructional strategies to accelerate literacy development (Snow et al., 1998). Schools that invest in collaborative learning models, literacy coaching, and data-informed decision-making create the conditions for long-term literacy success (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006).

By fostering a culture of continuous learning and professional collaboration, PLCs empower teachers to refine instructional strategies, implement HQIMs effectively, and support student literacy achievement. When implemented with intentionality and a focus on student-centered learning, PLCs serve as a powerful mechanism for sustaining instructional excellence and improving literacy outcomes (City et al., 2009; Hord, 2009).



Leader Resources:
U.S., DOE, IES, REL Southeast | *Professional Learning Communities Facilitator's Guide* (Kasanovich & Foorman, 2016) | For the WWC Practice Guide: *Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten Through Third Grade* (Foorman et al., 2016)

REL Southeast, IES | *Professional Learning Communities Facilitators' Guide* | For the WWC Practice Guide *Teaching Academic Content and Literacy to English Learners in Elementary and Middle School* (Baker et al., 2014)

6. Professional Learning | Provide Curriculum-Based Coaching for Educators

Curriculum-based coaching (CBC) is a key strategy for sustaining instructional excellence and ensuring that teachers receive individualized and collaborative support (Short & Hirsh, 2020). It integrates coaching strategies with curriculum materials to improve teacher effectiveness, student learning, and instructional consistency (Knight, 2009; Neuman & Wright, 2010). Literacy coaches and instructional leaders play a critical role in guiding educators, offering model lessons, feedback, and targeted professional learning to help teachers implement best practices in literacy instruction. By embedding coaching within the daily work of educators, schools can create a culture of continuous learning and instructional refinement (Short & Hirsh, 2020).

One of the core components of CBC is content-specific guidance, which ensures that teachers understand and effectively implement curriculum materials aligned with state standards, learning progressions, and evidence-based practices (Garet et al., 2001; Short & Hirsh, 2020). This approach helps teachers navigate instructional materials and make informed decisions about lesson planning and assessment. Unlike one-time workshops, job-embedded coaching provides educators with real-time support, allowing them to continuously refine their instructional practices. Ongoing coaching significantly increases teacher effectiveness and improves student literacy outcomes, particularly when it is sustained and job-embedded (Kraft et al., 2018).

A key feature of CBC is the use of collaborative coaching cycles, where coaches work with teachers in a structured process that includes pre-observation planning, classroom observation, and post-observation reflection. These cycles allow for targeted feedback and instructional refinement based on

observed teaching practices. Additionally, CBC emphasizes data-informed decision-making by helping teachers analyze student assessment data to differentiate instruction and make curriculum adaptations that support learner needs (Biancarosa et al., 2010; Short & Hirsh, 2020). Through this process, coaches and teachers work together to identify trends in student learning and implement strategies that enhance engagement and comprehension.

Another important aspect of CBC is scaffolded teacher support, which involves a gradual release of responsibility. Initially, coaches may model instructional practices and co-teach lessons before transitioning to a supportive role where teachers take the lead with ongoing feedback (Neuman & Cunningham, 2009). This approach fosters teacher confidence and independence in applying evidence-based strategies. Moreover, CBC ensures the integration of high-quality instructional materials that are aligned with academic standards. When teachers receive structured coaching on curriculum implementation, they are more likely to use instructional materials effectively and adapt them to meet student needs (Polikoff & Koedel, 2017; Short & Hirsh, 2020).

By investing in literacy coaching, professional learning communities, and data-driven instructional planning, Iowa schools can strengthen Universal Tier I instruction and ensure that all students receive high-quality literacy instruction that prepares them for lifelong success. When implemented effectively, curriculum-based coaching serves as a powerful mechanism for strengthening teacher practice, improving student outcomes, and ensuring that instructional excellence is maintained over time.

System Level | High Leverage Practice | Curriculum Based Professional Learning

Recommendation: Curriculum Based Professional Learning

Source: Carnegie Corporation of New York | *The Elements: Transforming Teaching through Curriculum Based Professional Learning* (Short & Hirsh, 2020)

Short and Hirsh (2020) outline a transformative approach to professional learning, emphasizing the integration of high-quality instructional materials (HQIMs) with sustained, practice-based teacher learning. The guide identifies three main categories of design features—core, functional, and structural—that shape effective curriculum-based professional learning. Additionally, it presents foundational “Essentials” that support implementation and provides a call to action for teachers, professional learning providers, and school leaders.

Key Elements of Curriculum-Based Professional Learning

1. **Core Design Features (The Purpose of Professional Learning)**
    - Curriculum – Professional learning should be anchored in high-quality, standards-aligned curriculum materials, helping teachers understand not just what to teach, but how to implement instructional materials effectively.
    - Transformative Learning – Teachers should experience the same type of inquiry-based, student-centered learning they are expected to facilitate in their classrooms.
    - High Expectations – Effective professional learning promotes high expectations and quality instruction, ensuring all students have access to rigorous, grade-level content.
2. **Functional Design Features (How Professional Learning is Designed & Implemented)**
    - Learning Designs – Professional learning must be active, inquiry-driven, and curriculum-based, allowing teachers to engage in hands-on experiences similar to their students.
    - Beliefs – Teachers’ pre-existing ideas about instruction and student ability must be addressed through structured learning experiences that challenge and refine their assumptions.
    - Reflection and Feedback – Teachers should continuously analyze their practice, receiving peer and coach feedback to strengthen their instructional strategies.

- Change Management – Implementation requires systematic supports, including leadership commitment and clear structures for sustaining professional learning over time.

3. **Structural Design Features (Logistics and Conditions for Success)**
   - Collective Participation – Teachers benefit most when they learn alongside colleagues who use the same curriculum, fostering collaborative expertise.
   - Models – Schools should implement proven coaching and peer-learning models that connect professional learning to daily teaching practice.
   - Time – Professional learning should be embedded within the school day, ensuring that teachers have ongoing opportunities to engage with the curriculum.
4. **The Essentials: Foundational Supports for Implementation**
   For curriculum-based professional learning to be effective, the guide emphasizes the importance of:
   - Leadership – School and district leaders must prioritize and advocate for curriculum-aligned professional learning.
   - Resources – Schools need adequate time, funding, and personnel to support sustained professional learning efforts.
   - Coherence – Professional learning should align with district-wide instructional goals and improvement strategies, ensuring consistency across schools.

Why These Elements Matter

This framework is crucial for ensuring that professional learning is not a one-time event, but rather an ongoing process of instructional improvement. By integrating professional learning with HQIMs, teachers can develop deep expertise in their content areas and implement student-centered, inquiry-based teaching strategies. Additionally, embedding evidence-based practices ensures that all students receive the high-quality instruction necessary for academic success.

State Resources

1. Provide stakeholders with an Evidence-Based Practice Guide (CLSD grant work).
2. Provide stakeholders with HQIM review tools and rubrics (CLSD grant work).
3. Provide a list of recommended HQIMs for ELA and literacy interventions (CLSD grant work).
4. Provide districts with Iowa's Universal Tier Guide via the Department's ESSA website, Universal Instruction page (Department, 2023) and corresponding professional learning modules, which includes:
   a. Support for planning, organizing, and leading MTSS and the Continuous Improvement process (CIP).
   b. **Professional Learning |** Iowa's just in time learning, professional learning cycle, unit planning, lesson planning, scaffolding unfinished learning.
5. **Professional Learning |** Develop a list of approved professional learning providers who can support districts with professional learning services and content aligned with evidence-based practices and provide curriculum-based coaching (CLSD grant work).
6. **Professional Learning |** Continue to partner with the IRRC to develop high-quality professional learning resources.

Additional Discussion and Resources

Iowa Legislation impacting MTSS at K–3

Recent Iowa legislation has driven significant changes to early literacy in grades K–3. Iowa Code 279.68 and Iowa Administrative Code 281-62 promote effective evidence-based programming,

instruction, and assessment practices across schools to support all students to become proficient readers by the end of the third grade. General requirements are:

- Provision of universal screening in reading for students in kindergarten through third grade
- Progress monitoring for students who are at risk and persistently at risk in reading
- Provision of intensive instruction – including 90 minutes daily of scientific, research-based reading instruction–for students who are persistently at risk in reading
- Notice to parents that a student is persistently at risk in reading, including strategies the parents can use at home to help the child succeed
- Notice to parents of such a student's subsequent progress

The Department provides guidance on both interpreting and implementing Iowa Code 279.68 as well as providing recommendations, clarifications and responses to questions from the field in the Early Literacy Implementation FAQs (Department, n.d.).

Focus on Supplemental and Intensive Tiers

Within Iowa's state literacy plan, the supplemental (Tier II) and intensive (Tier III) tiers of the Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) are essential components in ensuring that every student receives the instruction they need to reach their full potential. These tiers provide additional, evidence-based instructional supports that go beyond Universal Tier I instruction, ensuring that learners are appropriately challenged and supported. By implementing a systematic, data-driven approach, the MTSS framework establishes a pathway for all students to succeed, regardless of their initial skill level, learning challenges, or advanced capabilities.

The supplemental tier (Tier II) is designed to support students who require additional instruction beyond what is provided in the core curriculum. These students may include those who have unfinished learning, as well as those who demonstrate advanced learning needs and require differentiated content. Instruction at this level is delivered in small groups, using research-based interventions aligned with core instruction. Regular progress monitoring ensures that students receive timely, targeted support, enabling them to address missed learning opportunities or advance their learning at an appropriate pace.

For advanced learners, Tier II instruction serves as an avenue for enrichment and acceleration, allowing students to engage with more complex texts, critical thinking tasks, and independent learning opportunities. Just as struggling students require additional scaffolds, advanced learners benefit from strategic differentiation that keeps them engaged, motivated, and progressing toward their full potential.

For students requiring even more personalized, sustained support, intensive Tier III instruction provides highly individualized intervention plans tailored to each student's specific needs. This tier emphasizes high-frequency, data-driven interventions, with ongoing progress monitoring that informs instructional adjustments.

While Tier III is often associated with students who struggle significantly in literacy, it is equally important for students with advanced learning needs. For these students, Tier III programming may involve above-grade-level curriculum, independent research opportunities, mentorships, and access to accelerated coursework. This ensures that advanced learners continue to make meaningful academic progress, rather than stagnating in content they have already mastered.

In the Iowa MTSS model, assessment data plays a critical role in identifying students' instructional needs. Universal screeners help determine which students require additional support, but they are not designed to identify advanced learners or guide differentiation for high-achieving students. Instead, further diagnostic assessments—such as above-grade-level tests, criterion-referenced assessments, and student performance data—should be used to pinpoint areas of strength and readiness for advanced learning opportunities.

Through intentional differentiation and evidence-based instructional practices, teachers can ensure that all students experience one year of academic growth for each year of schooling. Advanced learners need instruction that is responsive, engaging, and aligned with their individual learning trajectories.

Schools that embrace data-driven decision-making and view all students through a lens of potential rather than deficit create environments where every child can thrive at their appropriate level and pace. Within the Iowa MTSS model, every student is entitled to high-quality, differentiated instruction, grounded in research-based practices that maximize student achievement for all learners.

By leveraging flexible instructional groups, advanced learning strategies, and higher-order thinking opportunities, Iowa's MTSS framework ensures that both intervention and acceleration are integral components of a comprehensive literacy system. When educators commit to responsive instruction that adapts to each student's learning needs, they cultivate an environment of high expectations, challenge, and continuous growth—ensuring that every student reaches their full potential.

Recommendations

1. Prioritize time within school schedules to support supplemental and intensive tiers.
2. Ensure that district and school budgets allow for hiring literacy specialists and interventionists.
3. Use data-based decision-making to determine the level of intensity needed for student placement in interventions.
4. Ensure that scientifically and evidence-based materials are utilized for Tiers II and III.
5. Align instruction and evidence-based practices across Tier I, Tier II, and Tier III.
6. Continue to leverage personalized reading tutors, such as Reading Assistant featuring Amira.
7. Monitor student progress frequently to assess intervention effectiveness.
8. Base decisions for student progress on demonstrated growth.
9. Utilize Personalized Reading Plans with students who are not proficient with literacy.

Recommendations Overview

Iowa's MTSS provides a structured framework for delivering literacy instruction that meets the needs of all students. Within this framework, the Supplemental (Tier I) and Intensive (Tier III) interventions play a crucial role in supporting students who struggle with reading. To ensure that these interventions are effective, research-based strategies must be embedded within instructional practices, professional learning, and data-driven decision-making. The following recommendations align with evidence-based literacy practices and support improved student outcomes across Iowa's schools.

1. Prioritizing Time for Supplemental and Intensive Tiers

One of the most critical factors in intervention success is ensuring sufficient instructional time is allocated within the school day (Gersten et al., 2007, 2009). Supplemental and intensive interventions should be provided in addition to core literacy instruction rather than as a replacement (Foorman et al., 2016; Gersten et al., 2007, 2009). This approach prevents students from missing essential content while receiving additional support.

To accomplish this, schools must establish clearly defined schedules that prioritize dedicated intervention blocks. These blocks should be protected from interruptions, allowing students to receive structured, evidence-based instruction in small groups or one-on-one settings. Additionally, intervention time should be strategically built into the school day to minimize the loss of instructional time in other content areas. Wanzek and Vaughn (2007) emphasizes the importance of intensive intervention occurring at least five times per week for students with significant reading difficulties, with Tier 3 interventions requiring higher frequency and longer durations than Tier 2.

2. Investing in Literacy Specialists and Interventionists

The success of any intervention is largely dependent on the expertise of those delivering it. The National Reading Panel (NICHD, 2000) and subsequent research confirm that students benefit most from literacy instruction delivered by educators trained in structured literacy approaches grounded in the science of reading. Therefore, districts and schools must allocate funding to hire and retain literacy specialists and interventionists who have expertise in explicit, systematic reading instruction.

Funding sources such as Title I, ESSA, and Department grants provide opportunities to support this initiative. Districts should also explore partnerships with universities and literacy organizations to provide ongoing professional learning for interventionists. When trained professionals deliver interventions, students receive higher quality instruction that aligns with research-based methodologies, including phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension development (Ehri, 2020).

3. Data-Based Decision-Making for Student Placement in Interventions

Effective intervention begins with data-driven identification of students needing additional support (Gersten et al. 2009). Schools must implement a universal screening process at least three times per year, using evidence-based assessments. Beyond initial identification, frequent progress monitoring is critical to ensuring interventions are meeting students' needs (Shapiro et al.,2010). Data review meetings involving interventionists, classroom teachers, and administrators should be scheduled regularly to analyze student progress and adjust instruction accordingly.

4. Using Scientifically and Evidence-Based Materials for Tiers II and III

Interventions at the supplemental and intensive levels must be grounded in materials and practices that align with the science of reading. The National Reading Panel (NICHD, 2000) emphasizes the importance of systematic, explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. For Tier II and Tier III interventions, schools should adopt materials and curricula that align with structured literacy approaches, ensuring that all intervention materials are aligned with research-backed methodologies improves student literacy outcomes and ensures consistency in instructional approaches across tiers (Foorman et al., 2016; Kilpatrick, 2015; Moats, 2020a, 2020b; Spear-Swerling, 2019; Torgesen & Miller, 2009).

5. Aligning Instruction Across All Tiers

One of the most effective ways to ensure literacy success is to align instruction across Tier I, Tier II, and Tier III. Torgesen (2002) emphasizes that interventions must complement and reinforce core instruction, rather than operate as isolated supports (Foorman et al., 2016; Gersten et al., 2009).

To achieve alignment:

- General education teachers and interventionists should collaborate on instructional planning to ensure that intervention strategies build on Tier 1 instruction (Fuchs et al., 2010).
- Professional learning should focus on consistent, evidence-based instructional strategies used across all tiers (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Gersten et al., 2009).
- Schools should implement common assessments and progress monitoring tools across all levels to maintain instructional coherence (Gersten et al., 2009; Shapiro et al., 2010).

By creating a unified approach to literacy instruction, students experience reinforcement of key literacy skills rather than fragmented instruction that lacks continuity.

6. Continue to Leverage Personalized Reading Tutors, Such as Amira

To further support literacy development, Iowa encourages schools to leverage personalized AI-driven reading tutors, such as Amira, to provide individualized literacy instruction for students who need

targeted intervention. AI-powered tutors offer real-time feedback, adaptive instruction, and personalized practice, allowing students to work at their own pace while receiving tailored support. Technology-based reading interventions enhance student engagement and accelerate progress, particularly for struggling readers (Bryant et al., 2014; Cheung & Slavin, 2013; Gillespie & Graham, 2014). These tools complement traditional classroom instruction, helping students build fluency, comprehension, and confidence in their reading abilities. By integrating AI-powered literacy support with teacher-led instruction, schools can maximize their ability to meet the needs of all learners.

Iowa's literacy assessment and data-use recommendations ensure that schools systematically identify, support, and track student progress within a coherent MTSS framework. By implementing universal screeners, diagnostic assessments, progress monitoring, formative and quarterly assessments, and fostering collaborative learning communities, schools create a data-driven environment. Additionally, leveraging personalized reading tutors expands literacy support beyond the classroom, helping close achievement gaps and improve literacy outcomes across the state. When assessment practices are intentional, systematic, and aligned with high-quality instruction, all students are better positioned to develop the literacy skills needed for lifelong success.

7. Frequent Monitoring of Student Progress

Progress monitoring plays a crucial role in determining whether interventions are effective. According to research on Response to Intervention (RTI) models (Gersten et al., 2007), students in Tier II and Tier III interventions should have frequent, data-driven assessments to track growth.

Best practices for progress monitoring include:

- Using curriculum-based measurements (CBMs) to track skill acquisition.
- Implementing goal-setting structures where student progress is compared to benchmarks.
- Adjusting interventions based on student response to instruction, rather than keeping students in static intervention groups.

When progress monitoring is conducted with fidelity, educators can make informed decisions about student placement and intervention intensity.

8. Basing Decisions for Student Progress on Demonstrated Growth

Effective MTSS implementation requires that student movement within or between intervention tiers be driven by evidence of growth rather than fixed timelines or static groupings. When schools base decisions on demonstrated progress, they are more responsive to student needs and better positioned to deliver the right level of support at the right time.

Instructional decisions should be informed by multiple sources of valid and reliable data, such as Curriculum-Based Measures (CBMs), diagnostic assessments, and formative checks aligned with instructional goals. Teams should regularly review progress data to determine whether students are meeting benchmarks and whether instructional changes are needed. Students who make sufficient growth can transition to less intensive supports, while those not progressing should receive intensified or modified interventions (Shapiro et al., 2010; Gersten et al., 2009).

Using demonstrated growth as the basis for decision-making, ensures efficient resource use and maximizes literacy development for every student.

9. Personalized Reading Plans for Non-Proficient Students

For students who continue to struggle with literacy, Personalized Reading Plans (PRPs) offer an individualized approach to intervention. PRPs ensure that instruction is tailored to each student's unique needs, focusing on specific areas of weakness while tracking progress.

Students benefit from interventions that address specific literacy deficits, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach (Gersten et al., 2007, 2009). PRPs should include:

- Clearly defined student goals based on data.
- Specific instructional strategies aligned with student needs.
- Progress monitoring tools to track improvement over time.
- Family engagement strategies to encourage literacy development at home.

By integrating Personalized Reading Plans into Iowa's MTSS framework, schools can ensure that non-proficient students receive tailored interventions that maximize literacy gains.

Iowa's MTSS framework for literacy provides a comprehensive approach to supporting struggling readers through targeted, evidence-based interventions. By prioritizing intervention time, investing in trained literacy specialists, using data-driven placement decisions, selecting high-quality instructional materials, aligning instruction across tiers, and monitoring student progress, schools can enhance literacy outcomes for all students. Implementing these research-based recommendations will create a systematic and sustainable approach to literacy instruction that ensures every child has the opportunity to become a proficient reader.

State Resources

1. Provide an MTSS Supplemental and Intensive Tier Guide. (Department, 2023).
2. Provide guidance and tools for intervention materials adoption (CLSD grant work).
3. Provide recommendations for interventions and evidence-based practices within the Literacy and Evidence-Based Practices Clearinghouse (CLSD grant work).
4. See prior support for data provided by the Department under Assessment.

Additional Evidence-Based Practices, Discussion, and Resources

Coordinating MTSS for Advanced Learners



Leader Resources: MTSS for Advanced Learners

Iowa Department of Education | MTSS Advanced Learner Guide (Department, 2018)

MTSS Supplemental and Intensive Tier Guide (Department, 2023).

Coordinating MTSS for Readers Needing Additional Support

Grades 4–12 | EBP | Intensive and Individualized Interventions for Struggling Readers

Recommendation | Grades 4–12: Make Available Intensive and Individualized Interventions for Struggling Readers

Source: IES Practice Guide, What Works Clearinghouse | *Improving Adolescent Literacy: Effective Classroom and Intervention Practices* (Kamil et al., 2008)

Some students require more intensive, individualized literacy support beyond what regular classroom teachers can provide. Such interventions, delivered by trained reading specialists, focus on accelerating literacy development so students can meet grade-level reading standards. Interventions are typically based on diagnostic assessments that identify specific literacy challenges, such as

decoding, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension strategies. The goal is to provide targeted, explicit instruction that addresses individual needs and improves overall reading outcomes.

How to Implement the Recommendation

1. **Identify Struggling Readers through Assessment**

   Start by using screening tools or threshold scores on reading tests to identify struggling readers. More in-depth diagnostic assessments should follow to determine specific needs. These assessments can be group-administered or individually administered, depending on the severity of the reading difficulties. The goal is to create a clear literacy profile for each student.

2. **Select Interventions Based on Student Needs**

   After diagnosing reading challenges, choose interventions that explicitly address the identified areas. Interventions should include modeling and practicing reading strategies, setting goals, and providing students with tools such as graphic organizers or advance organizers to aid comprehension. Interventions must be explicit, goal-oriented, and tailored to each student's learning profile.

3. **Increase Instructional Intensity**

   Struggling readers often need more intensive support than their peers. Increase instructional intensity by providing additional instructional time or working in small groups. Small group interventions allow teachers to offer personalized support and ensure that students receive the attention needed to progress toward grade-level reading proficiency.

4. **Use Effective Instructional Strategies**

   Use strategies like repeated reading, strategically placed questions, and comprehension scaffolding in interventions. These strategies are effective in small group settings and should be incorporated into content-area classrooms as well. Approaches such as reciprocal teaching and the use of graphic organizers can further enhance students' comprehension skills.

Timely assessments and interventions are crucial for preventing long-term academic challenges. Many middle and high school teachers may lack training in reading strategies, but professional learning can equip them with the skills to support struggling readers. Coordination across departments and collaboration with literacy specialists can ensure consistent and effective literacy support throughout the curriculum.



Leader Resources:
The Reading League | Adolescent Reading Intervention Evaluation Guidelines (Grades 4–12) (2024)

Coordinating Supplemental and Intensive Tiers for English Learners with and without Disabilities

K–5 | English Learners | EBP | Small Group Reading Interventions

Recommendation: Provide intensive small-group reading interventions. (Strong)

Source: What Works Clearinghouse | *Effective Literacy and English Language Instruction for English Learners in the Elementary Grades: A Practice Guide* (Gersten et al., 2007)

Gersten et al. (2007) recommend when providing intensive small-group reading interventions for English learners, the instruction should focus on the five core elements of reading: phonological awareness, phonics, reading fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. These interventions should be delivered through explicit, direct instruction in small, homogeneous groups of 3-6 students for at least 30 minutes per day.

Key instructional practices include:

1. Using effective intervention programs: Programs that provide multiple opportunities for students to respond and practice reading words and sentences, along with clear feedback, have shown positive outcomes.
2. Daily small-group instruction: Group students based on their reading skill level, and allow those making rapid progress to move to higher-performing groups.
3. Teacher training and support: Teachers and interventionists need training on how to implement these programs effectively, with emphasis on fast-paced, interactive instruction. Ongoing coaching is essential for success.
4. Coordination of services: While students may receive multiple services, coordination is essential to ensure that reading development remains a priority.

This approach helps students acquire language and achieve strong reading skills.

Potential challenges include complexities with scheduling and concerns about fragmented instructional time, but the benefits of ensuring strong reading skills outweigh these concerns**.** Collaboration among all educators working with English learners is key to overcoming barriers and providing the best educational opportunities.

Grades K–5 | English Learners | Peer Assisted Learning Opportunities

Recommendation K–5: Schedule Regular Peer Assisted Learning Opportunities. (Strong)

Source: What Works Clearinghouse | *Effective Literacy and English Language Instruction for English Learners in the Elementary Grades: A Practice Guide* (Gersten et al., 2007)

Grades K–8+ | English Learners | Small Group Instructional Intervention

Recommendation K–8+: Provide small-group instructional intervention to students struggling in areas of literacy and English language development. (Moderate)

Source: *Teaching Academic Content and Literacy to English Learners in Elementary and Middle School* (Baker et al., 2014)

+Note: While this EBP is recommended for grades K–8 in the practice guide, the Department would also recommend this practice in grades 9–12 as needed.

Providing targeted small-group instructional interventions is crucial for students struggling with literacy and English language development. By focusing on the specific needs of individual students, educators can deliver tailored support that addresses both foundational skills, like phonemic awareness and decoding, and more advanced competencies such as vocabulary, comprehension, and language development. This approach not only helps close learning gaps but also ensures that students are equipped with the skills needed to succeed academically and build a strong foundation for lifelong learning.

1. **Use available assessment information to identify students who demonstrate persistent struggles with aspects of language and literacy development.**

   Assessments play a crucial role in identifying students who need additional instructional support. By utilizing standardized tests, district benchmarks, and English language proficiency assessments, teachers can effectively screen for students who struggle in areas such as phonemic awareness, decoding, comprehension, and vocabulary. However, a brief screening may not fully reveal all the areas where English learners need support. Therefore, further diagnostic work, including formative assessments and informal reading evaluations, should be considered to understand holistically each student's specific needs in small-group instruction.

2. **Design the content of small-group instruction to target students' identified needs.**

   English learners vary widely in their strengths and weaknesses, and interventions should be tailored accordingly. Some students may need more foundational support in decoding and fluency, while others may have stronger reading skills but struggle with comprehension and vocabulary. The content of small-group instruction should be carefully designed based on diagnostic data to address these distinct needs, ensuring an integrated approach between foundational reading instruction, comprehension strategies, and English language development.

3. **Provide additional instruction in small groups consisting of three to five students to students struggling with language and literacy.**

   Small-group instruction, ideally consisting of three to five students, allows teachers to focus on specific skills such as phonemic awareness, decoding, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension strategies. Homogeneous groupings are effective for foundational skills, while heterogeneous groupings can be beneficial for tasks like writing or oral language development, where students can learn from peers with varying proficiency levels. Instruction should be fast-paced, engaging, and include multiple activities in a single lesson to maintain students' attention and maximize learning outcomes. Regular monitoring and regrouping based on student progress are essential to ensure the effectiveness of this approach.

4. **For students who struggle with basic foundational reading skills, spend time not only on these skills but also on vocabulary development and listening and reading comprehension strategies.**

   Small-group interventions should address both foundational skills, such as phonemic awareness and decoding, as well as more complex literacy skills like vocabulary and comprehension. Instructional time can be used efficiently by integrating literacy and language instruction, ensuring students receive comprehensive support across these areas. For instance, students may work on decoding while simultaneously engaging in vocabulary and comprehension activities that reinforce their understanding of the text and help develop their overall literacy skills.

5. **Provide scaffolded instruction that includes frequent opportunities for students to practice and review newly learned skills and concepts in various contexts over several lessons to ensure retention.**

   Scaffolded instruction breaks down learning tasks into smaller, manageable steps, allowing students to process information more effectively and retain new skills. Teachers should model and think aloud during instruction, gradually releasing responsibility to students as they gain confidence in performing tasks independently. Regular reviews of previously taught material, along with frequent opportunities to practice in various contexts, help reinforce learning and ensure that students internalize the skills. Providing prompt feedback and additional support when needed ensures students stay on track and continue to make progress.

By implementing these structured approaches to small-group instruction, educators can more effectively support English learners and struggling students in developing both foundational and advanced literacy skills. These targeted interventions help bridge missed learning opportunities, providing students with the tools they need to succeed academically.



Leader Resources: MTSS for English Learners with and Without Disabilities

Project ELITE², Project LEE, & Project ELLIPSES | US Office of Special Education Programs

MTSS in the Early-Elementary Grades (K–2), Practice Guides

- Brief 1: Meeting the needs of English Learners Through a Multitiered Instructional Framework (2015)
- Brief 2: Assessment and Data-Based Decision Making (2015)
- Brief 3: Core and Supplemental English as a Second Language Literacy Instruction for English Learners (2015)
- Brief 4: Core and Supplemental Biliteracy Instruction for English Learners (2015)
- Brief 5: Professional learning to Support a Multitiered Instructional Framework (2015)

MTSS in the Upper-Elementary Grades (Grades 3–5), Practice Guides

- Brief 1: Multitiered Instructional Systems for ELs (2018)
- Brief 2: Evidence-Based Tier 2 Intervention Practices for English Learners (2020)
- Brief 3: English Learners With Significant Learning Difficulties or Disabilities: Recommendations for Practice (2021)
- Brief 4: Fostering Collaborative Partnerships with Families of English Learners Within a Multitiered System of Supports (2021)
- Brief 5: Promoting Leadership and Collaboration for an Effective Multitiered System of Supports for English Learners (2021)

Implementing Structured Data Meetings for English Learners

- Implementing Structured Data Meetings: A Year-round Tool for Optimizing Instructional Planning for ELs (The Meadow Center and The University of Texas at Austin, 2016)
- Access Training Materials at the ELITE website (2025)

Early Childhood Educational Success

Early childhood success is the cornerstone of lifelong literacy achievement and academic readiness, marking a critical period where foundational skills in language, communication, and cognitive development are formed. The Iowa Comprehensive State Literacy Plan recognizes that the early years—birth through age five—are essential for setting students on a path toward reading proficiency and overall academic success. During this formative stage, children's experiences with language and literacy directly impact their ability to engage with more complex learning in later grades. Early language and literacy exposure is one of the strongest predictors of later reading ability and academic achievement (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Snow, 1998).

Notably, Hutton et al. (2019) found that a rich home literacy environment—characterized by frequent shared reading and access to books—is associated with stronger white matter integrity in brain regions that support language and literacy development in preschool-aged children. Early literacy experiences are not only beneficial but biologically influential in shaping cognitive development. When young children engage in back-and-forth conversation, hear stories read aloud, and explore books, they are developing the brain structures necessary for later reading and comprehension.

Ensuring success in early childhood literacy is also vital for closing achievement gaps before they begin, particularly for students who face barriers to accessing high-quality early education. Children from low-income families, dual language learners, and children with disabilities are especially at risk for entering kindergarten without the foundational literacy skills necessary for success (Dickinson et al., 2010; Hart & Risley, 1995). By investing in early literacy instruction and access to evidence-based preschool programs, Iowa commits to equipping every child with the tools they need to enter school ready to learn, fostering a lifelong love of reading, and supporting positive outcomes across communities.

This early investment lays the foundation upon which Iowa's broader literacy initiatives build. It ensures a seamless transition into the state's literacy standards and expectations at every stage of education. When children begin school with strong early literacy skills, they are more likely to stay on track academically, require fewer interventions, and achieve long-term educational milestones, including high school graduation and beyond (Heckman, 2006). In this way, early childhood literacy is not simply the beginning of a child's learning journey—it is the bedrock of educational success and opportunity.

Recommendations

1. Ensure that there is a strong understanding of the Iowa Early Learning Standards. (Early Childhood Iowa [ECI], n.d.).
2. Include early childhood literacy in your district's Birth to 12 Literacy Plan.
3. Provide families and caregivers with early literacy resources to support literacy and language development at home.
4. Ensure that scientifically aligned and evidence-based materials are being used to support preschool literacy programs.
5. Promote the attendance of all four-year-olds in preschool programs.

Recommendations Overview

1. Ensure that there is a strong understanding of the Iowa Early Learning Standards (ECI, n.d.)

The Iowa Early Learning Standards (IELS) are a foundational, research-informed resource that outlines what young children in Iowa—from birth through age five—should know and be able to do across critical areas of development. Grounded in best practices and the science of early learning, the IELS are designed to guide high-quality, developmentally appropriate early learning experiences that align with children's natural growth and learning trajectories. With approximately 2,000 days between birth and kindergarten entry—a period during which nearly 90% of brain development occurs—the standards emphasize the importance of intentional, nurturing, and responsive learning during this formative stage.

The IELS articulate developmental expectations across eight interconnected areas:

1. Social and Emotional Development
2. Physical Well-Being and Motor Development
3. Approaches to Learning
4. Social Studies
5. Creative Arts
6. Communication, Language, and Literacy

7. Mathematics
8. Science

Each area contains clearly defined standards, benchmarks, and examples of how children might demonstrate their learning, along with recommended adult supports—strategies educators and caregivers can use to foster growth. The standards are organized by age group (infant/toddler and preschool) and are aligned with the Iowa academic standards to support seamless transitions into the K–12 system.

The IELS serve multiple purposes: they inform educators, families, administrators, and community leaders about age-appropriate expectations for young children and provide a shared framework for decision-making in both public and private early childhood settings. Importantly, the standards are not intended to assess, sort, or exclude children. Rather, they aim to ensure that every child has access to high-quality early learning opportunities that support holistic development.

A strong understanding of the IELS—and their thoughtful integration into Local Education Agency (LEA) programming—is essential for promoting literacy achievement and academic readiness. When LEAs adopt and embed these standards into their early childhood systems, they foster consistent curriculum development, instructional planning, assessment practices, and professional learning. This coherence enhances continuity across early learning experiences, supporting smooth transitions from preschool into kindergarten and beyond.

Moreover, the IELS emphasizes essential considerations such as the role of relationships, physical and mental health, the value of play, and the importance of observing and responding to children's individual needs. These principles create environments where all children—regardless of background or ability—can thrive.

By using the Iowa Early Learning Standards as a foundation, educators, families, and policymakers work collectively to ensure that Iowa's youngest learners are equipped with the skills, knowledge, and confidence to enter school ready to learn and succeed. The IELS are not just a framework for early learning—they are a cornerstone of Iowa's long-term vision for literacy and educational excellence.

2. Include early childhood literacy in your district's Birth to 12 Literacy Plan.

Early childhood success is the cornerstone of lifelong literacy achievement and academic readiness, marking a critical period when foundational skills in language, communication, and cognitive development are formed. The early years—birth through age five—are essential for setting children on a path toward reading proficiency and overall academic success. During this formative stage, children's experiences with language and literacy directly impact their ability to engage with more complex learning in later grades. Early language and literacy exposure is one of the strongest predictors of future reading achievement and school outcomes (Snow et al., 1998; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

The development of oral language, vocabulary, phonological awareness, and print knowledge in early childhood is strongly associated with later reading success (Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2006). These skills are not isolated; they grow together and are influenced by rich early experiences. The more limited a child's early language environment, the greater the risk for difficulty learning to read. Conversely, children exposed to stimulating language interactions and print-rich environments show stronger reading readiness and comprehension later on.

Recent neurological studies further support these findings. Hutton et al. (2019) found that a rich home literacy environment—characterized by frequent shared reading and access to books—is associated with stronger white matter integrity in brain regions linked to language and literacy development in preschool-aged children. These findings confirm that early literacy experiences are not only educationally advantageous but also biologically foundational.

Participation in high-quality preschool programs amplifies these benefits. As Meloy et al. (2019) note, preschool attendance, especially in programs with strong literacy components, is consistently associated with gains in foundational literacy skills, reduced rates of special education placement, and decreased likelihood of grade retention. These effects are particularly impactful for children from low-income families, who are often at greater risk for entering school without the skills needed for early reading success.

Ensuring success in early childhood literacy is also vital for closing achievement gaps before they widen. Children from historically underserved groups—including those from low-income households, multilingual learners, and children with disabilities—are disproportionately at risk of entering kindergarten without the literacy skills necessary for academic success (Dickinson, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2010; Hart & Risley, 1995). Evidence-based early literacy instruction—grounded in oral language development, alphabetic code knowledge, and print awareness—serves as both a prevention and intervention strategy that benefits all learners while supporting those with greater need (Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2006).

This early investment creates the bedrock for Iowa's broader literacy initiatives. When children begin their formal education with strong literacy foundations, they are more likely to stay on track academically, require fewer interventions, and meet key educational milestones, such as high school graduation (Heckman, 2006). The benefits of early literacy and high-quality preschool extend well into adulthood, including better employment outcomes, higher educational attainment, and lower involvement with the criminal justice system (Meloy et al., 2019). In this way, early childhood literacy is not just an educational imperative—it is a social and economic one.

Preschool | Policy Recommendation

Recommendation | Policy | Policy and Practice in the Preschool Years

Source: National Institute for Early Education Research | *Early Literacy: Policy and Practice in the Preschool Years* (Strickland and Riley-Ayers, 2006)

Summary of Early Literacy: Policy and Practice in the Preschool Years

This policy brief underscores the critical importance of early literacy development during the preschool years and provides research-based recommendations for educators, policymakers, and program designers. It highlights how early language and literacy experiences are closely tied to later school achievement, graduation rates, reduced grade retention, and adult productivity.

Key Findings and Principles:

1. Early Literacy Starts at Birth: Literacy development is an ongoing process that begins long before formal schooling. Skills in oral language, phonological awareness, vocabulary, print awareness, and alphabet knowledge begin forming in infancy and continue to build through rich interactions and experiences.
2. All Domains of Development Are Interconnected: Physical, social-emotional, cognitive, and linguistic domains work together to support early literacy. Literacy cannot be taught in isolation and must be integrated across areas of development.
3. Home Literacy Environment Matters: Children from language-rich homes are better prepared to succeed in school. Factors such as exposure to rare vocabulary, shared book reading, and engaging conversations significantly affect vocabulary and comprehension.
4. Key Predictors of Reading Success: Foundational skills that predict later reading outcomes include:

- Oral language (listening comprehension, vocabulary)
- Alphabetic code (letter knowledge, phonological awareness)
- Print concepts (understanding print use and function)

5. The Role of Curriculum and Teaching Practices

   Effective early literacy curricula should:

   - Be grounded in scientifically-based research
   - Include intentional instruction in oral language, phonemic awareness, alphabet knowledge, and print use
   - Integrate literacy across daily routines and learning centers

6. The Importance of Standards: Well-designed early learning standards help clarify curriculum content, align with K–12 expectations, and ensure program accountability. However, standards must be implemented in ways that respect and reflect the backgrounds and developmental needs of all students.
7. Assessment and Accountability: Early literacy assessment should use multiple measures to guide instruction and improve program quality—not to label children or narrow the curriculum.
8. The Need for Skilled Teachers: Effective early literacy instruction requires highly trained educators who understand language development, use evidence-based strategies, and can adapt instruction to meet learner needs. Ongoing professional learning is essential.
9. Parent and Family Engagement: Parent involvement is a key factor in early literacy. Programs should guide families in supporting literacy at home through shared reading, rich conversations, and everyday literacy experiences.

Policy Recommendations from the Brief:

- All children should have access to high-quality early childhood programs with strong literacy components.
- Literacy curricula should be evidence-based and integrated with other learning domains.
- Early literacy standards should align with K–12 systems.
- Assessments should be used to inform instruction, not to rank or label children.
- Teachers should receive rigorous pre-service training and ongoing professional learning in early literacy.
- Programs should promote family engagement and support home literacy practices.
- Dual language learners should receive targeted support in both their home language and English.

This brief ultimately argues that early literacy is foundational to school readiness and later academic success. Strategic investments in early education policy, teacher preparation, curriculum, and family engagement are essential to improving literacy outcomes for all children—particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Policy Resources:
Learning Policy Institute | Untangling the Evidence on preschool Effectiveness | Insights for Policy Makers (Meloy et al., 2019)

National Institute for Early Education Research | *Early Literacy: Policy and Practice in the Preschool Years* (Strickland and Riley-Ayers, 2006)

- Reading League | Summary of the Policy Brief



Leader Resources:
Language and Literacy Spectrum | Language and Literacy Development in the Early Years: Foundational Skills that Support Emergent Readers (Brown, 2014)

3. Provide families and caregivers with early literacy resources to support literacy and language development at home.

Providing families and caregivers with early literacy resources is a critical strategy for enhancing children's language development and early reading skills. The home is a child's first learning environment, and family interactions play a powerful role in shaping children's early language exposure, vocabulary growth, and foundational literacy development. When schools and districts equip families with the tools, strategies, and support needed to foster early literacy, they amplify children's learning both at home and in the classroom.

Children who engage in regular literacy-rich activities at home—such as shared book reading, storytelling, and language play—develop stronger oral language, vocabulary, and emergent literacy skills, all of which are essential for later reading success (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2006). These effects are even more pronounced for children from families with fewer economic resources or lower levels of formal education, making home literacy support a key strategy for supporting their educational advancement.

According to Strickland and Riley-Ayers (2006), "children reared in families where parents provide rich language and literacy support do better in school than those who do not." The brief emphasizes that parent-child interactions, including conversation and book reading, contribute directly to children's vocabulary acquisition and comprehension—skills strongly linked to academic achievement. They also note that parent involvement programs must go beyond simply giving families books; they should provide guidance on how to use those materials to promote conversation, build background knowledge, and support meaningful engagement with language and print.

In a related study, Hart and Risley (1995) found vast disparities in early language exposure between children from high- and low-income families—often referred to as the "word gap." These differences in quantity and quality of language input were strongly associated with later differences in vocabulary development and reading performance. By empowering families with literacy resources and coaching, schools can help bridge this gap.

Programs like Reach Out and Read and Reading Is Fundamental have demonstrated that when families are supported in engaging their children in regular reading and language activities, children show measurable gains in language development, emergent literacy, and motivation to read (Tabors et al., 2001).

Ultimately, supporting families in early literacy practices helps ensure that children experience consistent, high-quality language interactions across settings. It reinforces the message that literacy

development is a shared responsibility and that families are essential partners in preparing children to become confident, capable readers.

Note: Evidence-Based Practices and Resources will be included in the following section of the CSLP–Family and Community Partnerships.

4. Ensure that scientifically aligned and evidence-based materials are being used to support preschool literacy programs.

Ensuring that preschool literacy programs use scientifically aligned and evidence-based materials is essential to ensuring effective early literacy development for all children. High-quality materials grounded in the science of reading and early learning research support instruction that is intentional, developmentally appropriate, and capable of meeting the needs of all preschool learners.

Early skills such as oral language, phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, and print awareness are among the strongest predictors of later reading achievement (NICHD, 2008; Snow et al., 1998). Instructional materials that are explicitly designed to support these skills provide the structure and consistency needed for effective early literacy teaching. According to Strickland and Riley-Ayers (2006), early literacy instruction should be guided by materials that are evidence-based, aligned across developmental domains, and practical for teachers to use across varied early learning contexts.

For children from historically marginalized backgrounds—such as dual language learners, children with disabilities, and those living in poverty—access to high-quality, evidence-based literacy instruction can significantly reduce opportunity gaps (Meloy et al., 2019). For example, Espinosa (2013) emphasizes that early literacy materials should validate children's home languages and cultures while systematically building early literacy in English, thereby supporting both language development and identity.

Evidence-based literacy programs also benefit children with disabilities. Erickson and Koppenhaver (2020) highlight the need for accessible, universally designed instructional materials to ensure that students with significant support needs are not left out of early literacy instruction. Materials must be flexible enough to accommodate different modes of communication and support the principle of presumed competence, ensuring that all children are provided opportunities to develop literacy skills regardless of their learning profile.

Using evidence-based materials also supports teacher effectiveness. When materials are well-structured and aligned with developmental expectations, teachers can focus more on differentiating instruction, collaborating with families, and addressing the needs of multilingual or neurodiverse learners. This leads to more consistent instruction and stronger learning outcomes.

In summary, Iowa's recommendation to ensure the use of scientifically aligned and evidence-based literacy materials in preschool programs reflects a commitment to excellence and high expectations for all students. These materials help all children—regardless of language, ability, or background—gain a strong foundation for reading, setting them on a path toward academic success and full participation in school and society.

Note: This evidence-based practice guide is filled with a wealth of evidence-based practices that district and school leaders can use to develop quality preschool literacy programs.

5. Promote attendance of all four-year-olds in preschool programs.

Building on the foundational importance of high-quality early literacy instruction and resources, ensuring universal access to preschool for all four-year-olds is a critical next step in Iowa's comprehensive literacy efforts. Preschool programs provide an essential bridge between early learning at home and formal education in kindergarten, offering children structured opportunities to develop the language, literacy, cognitive, and social-emotional skills necessary for academic success.

Children who attend preschool—particularly those enrolled in programs with a strong focus on language and literacy—demonstrate measurable gains in foundational reading skills such as oral language development, vocabulary, phonological awareness, and print knowledge (NICHD, 2008; Snow et al., 1998). These early gains have long-lasting impacts. Meloy et al. (2019) demonstrate that preschool participation is associated with lower rates of grade retention and special education placement, especially for children from historically underserved populations. For children from low-income households, dual language learners, and children with disabilities, preschool can offer the critical early boost that helps level the playing field before kindergarten begins.

The evidence base also shows that the benefits of preschool are greatest when attendance is consistent and the programming is high-quality and literacy-rich. According to Yoshikawa et al. (2013), universal preschool programs help narrow opportunity gaps across racial and socioeconomic groups, supporting improved outcomes in reading and school readiness. Furthermore, participation in preschool contributes to children's confidence, executive functioning, and familiarity with classroom routines—all of which promote a smoother transition into kindergarten and lay the groundwork for continued academic engagement.

From a developmental perspective, the preschool years are a time of extraordinary brain development. As Shonkoff and Phillips (2000) emphasize, early experiences—particularly those in language-rich environments—shape the architecture of the brain and influence long-term cognitive and literacy outcomes. Preschool programs provide precisely the kind of intentional, structured, and socially interactive learning opportunities that strengthen the neural pathways essential to language and literacy development.

For these reasons, promoting preschool attendance for all four-year-olds is not only a sound educational strategy—it is a public investment in Iowa's future. Universal access to preschool aligns with the state's commitment to providing a quality education for all students, ensuring that no child enters school at a disadvantage, and reinforces the broader goals of the Iowa CSLP: to prepare all children to become skilled readers, writers, and lifelong learners.



Leader Resources:
Attendance Works | Early and Often: Showing Up in Preschool Matters 2.0 [Toolkit] (2018)

Attendance Works | Early and Often: Showing Up in Preschool Matters 2.0 [Executive Summary] (2018)

State Resources

1. Provide We are ECI: Early Literacy Plan 2023-2026. (Early Childhood Iowa State Board, n.d.)
2. Identify a set of approved kindergarten readiness assessments (CLSD work).
3. Provide an annual "State of the State in Early Childhood" report (go to "Annual Reports").
4. Identify quality family resources on the Early Childhood Iowa Website: National Association for The Education of Young Children [blog].
5. Develop an integrated data system for Iowa's early childhood system to effectively and efficiently coordinate the work of health, social services, and education agencies, directly benefiting families.

Additional Resources

Leader Resources:
The Meadows Center | 10 Key Policies and Practices for Supporting Language Development (University of Texas at Austin, 2023)

Family and Community Partnerships

Strong family and community partnerships are essential to building a comprehensive literacy framework that supports student success across all stages of development. In Iowa's Comprehensive State Literacy Plan, family and community involvement is not a supplemental strategy—it is a foundational element of effective literacy instruction. When families and communities are meaningfully engaged, students benefit from a more cohesive and supportive learning environment that extends beyond the classroom, reinforcing literacy skills in everyday, authentic contexts.

These partnerships promote a shared responsibility for literacy education, bridging the gap between school-based instruction and home-based support. By fostering open communication, investing in relevant and accessible resources, and embracing collaborative leadership models, Iowa's literacy plan encourages Local Education Agencies (LEAs) to build strong, sustainable networks that empower families and communities as partners in student learning. This collaborative approach helps ensure that literacy development is reinforced consistently from birth through grade 12.

Family and community engagement also plays a crucial role in ensuring access to resources. By partnering with Early Childhood Iowa, Head Start, and other local educational and community organizations, LEAs can co-create a shared vision for supporting literacy, especially for families navigating economic hardship or with limited access to educational tools. Establishing clear roles, sustained funding, and progress monitoring ensures that family and community engagement is not a one-time initiative but a long-term commitment to literacy for all.

These partnerships become especially vital when addressing the needs of students who are not yet proficient in literacy. Through strategies like implementing Personalized Reading Plans, using decodable take-home books, and offering multilingual family resources, schools can ensure that families are informed, equipped, and included in key literacy decisions—including decisions around retention. Instructional videos, newsletters, and digital hubs provide families with clear, actionable ways to support their child's learning journey at home.

Together, these recommendations represent Iowa's commitment to accessible, community-rooted literacy practices. By engaging families and communities as active participants, Iowa schools can create a powerful, coordinated system of support that fosters student success and cultivates a statewide culture of lifelong literacy.

Recommendations

1. Partner with Early Childhood Iowa, Head Start, and other local educational and community organizations to complete the following:
    a. Collaboratively, create a vision for family and community partnerships as part of your local literacy plan from birth to grade 12.
    b. Identify responsible parties for leading the work.
    c. Budget and plan for continuous progress monitoring, adjustments, and financial success.
2. Engage in the development and implementation of the Personalized Reading Plan for students not proficient in literacy.

3. Partner with educators in decision-making, including retention.
4. Utilize decodable take-home books packs to reinforce reading skills.
5. Provide families with multilingual literacy resources, newsletters, instructional videos, and tips on supporting literacy at home. Ensure that these resources are accessible, helping all families understand how they can play an active role in their child's literacy development. Consider creating a digital hub with easy-to-access resources and information in multiple languages.

1. Partner with Early Childhood Iowa, Head Start, or other local educational and community organizations to complete the following:

Partnering with organizations such as Early Childhood Iowa, Head Start, and other local educational and community entities is a vital strategy for building sustainable and impactful literacy systems. This recommendation calls for districts and schools to collaborate with trusted partners to co-create a shared vision for family and community engagement in literacy development across the entire educational continuum—from birth through grade 12. It also emphasizes the need to identify responsible leaders, establish clear plans and budgets, and embed processes for ongoing progress monitoring and continuous improvement.

By working collaboratively, school districts can align resources, streamline services, and ensure that literacy initiatives are coordinated across agencies and systems, rather than working in silos. This approach not only strengthens early learning transitions but also ensures that families and communities remain engaged and supported throughout a child's literacy journey.

Connecting to the Research on Community Partnerships in Education

Family partnerships that are mutually respectful, engage in two-way communication, and incorporate important cultural and family background information offer promise for stronger home–school connections. Strong school–community partnerships improve student achievement, family engagement, and educational success for students. According to the Harvard Family Research Project, community partnerships in education are most effective when they are "systemic, sustained, and integrated into school improvement efforts" (Weiss et al., 2006). When community organizations collaborate with schools around a common literacy vision, they extend learning beyond the classroom, help reduce service gaps, and promote shared responsibility for student success.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2009) supports this view, noting that authentic family and community engagement contributes to improved school readiness, stronger home–school connections, and increased cultural responsiveness in instruction. Additionally, Blank et al. (2012) found that community schools that foster strong partnerships and shared leadership often show improved student outcomes, better attendance, and more engaged families.

Community partnerships help ensure consistent access to high-quality literacy experiences, especially for children from underserved communities (Allington et al., 2018; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine , 2017). Whether through book drives, home visiting programs, or early literacy events, these efforts help create literacy-rich environments in the home, school, and community—leading to stronger student growth and long-term reading success (Chambers et al., 2021; Weiss et al., 2017).

Importantly, Espinosa (2013) emphasizes the importance of shaping family engagement policies and practices to reflect the cultural and linguistic realities of dual language learners and children from multicultural backgrounds. Traditional models of parent involvement may need to be expanded to include extended family members and tailored to align with family expectations and values around child development and learning. Engagement goes beyond translation of materials—it requires intentional efforts to build trusting, reciprocal relationships that honor families' linguistic and cultural identities and empower them as active partners in literacy development from the earliest years.

Weiss et al. (2005) provide compelling evidence that family involvement significantly impacts literacy growth over time, especially for children from low-income families. Their findings indicate that:

- Sustained involvement from kindergarten through fifth grade predicts literacy gains.
- Increases in family involvement correlate with improvements in student literacy performance.
- The effects are particularly strong for students whose mothers have lower levels of formal education.
- Family involvement boosts children's positive attitudes toward literacy, which in turn promotes achievement.
- A school's climate—including teacher outreach and supportive services—predicts the degree of family involvement, which ultimately impacts student outcomes.

These findings emphasize that family involvement should not be treated as an optional add-on, but rather as a core element of instructional strategy and policy. Schools can foster this engagement by:

- Creating welcoming school climates.
- Developing structured communication systems.
- Training educators to understand and implement family engagement practices.
- Providing consistent opportunities for families to participate in school leadership, learning activities, and decision-making.

By leveraging these research-based practices, Iowa's literacy efforts can ensure that family involvement is dynamic and sustained across all grade levels—ultimately contributing to improved literacy outcomes for every student.

2. Engage in the development and implementation of the Personalized Reading Plan for students not proficient in literacy.

Ensuring that all students achieve literacy proficiency is central to Iowa's CSLP. For students who are not meeting literacy benchmarks, a one-size-fits-all approach to instruction is not sufficient. The implementation of Personalized Reading Plans (PRPs) is a research-based, student-centered strategy that allows schools to respond systematically and equitably to individual literacy needs. PRPs serve as targeted intervention tools that guide educators, families, and specialists in coordinating supports that are responsive, timely, and effective.

Personalized Reading Plans are grounded in the principles of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), which emphasize early identification, data-driven decision-making, and the use of evidence-based instruction and intervention Gersten et al., 2009). PRPs function as actionable roadmaps that include diagnostic data, clearly defined goals, selected interventions, progress monitoring strategies, and timelines for review. They promote a proactive, rather than reactive, approach to literacy development—ensuring that struggling readers receive the specific supports they need before falling further behind.

Intensive, individualized intervention is essential for students who struggle with reading. The National Reading Panel (NICHD, 2000) found that the most effective interventions are explicit, systematic, and focused on specific areas of difficulty, including phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, or comprehension. Personalized Reading Plans (PRPs) help make this possible by aligning instruction with each student's needs and fostering coordination among teachers, specialists, and families.

In addition, PRPs foster family engagement and shared responsibility. By clearly outlining the student's literacy goals and the supports being provided, PRPs help families understand their child's learning

path and how they can contribute to progress at home. This transparency encourages partnership and creates consistent messaging between home and school.

Students from historically marginalized groups—including those from low-income backgrounds, multilingual learners, and students with disabilities—often require differentiated support to access the same learning opportunities as their peers (Simmons et al., 2008). PRPs allow educators to tailor interventions with consideration for each learner's cultural, linguistic, and developmental context, promoting high expectations for all students and access to quality instruction.

Ultimately, the development and implementation of PRPs is not just a compliance task—it is a commitment to literacy success for every student. It operationalizes Iowa's vision of literacy as a civil right by ensuring that students who need the most support receive it through intentional, responsive, and research-based planning.

3. Partner with educators in decision-making including retention.

Partnering with educators in decision-making processes—particularly those involving student promotion and retention—is essential for ensuring that literacy interventions are both instructionally sound and student-centered. Teachers, reading specialists, and interventionists bring deep knowledge of students' literacy profiles, learning histories, classroom engagement, and social-emotional development. Their involvement ensures that decisions are not made solely on standardized test scores or policy mandates, but through collaborative, evidence-informed, and context-sensitive processes.

Retention, in particular, is a complex and high-stakes decision that must be approached with caution and care. While some policies emphasize retention as a means to ensure reading proficiency by a certain grade, retention can have long-term academic and emotional impacts if not accompanied by targeted, high-quality intervention and instructional change (Jimerson, 2001). Educators are best positioned to interpret a student's needs holistically, weighing academic performance alongside developmental readiness, intervention history, and social factors.

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP, 2011) strongly recommends against retention as a standalone solution, advocating instead for individualized instructional supports and collaborative decision-making. Involving educators in these discussions allows for the consideration of alternative strategies—such as Personalized Reading Plans, differentiated instruction, additional reading time, or summer literacy programs—that may be more beneficial for student growth and well-being.

Collaborative decision-making also fosters professional trust and shared accountability. When educators are empowered to lead and inform critical literacy decisions, they are more likely to be invested in implementation and follow-through. Decisions made through collaborative inquiry and collective responsibility result in stronger student outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2008).

Teachers who understand their students' backgrounds and strengths can advocate for instructional strategies and supports that affirm identity, increase engagement, and promote access to literacy growth without defaulting to exclusionary practices like retention.

Partnering with educators in key literacy decisions, especially those involving retention, ensures that Iowa's commitment to evidence-based and student-centered instruction is upheld. It reflects a belief that the professionals closest to the child should play a central role in guiding the path forward.

4. Utilize decodable take-home books packs to reinforce reading skills.

Providing families with decodable take-home book packs is a powerful and accessible strategy for reinforcing early reading skills outside of the classroom. Rooted in the science of reading, decodable texts are carefully crafted to align with students' phonics instruction, allowing children to apply specific skills, such as letter-sound correspondences, blending, and word recognition, in connected text. When

these materials are extended to the home environment, they not only strengthen reading fluency and confidence but also promote family engagement and shared ownership of literacy development.

Decodable take-home books offer families a clear, structured way to support their child's reading progress. Unlike leveled texts that often rely on memorization or visual cues, decodable books are predictable and intentionally aligned with phonics patterns children are learning in school (Mesmer, 2005). This gives families a tangible tool to reinforce classroom instruction at home, providing consistent practice in decoding and promoting mastery through repetition and success.

Integrating decodable texts into family and community partnerships provides students additional options to practice their newly learned skills at home. Children from homes with limited literacy resources or where English is not the primary language may have fewer opportunities to engage with books that match their instructional needs. By sending home high-quality decodable books—paired with guidance or simple tips for families—schools empower caregivers to support literacy, regardless of their own reading ability or language proficiency (National Center on Improving Literacy, 2022). This practice ensures that all children have access to the kinds of targeted, skill-building texts that foster reading growth.

Furthermore, home-based reading practice using decodable books leads to improvements in word reading accuracy, fluency, and comprehension (Cheatham & Allor, 2012). When decodable books are part of an intentional family literacy initiative, they not only build foundational skills but also strengthen the home-school connection, demonstrating to families how and why phonics-based instruction supports reading success.

In the context of Iowa's Comprehensive State Literacy Plan, this recommendation reinforces the belief that literacy is not limited to the classroom. By making evidence-based instructional tools available at home, and by building families' capacity to use them confidently, schools can extend the impact of their literacy efforts and cultivate a statewide culture of reading support.

5. Provide families with multilingual literacy resources, newsletters, instructional videos, and tips on supporting literacy at home.

Engaging families in literacy development requires more than outreach—it demands linguistically accessible resources that reflect the richness of Iowa's communities. The recommendation to provide multilingual newsletters, instructional videos, tips for supporting literacy at home, and a digital hub stems from a growing body of research recognizing the critical role families play in reinforcing reading skills and fostering lifelong literacy, particularly among multilingual learners and students from historically underserved communities.

Providing materials in families' home languages, with attention to cultural relevance, ensures that all caregivers—regardless of language proficiency or literacy background—can actively support their child's literacy development. When families are engaged in meaningful and accessible ways, students demonstrate stronger reading achievement, improved motivation to learn, and more positive attitudes toward school (Fan & Chen, 2001; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002). Fostering Collaborative Partnerships With Families of English Learners Within a Multitiered System of Supports from Project ELITE², Project ELLIPSES, and Project LEE (2021) reinforces this recommendation by emphasizing that effective family-school partnerships for English learners require multidirectional communication and affirming practices.

Family literacy engagement is most effective when resources are multilingual, multimodal (videos, print, audio), and relevant to family cultures and routines (Gonzalez, 2005; U.S. DOE, Office of Technology, 2016: Weiss, et al, 2017). Resources that validate families' identities build trust, encourage participation, and strengthen the home-school partnership. Creating a digital literacy hub accessible via phone, tablet, or computer further enhances access to school and improves communication with teachers and administrators. Such platforms can centralize translated newsletters, skill-building videos,

book suggestions, and simple reading strategies, enabling caregivers to find the information they need, when they need it. This is especially important for families navigating work schedules, transportation limitations, or unfamiliarity with U.S. school systems.

Providing multilingual resources reflects Iowa's commitment to its multilingual families and students. By bridging the gap between school and home, school leaders and educators can support a seamless, community-wide approach to raising strong, confident readers.

State Resources

1. Family and Community Literacy Partnership Guide for Birth to Grade 12, which includes a list of potential statewide partners (TBD, CLSD grant work).
2. IRRC Caregivers Resource Hub for eLearning content specially designed for the caregivers of K–12 students.

Additional Resources

Leader Resources:
Project ELITE², Project LEE, & Project ELLIPSES | Brief 4: Fostering Collaborative Partnerships With Families of English Learners Within a Multitiered System of Supports (US Office of Special Education Programs, 2021)

The Ohio State University | Partnering with Families for Early Language and Literacy: Research-Based Strategies for early Childhood Educators (Boone, et al., 2021)

ParentPowered | Three Powerful Examples of Family Engagement in Schools to Inspire You (Madelyn, 2025)

Supporting Reading at Home Parent Guide (Project ELLIPSES, n.d.)

IMPACT Consortium | Support for Migratory Family Partnerships

Family and Caregiver Resources:
Reading Rockets | Reading 101: A Guide for Parents (WETA, 2020)

Supporting Reading at Home Parent Guide (Project ELLIPSES, n.d.)

Quality Educators

Educator success is a fundamental pillar of the Iowa Comprehensive State Literacy Plan, grounded in the understanding that skilled, knowledgeable, and supported teachers are the most influential factor in student literacy outcomes. The state's investment in educator success reflects a commitment to ensuring that every teacher—across all grade levels, from early childhood through high school—is equipped to deliver high-quality, evidence-based literacy instruction that supports every learner's growth.

Teacher effectiveness is the single most important in-school factor influencing student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Rivkin et al., 2005). Effective literacy instruction depends on teachers who are confident in their understanding of the science of reading, including phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, as well as their ability to differentiate instruction for all students, including English learners and students with disabilities.

The Iowa Comprehensive State Literacy Plan emphasizes professional learning that is sustained, collaborative, and focused on instructional practice. High-quality professional learning that is embedded

in teachers' daily work, such as through coaching, professional learning communities (PLCs), and collaborative inquiry, has been shown to be more effective than one-time workshops in improving instructional quality and student learning (Desimone & Garet, 2015; Desimone & Pak, 2017). These models promote reflective practice, allow teachers to analyze student data, and encourage collective problem-solving—key ingredients for ongoing instructional improvement.

To support this work, Iowa prioritizes the development of strong instructional leadership teams and the use of instructional coaching, which has been shown to improve teachers' implementation of evidence-based practices and positively affect student outcomes in literacy (Kraft et al, 2018). Literacy coaches, mentors, and teacher leaders help build internal capacity within schools, ensuring that professional learning translates into consistent, high-quality literacy instruction in every classroom.

Furthermore, supporting educator success involves retaining and nurturing effective teachers, particularly in high-need and rural schools. Teacher burnout and attrition are often driven by lack of professional support, isolation, and limited access to growth opportunities (Ingersoll et al., 2014). Iowa's focus on educator collaboration, embedded coaching, and leadership development addresses these challenges by creating systems where teachers feel supported, connected, and empowered. This focus is especially critical in literacy instruction, where teachers must be adaptive, data-informed, and culturally responsive. Educators who are confident in their literacy knowledge and instructional strategies are more likely to deliver instruction that is engaging and aligned with students' needs (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

By centering educator success as a strategic priority, Iowa is not only improving instruction today but is building the professional infrastructure needed for long-term, systemic literacy growth. This ensures that every student in Iowa—regardless of geography, background, or learning profile—has access to excellent literacy teaching that unlocks academic potential and lifelong opportunity.

Recommendations

1. Attend LETRS® for Elementary Educators or Early Childhood professional learning.
2. Review the Standards Professional Learning Opportunities recordings and content to support implementation of the revised 2024 Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects.
3. Utilize the national resources such as the International Dyslexia Association's Knowledge and Practice Standards and the International Literacy Association Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals.
4. Higher Education Institutions align syllabi and content to comprehensive literacy and the Science of Reading for all literacy coursework, including the integration of disciplinary literacy instructional practices within content specific practicum courses. Institutions of Higher Education align syllabi to Science of Reading principles through use of the Iowa Literacy Educator Preparation Workbook or similar tools such as Rhode Island Science of Reading and Structured Literacy Syllabi Refinement Tool or those offered by The Center for Reading Science.

Recommendations Overview

1. Attend LETRS® for Elementary Educators or Early Childhood professional learning.

The Iowa CSLP recognizes that equipping educators with deep knowledge of how children learn to read is essential for effective literacy instruction. The recommendation for teachers to attend LETRS® (Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling)—whether in elementary or early childhood

settings—reflects Iowa's commitment to providing high-quality, research-aligned professional learning that empowers educators to deliver instruction grounded in the science of reading.

Developed by Dr. Louisa Moats and rooted in decades of reading research, LETRS® offers comprehensive training in the foundational components of literacy, including phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and written expression. The course is designed to help educators understand the how and why behind reading instruction, not just scripted strategies—making it adaptable to any curriculum and grade level.

Why LETRS®?

A. Grounded in the Science of Reading

LETRS® is based on the science of reading, an interdisciplinary body of research from cognitive psychology, neuroscience, linguistics, and education that identifies how proficient reading develops and what instruction is most effective. The National Reading Panel (NICHD, 2000) and subsequent reviews (Castles et al., 2018) emphasize the importance of explicit, systematic instruction in foundational literacy skills, especially for students at risk of reading difficulties.

B. Deepens Educator Knowledge and Practice

Many teacher preparation programs do not provide sufficient training in early reading instruction (Moats, 2020a, 2020b). LETRS® fills this gap by helping educators understand how to assess, plan, and differentiate literacy instruction for all learners, including multilingual students and those with dyslexia or other reading difficulties. Teachers who complete LETRS® report improved confidence and instructional clarity, leading to more effective teaching and better student outcomes.

C. Promotes Instructional Consistency

LETRS® training builds a common language and framework for literacy instruction across schools and districts. This consistency enhances collaboration among educators and ensures all students, regardless of classroom or background, receive instruction aligned with research-based best practices. It is especially beneficial for educators in MTSS frameworks, where precise intervention and progress monitoring are required.

D. Supports Early Childhood Educators

LETRS® for Early Childhood Educators provides early learning professionals with critical knowledge about oral language, print awareness, alphabet knowledge, and phonological sensitivity, skills that serve as the foundation for later reading success. High-quality early literacy instruction in preschool has been shown to significantly impact later academic performance, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Meloy et al., 2019).

By investing in LETRS®, Iowa ensures that its educators are not only implementing evidence-based practices, but also understanding the research behind those practices. This investment creates a stronger, more knowledgeable teaching workforce capable of closing literacy gaps and elevating outcomes for all students.

2. Review the Standards Professional Learning Opportunities recordings and content to support implementation of the revised 2024 Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects.

The Iowa CSLP emphasizes the importance of aligning instruction to the state's revised 2024 English Language Arts (ELA) and Literacy Standards, which include integrated literacy expectations across disciplines—such as history/social studies, science, and technical subjects. To support successful

implementation, the plan recommends that educators and LEAs engage with the Standards Professional Learning Opportunities (Department, 2025) recordings and content. These resources provide essential guidance, examples, and instructional strategies to help educators understand and apply the standards with fidelity and purpose.

Why This Matters

A. Ensuring Standards-Aligned Instruction Across Content Areas

Literacy is not solely the responsibility of the ELA classroom. Iowa's revised 2024 standards reflect the disciplinary literacy model, which emphasizes that each subject area requires specific literacy skills (e.g., sourcing and interpreting historical texts, analyzing scientific arguments, reading technical manuals). Engaging with professional learning materials helps educators in all subjects understand how to support reading, writing, speaking, and listening through the lens of their discipline (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008).

B. Bridging the Gap Between Standards and Practice

Without targeted professional learning, standards documents alone are insufficient to drive instructional change. Teachers need scaffolded support in unpacking and applying new standards in real classroom settings (Desimone & Garet, 2015). The Department's recorded trainings and resources provide concrete examples, pacing suggestions, and instructional practices that align with the rigor and intent of the 2024 revisions.

C. Promoting Instructional Consistency

Professional learning that is accessible and consistent across the state ensures that all Iowa educators are working from a common understanding of the standards. This consistency helps reduce variation in instructional quality, particularly in districts with fewer resources for curriculum development or instructional coaching. When educators across schools and content areas engage with shared training, students benefit from a more coherent literacy experience.

D. Strengthening Educator Capacity and Leadership

Reviewing the Standards Professional Learning content positions educators and instructional leaders as informed implementers and curriculum decision-makers. Teachers become more confident in designing lessons that integrate literacy and content learning, while instructional leaders can better support planning, coaching, and curriculum alignment efforts. This aligns with the research-supported model of distributed instructional leadership, where capacity-building is shared across educators (Leithwood et al., 2004).

E. Supporting Long-Term Systems Change

The successful implementation of revised standards requires ongoing professional learning, not one-time exposure. By engaging with recorded content, educators can revisit key concepts as needed, onboard new staff, and integrate materials into PLCs, coaching cycles, and district-wide professional learning plans. This flexible, self-paced model also supports rural and under-resourced districts that may face challenges accessing live training sessions.

3. Utilize national resources to prepare literacy professionals.

The Iowa CSLP underscores the importance of building a knowledgeable, skilled, and well-supported literacy workforce. To guide this effort, the plan recommends that LEAs, educator preparation programs, and professional learning providers utilize the Iowa Literacy Educator Preparation Workbook, International Dyslexia Association's Knowledge and Practice Standards (2018), and the International Literacy Association (ILA) Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals 2017 (2018). These

standards offer a comprehensive, research-based framework that defines what effective literacy educators should know and be able to do at various levels and roles within the education system..

Why the Standards Are Essential

A. Define Professional Excellence in Literacy Instruction

The standards offer a common language and vision for what constitutes effective literacy teaching and leadership. They articulate expectations for content knowledge (e.g., foundational skills, writing, digital literacy), instructional design (e.g., assessment, responsive teaching), and the dispositions necessary for creating supportive learning environments, such as for students with learning differences. The standards ensure that all literacy professionals—regardless of role—are prepared to meet the needs of today's learners.

B. Align Preparation and Practice with the Science of Reading

The standards are grounded in research on how children learn to read and write, supporting instruction that is explicit, systematic, and cumulative. They encourage ongoing reflection and professional learning, aligning with Iowa's emphasis on evidence-based practices and high-impact literacy instruction across the birth-to-grade-12 continuum.

C. Support Leadership Development and Collaboration

In addition to classroom instruction, the standards address the roles of literacy coaches, interventionists, and school/district literacy leaders. These roles are essential in Iowa's vision for building sustainable literacy systems, supporting MTSS implementation, and ensuring fidelity to instructional frameworks. The standards promote collaborative leadership, advocacy, and data-informed decision-making, empowering literacy professionals to drive improvement at every level.

D. Improve Access to High-Quality Instruction

The standards emphasize the use of evidence-based practices. By adopting the standards, Iowa can ensure that educators are delivering effective instruction in ways to meet the learning needs for all students. This focus aligns with Iowa's commitment to support all learners.

4. Higher Education Institutions align syllabi and content to comprehensive literacy and the Science of Reading for all literacy coursework, including the integration of disciplinary literacy instructional practices within content specific practicum courses.

The Department recognizes that ensuring all students become proficient readers requires a highly prepared and knowledgeable educator workforce, beginning in teacher preparation programs. To achieve this, the plan calls for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to align their literacy coursework syllabi and content to the science of reading and comprehensive literacy instruction, while also embedding disciplinary literacy strategies into content-specific practicum experiences.

This recommendation ensures that new teachers enter the classroom with a strong foundation in reading research, practical instructional skills, and the ability to support literacy across content areas—equipping them to address the varied needs of Iowa's learners from day one.

Why This Alignment Is Critical

A. Builds Foundational Knowledge Based on the Science of Reading

The science of reading refers to the vast, interdisciplinary body of research that explains how students learn to read and which instructional practices are most effective. It emphasizes explicit, systematic instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (Castles et al.,

2018; NICHD, 2000). Yet, many teacher preparation programs have historically lacked coursework that sufficiently addresses this research base (Moats, 2020a, 2020b). Aligning syllabi with the science of reading ensures all teacher candidates learn how to teach reading based on how the brain learns to read—not just theory or tradition.

B. Promotes a Comprehensive Literacy Framework

Comprehensive literacy integrates foundational skills with oral language development, writing, listening, speaking, and critical thinking. It also emphasizes differentiation and the ability to teach students with various linguistic, cognitive, and cultural backgrounds. Embedding this broad view into teacher preparation ensures that literacy instruction is appropriate across early childhood, elementary, and secondary education.

C. Prepares Teachers for Disciplinary Literacy Instruction

Literacy is not confined to English Language Arts. Students must also learn to read like historians, write like scientists, and engage with texts in technical fields. Disciplinary literacy involves teaching the reading, writing, and thinking practices unique to each subject area (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). By integrating disciplinary literacy into content-specific practicum courses, future teachers develop the pedagogical content knowledge to support reading and writing in their own disciplines—something especially critical in middle and high school.

D. Strengthens the Pipeline of Literacy-Ready Educators

Ensuring that HEIs align with the science of reading helps create a more consistent, statewide baseline of literacy knowledge and instructional competence among new teachers. This alignment also supports ongoing professional learning, as teachers enter the workforce with the language and frameworks used in state-level initiatives, coaching, and assessment systems.

E. Addresses Achievement Gaps

A well-prepared teacher is the most powerful lever for addressing early reading difficulties and preventing long-term academic disparities. Aligning preparation programs with research-based literacy instruction helps reduce variability in student outcomes and ensures that all children—especially those from marginalized communities—receive the literacy instruction they need to thrive (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Foorman et al., 2016).

State Resources

1. Iowa Reading Research Center Science of Reading Summit.
2. IRRC eLearning Modules.
3. Development of the Iowa Literacy and Evidence-Based Clearinghouse (TBD, CLSD grant work).
4. The Institute of Higher Education, Science of Reading Convening each summer, 2025–2029 (CLSD grant work).
5. Publication of the monthly Literacy News You Can Use (via Department literacy webpage, 2024g).

Additional Evidence-Based Practices and Resources

Educator Support | Iowa Professional Development Model (2009)

Recommendation for LEAs | Use the Iowa Professional Development Model Technical Guide to Steer Professional Learning Strategies and Initiatives

Source: Iowa Department of Education. (2009). *Iowa Professional Development Model Technical Guide*.

The Iowa Professional Development Model (IPDM) Technical Guide provides a comprehensive framework for designing, implementing, and evaluating professional learning (professional development) in Iowa schools, with the ultimate goal of improving student achievement. Below is an overview and summary of the key components and rationale behind the IPDM as outlined in the guide:

Purpose and Foundation

The IPDM is built on the understanding that well-designed, sustained professional learning significantly improves student learning. The model aims to:

- Increase student achievement.
- Build teacher capacity through high-quality, evidence-based learning experiences.
- Align teacher learning efforts with student needs, curriculum, and instruction.
- Support systemic and collaborative improvement practices.

Key Operating Principles

The model is guided by four essential principles:

1. Leadership – Strong, distributed leadership is crucial for sustaining learning efforts.
2. Focus on Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment – Learning experiences should directly support instructional improvement.
3. Simultaneity – Schools must manage multiple initiatives while maintaining focus on priority goals.
4. Participative Decision-Making – Educators are actively involved in selecting and planning their learning experiences.

Core Components of the IPDM Cycle

The IPDM is structured as a continuous cycle of improvement with the following stages:

1. Collecting and Analyzing Student Data: Multiple data sources (e.g., standardized tests, diagnostic data, subgroup analyses) are used to identify student learning needs and drive decisions.
2. Goal Setting and Student Learning: SMART goals are created based on data to target specific improvements in student achievement.
3. Selecting Content: Learning content is chosen based on the needs identified in the data and aligned with district goals, teaching standards, and research.
4. Designing the Learning Process: A structured process for delivering learning experiences is developed, including theory, modeling, practice, feedback, collaboration, and coaching.

5. Training and Learning Opportunities: Ongoing learning sessions are provided for educators, moving beyond one-time workshops toward job-embedded learning.
6. Collaboration and Implementation: Teachers collaborate in professional learning communities to apply new strategies and monitor their impact.
7. Ongoing Data Collection (Formative Evaluation): Data is gathered to assess implementation fidelity and inform adjustments during the PD process.
8. Program Evaluation (Summative Evaluation): Districts evaluate whether the learning experiences impacted instructional practice and student outcomes.

Professional Development Plans

The guide outlines expectations and tools for different levels of PD planning:

- District Professional Learning Plan – A long-term plan aligned with district goals and data.
- Attendance Center/Building-Level Plan – Targets building-specific needs within the district's framework.
- Individual Teacher Plan – Customized goals developed in collaboration with an evaluator.
- Individual Administrator Plan – Aligns leadership development with school and district goals.

Alignment with State and National Standards

The IPDM aligns with both:

- The Iowa Professional Development Standards, which mandate data-driven, instructional-focused, research-based PD.
- The National Staff Development Council Standards, emphasizing collaborative, sustained, and student-centered PD.

Summary

The IPDM is a structured, research-informed approach to professional learning that emphasizes collaborative learning, data-driven decision-making, and alignment with instructional goals. Its cyclical process ensures ongoing evaluation and adaptation, positioning Iowa educators to effectively meet the needs of students and improve educational outcomes across the state. The model's emphasis on leadership, instructional focus, and teacher involvement ensures that PD efforts are meaningful, sustainable, and impactful.

K–5 | English Learners | Develop Formal or Academic English

Recommendation K–5: Ensure that the development of formal or academic English is a key instructional goal for English learners, beginning in the primary grades. Provide curricula and supplemental curricula to accompany core reading and mathematics series to support this goal. Accompany with relevant training and professional learning. (Expert Opinion)

Source: What Works Clearinghouse | *Effective Literacy and English Language Instruction for English Learners in the Elementary Grades: A Practice Guide* (Gersten et al., 2007)

The Role of Professional Development in Supporting Academic English Instruction for English Learners

A central theme within Recommendation 4—Develop Academic English—is the crucial role of ongoing, practical, and focused professional learning for teachers. While the evidence base for the recommendation is rated as “low” due to limited empirical studies, there is strong expert consensus that English learners require explicit, sustained instruction in academic English beginning in the early grades. Importantly, this instruction can only be effective if educators are well-prepared and supported to deliver it.

The panel underscores that many teachers lack awareness of the linguistic features of academic English—such as complex sentence structures, morphology, discourse conventions, and content-specific vocabulary—and therefore require systematic and targeted professional learning to teach these elements effectively. Instructional strategies alone are not sufficient without a deep understanding of language structures, scaffolding techniques, and instructional practices.

Key Components of Effective Professional Development for Academic English Instruction

1. **Ongoing and Gradual Learning:** Teachers need extensive professional learning opportunities that introduce key features of English morphology, syntax, and discourse in manageable ways over time. This reduces cognitive overload and promotes gradual mastery of complex instructional content.
2. **Practical, Hands-On Learning:** Effective professional learning should include:
    - Text analysis activities that help teachers identify the language demands of reading and writing tasks.
    - Guidance on crafting student-friendly explanations of complex grammatical concepts.
    - Opportunities to practice delivering instruction and receive feedback from peers or coaches.
3. **Focus on Academic English Integration:** Teachers should learn how to:
    - Identify and model academic vocabulary and grammar during content instruction.
    - Design lessons that integrate academic language goals into reading, writing, and content-area instruction.
    - Provide oral and written practice opportunities for students to use academic English meaningfully and accurately.
4. **Structured Time and Systematic Instruction:** The guide recommends that teachers devote specific instructional blocks to the development of academic English—distinct from core content instruction—while also integrating academic language throughout the school day. Professional learning should prepare educators to plan and manage both approaches.
5. **Addressing Teacher Misconceptions and Expectations:** The panel identifies that some teachers may mistakenly believe that academic English is too difficult for ELs, or that simplified texts are more appropriate. Professional learning should address these misconceptions and build teacher confidence in using rigorous, grade-level content with appropriate language scaffolds.
6. **Alignment with Curriculum and Language Objectives:** Teachers must learn to align vocabulary instruction with grammar and usage, and integrate language objectives into all lessons. For example, a vocabulary lesson on the word “success” should include instruction on related forms (“succeed,” “successful”) and proper syntactic usage in context.

The effective development of academic English for ELs hinges on intentional, well-supported professional learning for educators. Teachers cannot be expected to deliver high-quality academic language instruction without a solid foundation in the structures of academic English and ample opportunities to practice, reflect, and refine their instructional approaches. As the guide notes, while empirical research in this area is limited, the expert consensus is clear: professional learning is essential for preparing teachers to meet the complex linguistic needs of ELs.

Highlighted Coaching Resource

Coaching Field Guide: Resources and Tools to Support Iowa Coaches (2019)

The Iowa Coaching Field Guide is a comprehensive resource designed to enhance the skills, practices, and professional effectiveness of instructional coaches across the state. It serves as a foundational tool for supporting teacher leadership and improving instruction within the framework of Iowa's education system, particularly aligned with the Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) and the Specially Designed Instruction (SDI) Framework.

Purpose and Vision

Developed by the SDI Coaching Skills Task Team through the Collaborating for Iowa's Kids (C4K) initiative, the guide aims to:

- Build the capacity of coaches to improve teaching and learning.
- Offer clear tools, strategies, and self-assessment resources for coaches, administrators, and teacher leaders.
- Support the implementation of evidence-based instructional practices within literacy and other content areas.
- Align with the Iowa professional learning Model (IPDM), MTSS, and Differentiated Accountability processes.

Key Features of the Guide

1. Coaching Process Framework

   The guide outlines a flexible, three-phase coaching cycle—Align & Innovate, Engage & Facilitate, and Reflect & Reimagine—which corresponds with the Iowa professional learning Model and the MTSS collaborative inquiry questions.

   These phases emphasize goal setting, co-teaching and modeling, and data-informed reflection to support ongoing instructional improvement.

2. TLC Learning Supports Framework

   Coaching competencies are organized into seven domains: Adult Learning, Collaborative Culture, Communication, Content/Pedagogy/Assessment, Data, Systems Thinking, and Organizational Leadership.

   Each domain includes a self-assessment rubric and tools for developing coaches' capacity in targeted areas of instructional and systems coaching.

3. Dual Coaching Roles

   The guide differentiates between practices coaching, which supports teachers with instructional implementation, and systems coaching, which focuses on supporting leadership teams in building sustainable infrastructure for MTSS and SDI.

   This dual focus ensures that coaching is both classroom-focused and systemically strategic.

4. Tools and Resources

   Includes planning templates, adult learning strategies, dialogue protocols, professional learning resources, and data analysis tools.

   These resources are intended to support coaches in promoting teacher growth and student outcomes for all learners.

Coaching is a critical lever in improving literacy instruction across all levels. The Iowa Coaching Field Guide:

- Equips instructional coaches with structured and research-aligned methods to support literacy development.
- Promotes the consistent implementation of best practices across schools and districts.
- Provides a clear model for building instructional capacity and fostering reflective practice.
- Aligns with national research emphasizing the role of coaching in promoting student achievement and sustaining instructional change. (Cornett & Knight, 2009; Joyce & Showers, 2002).
- Enhances the effectiveness of professional learning by embedding it in ongoing, job-embedded support—an approach shown to be significantly more impactful than one-time workshops.

The Department is committed to building a robust infrastructure for literacy leadership. As literacy outcomes are closely tied to the quality of instruction, and instruction is strengthened through skillful coaching, this guide serves as an essential tool for achieving excellence in literacy education across Iowa.

Glossary

disadvantaged children: any child who is at risk of educational failure or is otherwise in need of special assistance and support, including an infant or toddler with developmental delays, a child living in poverty, a child with a disability, a child who is an English learner (EL), migratory children, or a child belonging to a subgroup that is otherwise underrepresented (i.e., Native American). This can also include a child who meets one or more of the following criteria: reading below grade level, at risk of graduating outside of their cohort, homeless, raised in foster care, and/or has a history of incarceration. These children will be referred to as disadvantaged children from this point forward.

Early Childhood Educator: in Iowa, educators who work with young children, typically from birth through age five, to support their development and prepare them for future learning experiences.

English Learners (ELs): students are classified as ELs when their Home Language Survey (HLS) indicates a language other than English is spoken prominently in the home and they have not yet demonstrated proficiency in all four domains of the English language (reading, writing, speaking, and listening). The Standardized Entrance and Exit Procedures for Iowa's English Learners provides additional information to identify, assess, and monitor ELs. Iowa EL Code defines state-specific requirements for identifying and serving all ELs.

Local Education Agency (LEA): a public authority responsible for operating and overseeing public K–12 schools within a specific geographical area, such as a school district or charter school organization, and for implementing state and federal education policies.

students with disabilities: individuals who have been formally identified through evaluation as having one or more physical, cognitive, emotional, behavioral, or learning impairments that significantly impact their ability to access and benefit from general education without specially designed instruction or supports. These students qualify for services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) or Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and may receive individualized instruction, accommodations, modifications, and related services as part of an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or Section 504 Plan.

Students with disabilities represent a wide range of learners, including those with:

- Specific learning disabilities
- Speech or language impairments
- Intellectual disabilities
- Emotional or behavioral disorders
- Autism spectrum disorder
- Hearing, vision, or physical impairments
- Traumatic brain injury
- Multiple disabilities

This definition recognizes the presumed competence and potential of all students with disabilities and affirms their right to access high-quality instruction that is supported by evidence-based practices, delivered by appropriately trained educators, and tailored to their individual needs.

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