



# THE PATH FORWARD SUMMIT 2025

ISSUE BRIEF





## Introduction

Early literacy proficiency is [critical for later success](#) both in school and life. Students who lack reading proficiency by the end of the third grade are [four times](#) more likely to drop out of high school than proficient readers—and the number is even higher for students living in poverty. Low literacy skills can also have a lasting impact into adulthood – [59 million](#) adults in the United States have low literacy skills.

Yet, despite the robust research detailing the importance of reading proficiency and decades of efforts to improve early literacy instruction, the United States continues to struggle to effectively teach children to read.

The education interruption of the past several years [significantly disrupted](#) reading progress nationally. According to data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), between 2019 and 2024, average reading scores for both fourth and eighth grade students [decreased](#) by five points. The widely used Measure of Academic Progress also reveals a three to six [percentile drop](#) between the 2019–20 and the 2020–21 school years.

In addition to declining scores, achievement gaps between white students and students of color are widening. Scores from the 2022 NAEP reading assessment show a [26-point difference](#) in reading proficiency between white and Black students, a 30-point difference between white and American Indian students, and a 22-point difference between white and Hispanic students. There is also a 36-point

difference between students with disabilities and students without disabilities, and a 39-point difference between English Learner (EL) and non-EL students.

## Early Work in the Science of Reading

In 1997, the Director of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development convened the [National Reading Panel](#) (NRP) at the request of the U.S. Congress. The NRP aimed to “assess the status of research based knowledge,” in an effort some viewed as an opportunity to settle the [Reading Wars](#). The Panel conducted a meta-analysis of reading research and identified [five pillars](#) of instruction that contribute to reading development: phonemic awareness, phonics, oral reading fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

The findings and meta-analysis from the NRP are a critical component of the evidence-base within the [science of reading](#) (SOR). The science of reading is an interdisciplinary body of research grounded in decades of evidence from fields like education, psychology, linguistics, and neuroscience. It emphasizes that [reading is not an innate skill](#) and must be explicitly taught to most children. Findings from NRP are central to this evidence base, and the field continues to evolve as new research emerges.

The science of reading looks to two frameworks – The Simple View of Reading and Scarborough’s Reading Rope – both of which can be used to inform and create reading assessments and instructional resources for all educational stakeholders.



### The Simple View of Reading

The [Simple View of Reading](#) is a framework developed by Philip Gough and William Turner that depicts the skills necessary for reading comprehension to occur. Based on over 150 empirical studies, the Simple View of Reading posits that young learners need both the ability to decode and the ability to comprehend language to achieve reading comprehension.

**Decoding x Language  
Comprehension = Reading  
Comprehension**

Phonics, as it relates to decoding, is an important component of reading comprehension, although not the only component. Similarly, language instruction must occur to support students understanding of language. Therefore, the formula is written as multiplicative, rather than additive—if a student misses one of these components, the formula would multiply by zero, and the result for reading comprehension would be zero. Hence, reading comprehension cannot occur without both decoding and language comprehension.

The Simple View of Reading is limited in that it is a primarily cognitive [theory of reading](#) and does not address or provide instructional practices; nevertheless it helps educators understand the skills that are required for young children to achieve reading comprehension.

### Scarborough's Reading Rope

Dr. Hollis Scarborough introduced the [Reading Rope](#) to illustrate how different elements of language comprehension and word recognition must be interconnected to achieve skilled literacy. As learners engage in more conversation, they gain more exposure to language structure and words, which in turn expands their background knowledge and strengthens their ability to utilize vocabulary. They learn to make

### Misconceptions of The Science of Reading

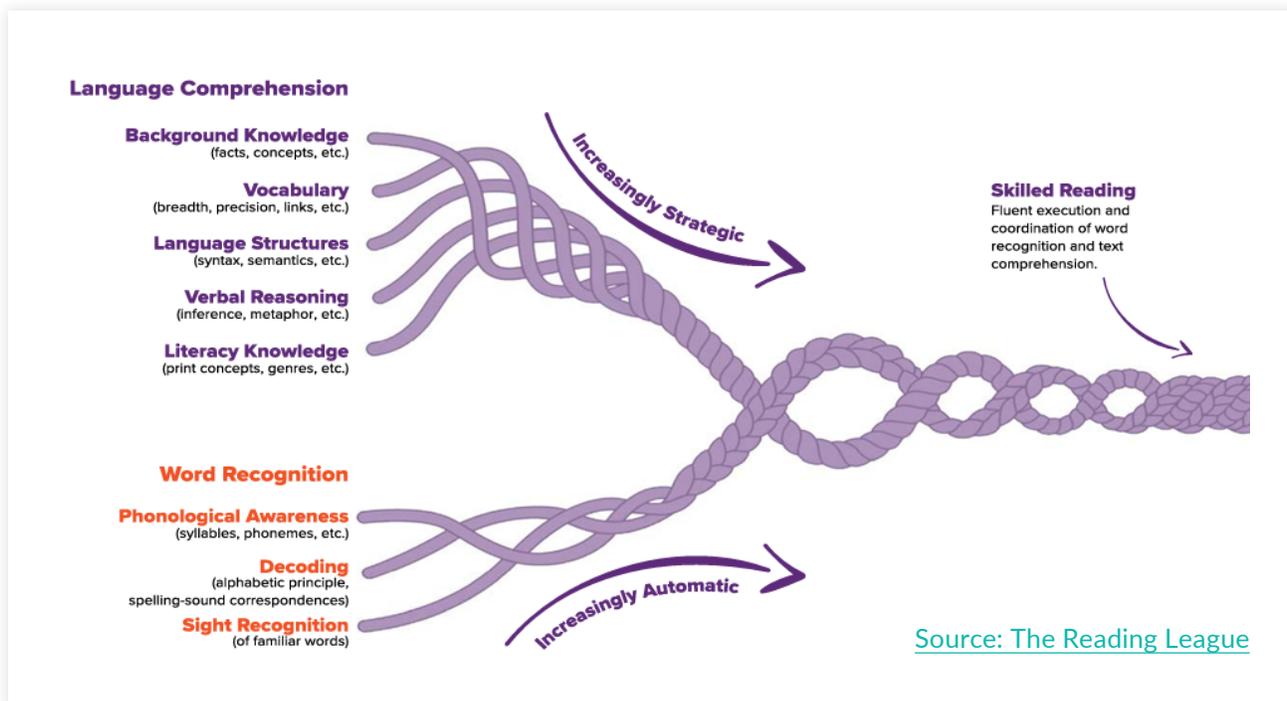
#### The science of reading is not:

- A program for instruction that provides a scope and sequence or curriculum
- Specific books or leveled readers for students and teachers
- A literacy method
- An ideology or philosophy
- A political agenda
- A fad, trend, or new idea
- A one-size-fits-all approach
- A single specific component of instruction such as phonics

sense of sentence structures and how to use them effectively. As they read, they also gain the ability to decode, recognize words, and make connections between written language and sounds.

With language comprehension and word recognition, reading automaticity and strategic understanding also [improve](#). The Reading Rope ultimately reveals that reading is a multifaceted cognitive process, requiring a variety of skills.





## State Policies Incorporating the Science of Reading

There has been rapid growth in interest in policies related to the science of reading. [Twenty states](#) passed or were considering measures related to the science of reading as of fall 2021; by spring 2022, over [35 states](#), had passed or considered legislation focused on the science of reading. Now, [40 states and D.C.](#) have implemented science of reading legislation. These efforts generally focus on three areas: teacher preparation and licensure, classroom instruction and intervention, and professional development.

### Teacher Preparation and Licensure

Teachers are more likely to use the science of reading in classroom instruction if they have learned evidence-based instructional practices in their educator preparation program (EPP). As of 2025, [43 states](#) required EPPs to address the science of reading for at least some teacher candidates. A national review

of [syllabi](#) also found that coverage of the science of reading within university coursework is increasing. While surveys and syllabi reviews alone are not sufficient to truly measure how effectively the science of reading is embedded in teacher preparation programs, it does provide some insight into the growing awareness of the science at the EPP level. As for licensure, in 2024, [31 states](#) required elementary teachers to pass a credential exam that measures their knowledge of the science of reading.

### ALABAMA

In 2019, Alabama passed the [Alabama Literacy Act](#) supporting reading instruction for Pre-Kindergarten through third grade students. The bill also targeted funding and resources to ensure effective implementation, requiring nine hours of science of reading training for educators in Kindergarten through sixth grade and a [Foundations of Reading](#) assessment for teacher candidates pursuing an Elementary Education, Early Childhood Education, or Collaborative Special Education teaching certificate.



To effectively enact the Alabama Literacy Act, the Alabama State Department of Education developed an [implementation guide](#) complete with professional learning opportunities, plans for monitoring progress, and recommended next steps. The state also stipulated that EPPs submit course syllabi to the Alabama State Department of Education for evaluation. To ensure programs are in compliance with the legislation, the state contracted with the Barksdale Reading Institute to provide external review of course offerings.

### ILLINOIS

Illinois adopted the [2024 Comprehensive Literacy Plan](#) under the Illinois State Board of Education with three goals focused on student instruction, teacher preparation, and creating conditions for high-quality, evidence-based instruction. [Public Act 103-0402](#), which mandated the development of the Comprehensive Literacy Plan, requires all EPPs to align their curriculum with the plan. In order to support educator preparation programs with these requirements, the Illinois State Board of Education developed a [Community of Practice \(CoP\) for Educator Preparation Programs](#). This CoP offers a strategic network of higher education leaders, faculty, and staff to improve and support literacy instruction in EPPs across the state. The CoP designed a statewide rubric to evaluate alignment of literacy preparation standards in EPPs with the Comprehensive Literacy Plan.

“*The lack of systematic reading foundations and reading comprehension instruction in Pre-K-2 has exacerbated inequality in our country... We just aren’t requiring that our systems do at scale the things we know scientifically matter and work.*”  
- **Rebecca Kockler**

### INDIANA

Indiana set their sights on ensuring 95 percent of their third grade students can read by 2027. To support this goal, [House Enrolled Act 1558](#) required the Indiana State Board of Education to establish an [Early Literacy Endorsement](#). The Early Literacy Endorsement is required for incoming educators for teaching Pre-K to fifth grade or special education, and educators who are renewing their license on or after July 1, 2027. To support current teachers with this requirement, Indiana offers a free 80-hour course from [Keys to Literacy](#). Stipends for eligible educators were also made available to incentivize the completion of the course.

### NORTH CAROLINA

Similarly, in 2020, the University of North Carolina (UNC) System Board of Governors passed the [Resolution on Teacher Preparation](#) to create a framework for implementing the science of reading in EPPs for prospective elementary and special education teachers. To implement this, the System created [Literacy Fellows](#) responsible for ensuring pre-service teachers are competent and consistent in teaching literacy to all students. In 2021, the North Carolina General Assembly passed the [Excellent Public Schools Act](#) requiring EPPs to include coursework on the science of reading and a [provision](#) to review the integration in public and private universities. The state is implementing [comprehensive](#) science of reading practices in their EPPs.

### Classroom Instruction and Intervention

States leading in early literacy instruction have targeted supports for educators who work directly with new or struggling readers such as the identification and adoption of high-quality instructional materials, access to on-campus support or coaching, and requirements for screeners to identify students who need early intervention.

### MISSISSIPPI

The Magnolia State has been a [national leader](#) and trailblazer with respect to incorporating the science of reading into early instruction and teacher preparation. In collaboration with the Barksdale Reading Institute, the University of Mississippi’s [Center for Excellence in Literacy Instruction](#), and others, state leaders began taking steps to embed the science of reading across education sectors in 2013. These efforts [included](#):

- Providing instructional coaches to K-3 classroom teachers in schools identified as most in need
- Providing mentoring related to the science of reading to faculty members of teacher preparation programs
- Funding professional development for teachers in the science of reading
- Embedding the simple view of reading in professional learning

Since making these changes, Mississippi’s students have shown considerable reading progress. The state ranked first for reading gains on the 2019 NAEP and fourth grade reading [scores](#) grew by four points from 2017 to 2019, tying the national average – despite average reading scores declining nationally during that same timeframe. Post- pandemic, Mississippi was also [one of the few states](#) that saw no significant declines in NAEP reading scores among fourth grade students.

### TENNESSEE

In 2021, the state allocated over [\\$120 million](#) to launch [Reading 360](#), a statewide initiative providing the following literacy supports for administrators and teachers:

- [Tennessee Universal Reading Screener](#) suite of tools to administer to all K-3 students
- [Reading Summit Professional Development](#) so teachers can have access to optional asynchronous monthly trainings for the implementation of science-based instruction

- Partnership with the University of Tennessee to establish the [Reading Research Center](#) to improve classroom instruction and teacher preparation

In [2020](#), Tennessee students had one of the lowest literacy rate levels nationally, however during the 2020-21 school year, 75 percent of Tennessee districts saw improvement in reading scores across grade levels.

### VIRGINIA

To address growing concerns of learning loss and reading proficiency post-pandemic, the Virginia General Assembly, through bipartisan leadership, passed the [Virginia Literacy Act \(VLA\)](#) in April 2022. The VLA requires:

- Individualized reading plans for students who are not meeting literacy benchmarks
- Teachers to use evidence-based literacy curriculum and literacy screeners
- Reading specialists to oversee interventions in consultation with classroom teachers
- Pre-service teachers to demonstrate mastery of science-based reading research and evidence-based literacy instruction

In 2023, the Virginia legislature passed [Senate Bill 616](#) which added provisions to the VLA—expanding evidence-based literacy initiatives to include students from fourth- through eighth-grade in the state’s literacy movement.



### Professional Development

Many veteran teachers and EPP faculty did not learn about the science of reading during their time in EPPs, including advanced degree programs. To combat this, [34 states](#) require educators to participate in ongoing professional development rooted in the science of reading.

#### COLORADO

[Colorado](#) requires local education agencies that receive intervention funds or literacy grants to [collect documentation](#) from all Kindergarten through third grade teachers to ensure that they are trained in evidence-based reading practices. This measure was passed as an update to the [2012 Colorado Reading to Ensure Academic Development Act](#) (Colorado READ Act) as a way to ensure effective implementation. While local district boards are empowered to select the trainings that align with the necessary requirements, LEAs are [required](#) to provide proof that K-3 teachers have completed one evidence-based training: a course in an approved preparation program, a course in a postgraduate degree program, a course on a list of approved professional development programs, or a training provided by an LEA.

#### MINNESOTA

In 2023, Minnesota launched the READ Act, or [Reading to Ensure Academic Development](#), replacing the Read Well by Third Grade legislation, to focus the state's efforts on the science of reading. The legislation aims for all children to read at or above grade level every year and requires districts to provide evidence-based reading instruction by the 2026-2027 school year. Under the READ Act, beginning in 2024, districts must provide training to K-12 Intervention teachers, classroom teachers in PreK-3, special education teachers, curriculum directors, instructional support staff who support reading instruction, and employees who select literacy instruction materials for a district no later than July 2027.

Evidence of the program's effectiveness may already be seen in St. Paul Public Schools, who used ESSER funding to implement a Tier 2 intervention program with trained special education or intervention teachers. According to 2024 end of year data, [87 percent](#) of kindergartners participating in the program improved their reading skills, compared to 81 percent of students not in the program. Experts say the full effects of the program will not be measurable until 2030, three years after all districts are required to implement the requirements of the READ Act.

#### NORTH DAKOTA

North Dakota enacted [legislation](#) in 2021 requiring statewide professional development in research-based reading instruction practices. The North Dakota Department of Public Instruction has also incorporated the [Foundations of Reading and Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling \(LETRS\)](#) evidence-based professional learning, designed to equally support both new and in-service educators with explicit reading instruction. This training requires that all teachers in Kindergarten through third grade classrooms are instructed in methodology related to diagnosing and supporting reading development and comprehension. The state superintendent is empowered to provide assistance to school districts to ensure that this requirement is met and to provide updates to legislative management on the implementation and effectiveness of these programs.





## Secondary Literacy

A significant portion of Americans are struggling readers; [18 percent](#) of adults in the US are illiterate. Although literacy starts early for most students, many struggle to read well into middle and high school, with [70 percent](#) of eighth graders scoring below proficient on the 2024 NAEP. Secondary literacy focuses on engaging middle and high school students and building their reading skills.

### Impact of Secondary Literacy

As texts increase in difficulty from elementary to middle and high school, there is a lot of room for students to fall through the cracks without proper instruction or intervention. Older students who struggle to read are less likely to see themselves as readers over time and are prone to losing [motivation and agency](#) in school. These students are more likely to both take longer to graduate and can be more at-risk of [dropping out](#) of high school. Similarly, students who are low-income, English Learners, are chronically absent, or have disabilities are disproportionately impacted by poor literacy. Interventions and reading support can address these challenges, building secondary students' strength and agency as readers. However, providing reading support and intervention to older students has its challenges. There is a lack of professional development and [resources](#) for helping struggling readers in older grades. Interventions must also be balanced against other classes and progress towards graduation requirements.

### Morphology & Age-Appropriate Interventions

[Adolescent literacy](#) focuses on foundational skills, comprehension, progress monitoring, and reader agency. "Reader agency" denotes how secondary students' identity as struggling readers impacts their independence and ability to make purposeful choices. Part of reader agency involves designing interventions that are [appropriate](#) to a student's age, maturity level, and interests. [Research](#) suggests that reading skills

are linked to enjoyment; therefore, it is essential to provide materials that engage and interest secondary students.

### MORPHOLOGY

Morphology, the study of word formation, allows older and bilingual students to break down words into bases and affixes (prefixes and suffixes). [Morphology](#) helps students with understanding vocabulary, reading aloud, spelling, word recognition, and comprehension. It is especially [helpful](#) to [bilingual learners](#), who may learn to connect Latin and Greek prefixes to English and Spanish cognates.

### DISCIPLINARY AND CONTENT LITERACY

[Disciplinary and content literacy](#) involves learning reading and writing across different content courses. It recognizes that literacy and words [differ](#) across subjects like mathematics, social studies, science, etc. This practice includes interpreting, composing, and revising texts. Disciplinary literacy allows reading comprehension to take place across [all classes](#) to help struggling readers in secondary schools learn. It also allows students with [interests](#) in different subjects to gain more motivation to practice literacy.



### TIERED INTERVENTIONS

Interventions allow struggling readers to receive additional support. Interventions include [three tiers](#): tier one includes grade-level core instruction for all students, tier two involves targeted, systematic, explicit, and interactive instruction, and tier three offers more intensive interventions where tier two intervention is insufficient. [Assessment](#) is key to tiered instruction and allows educators to identify students, their needs, and track their progress. [Successful interventions](#) include building readers' self-efficacy, integrating collaborative learning, sharing strategies to content teachers, and applying skills from interventions into different subjects.

### LOUISIANA | TIERED PATHWAYS FOR LITERACY SUPPORT FRAMEWORK

To support literacy for all students, Louisiana created the [Tiered Pathways for Literacy Support](#) (TPLS). TPLS is part of Louisiana's [Comprehensive Literacy Plan](#) to improve literacy outcomes for all students through high-quality instruction. TPLS has five [considerations](#): communication and collaboration, using data to drive instruction, tiered interventions, professional development, and continuous instruction. The [framework](#) involves three tiers: whole-class instruction, targeted small-group interventions, and intensive individualized interventions. It has [considerations](#) for choosing tiers between both grades K-3 and 4-12. Louisiana also has [guidance](#) for universal literacy screenings, diagnostic assessments, progress monitoring, formative, and summative assessments. The state had the [highest progress](#) in the 2024 National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) Reading for both fourth and eighth graders.

### MARYLAND | READING APPRENTICESHIP

In 2018, Maryland led a multi-year intervention of [Reading Apprenticeship](#) in all 24 districts. This program was created through the [Striving Readers Grant](#) from the US Department of Education in 2017. The intervention was designed to help struggling

readers in [middle and high school](#) in social studies, science, and other subjects, build their ability to read complex texts, and build a practice of continuous professional learning. One year after implementation, [87 percent](#) of students in the intervention showed growth, some up to three grade levels worth. Additionally, [90 percent](#) of ninth graders found the program to be more helpful than their middle school interventions. In the 2019-2020 school year, five additional schools conducted pilot programs, hoping to expand upon these promising results. Since then, [individual districts](#) have continued the program, often embedding it into their Grow Your Own opportunities.

### NEW YORK | BIG 6 FOR LIFELONG LITERACY

The New York State Education Department (NYSED) has a continuum for literacy from Pre-K to elementary and secondary grades. These six high-impact practices [include](#):

- Collaborative and culminating projects, performances, and celebrations
- Text-based discussions and writing opportunities
- Engagement with a variety of high-interest, diverse, and complex texts
- Phonological awareness, phonics, spelling, and word study skill building
- Fostering understanding of print conventions, features, and functions

NYSED provides [guidance](#) for each practice, what it looks like, what skills students develop, and the structures and processes needed to implement for secondary literacy. The state also emphasizes these [practices](#) being culturally responsible, rigorous, authentic, and developmentally appropriate.



## Measuring Initiative Effectiveness

As states shift their focus from legislative action to implementation, it is important for policymakers and practitioners alike to consider how they will measure effectiveness. Effectiveness may be measured in terms of student performance growth, closing achievement gaps, increased achievement, improved educator effectiveness or implementation of curriculum and high-quality instructional materials. Identifying measurement criteria will influence the tools required for evaluation.

### Education Visualization and Analytics Solution

The [Education Visualization and Analytics Solution](#) (EVAAS) is a data tool that helps educators and policymakers make informed decisions about school improvement and key education decisions. EVAAS links [student data](#) to data visualization, helping measure the impact of instruction and programs on student outcomes. EVAAS includes multiple metrics including state reading assessments, formative and diagnostic assessments, student growth data, benchmarks by grade level, graduation rates, and longitudinal data tracking. In [Texas](#), two districts used EVAAS to guide teacher assignments, student placements, and identify student needs. As a result,

one of the underperforming high schools using the tool increased its accountability score by [four points](#), with all students exceeding growth targets. North Carolina has been using EVAAS for over two decades, but more recently started using it to evaluate [teacher effectiveness](#) in 2012. Currently, EVAAS is used to measure growth, impact, and student success state-wide in North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Tennessee.

## THE SCIENCE OF READING IS FOR ALL STUDENTS

### Students with Learning Differences

To address the instructional needs of students with disabilities, the [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act](#) (IDEA) mandates that individualized education plans (IEPs) are crafted for each student. Despite this, more than [60 percent](#) of students with specific learning disabilities experience significant difficulty learning to read. As of 2023, [46 states](#) have legislation related to dyslexia. As states identify and implement assessments to ensure students are receiving appropriate instruction and intervention, they should consider that data is most helpful when it alerts teachers of reading gaps early.



**ARIZONA**

[Universal screeners](#), assessments administered to all students, can be beneficial for ensuring no student is missed during identification processes. [Arizona](#) mandates that each school district and charter school provide ongoing diagnostic assessments to plan evidence-based instruction and interventions for students in Kindergarten through third grade. In situations where more than 20 percent of students in a school or district do not meet proficiency standards on the state reading assessment, the Arizona Department of Education (ADE) reviews the related curriculum and professional development to consider how evidence-based reading instruction was used. Additionally, Arizona requires any campus that serves K-3 students to identify a Dyslexia Training Designee (DTD) that acts as a resource expert for campus colleagues. ADE offered [grant funds](#) for school districts to offset the training cost of DTDs.

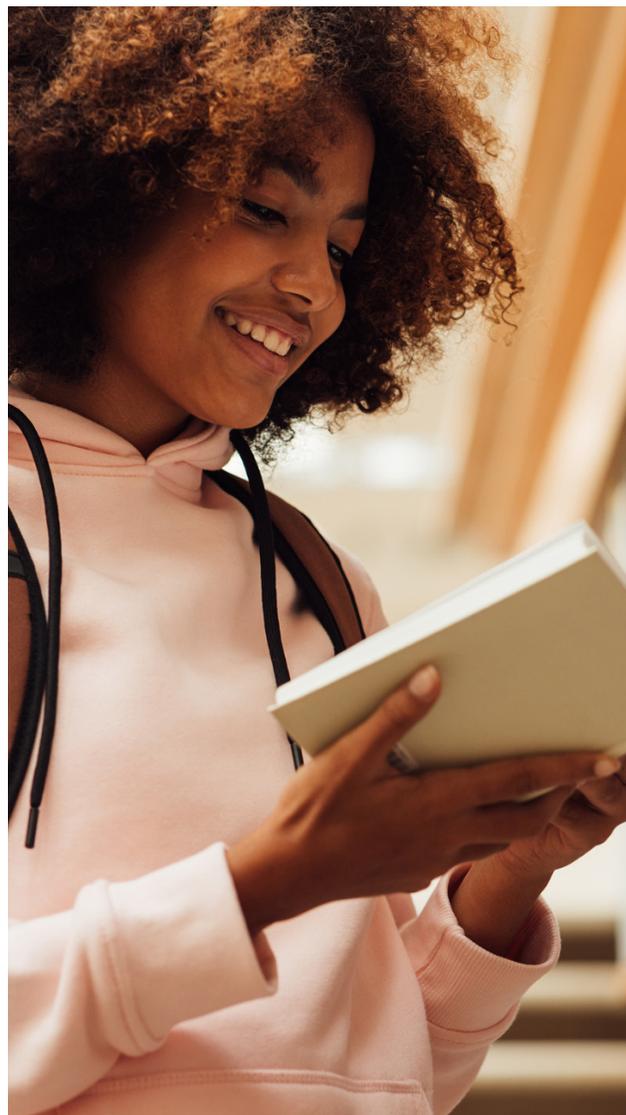
**MASSACHUSETTS**

[Massachusetts](#) has approved several universal screener assessments for reading that school districts may purchase using grant funds. The [Early Literacy Universal Screening Assessment](#) for K-3 students must be administered to all students beginning in July 2023. LEAs have the power to identify a screening assessment that “Meets Expectations” according to state requirements and will receive funding to support implementation if they train K-3 educators in the assessment, administer the assessment to all students in grades 1-3, make the assessment part of the schools’ early literacy program, and participate in future research and data collection efforts.

**English Language Learners**

Systematic and explicit instruction in letters and sounds are imperative for young readers. Research shows that multilingual learners or English language learners (ELLs) also [benefit](#) from reading instruction that includes phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension and respond to

interventions for phonological awareness. However, ELLs may also need tailored attention in [oral language proficiency](#) to achieve optimal reading proficiency. Fostering oral language skills through [explicit instruction](#) and practice can strengthen language comprehension for ELL students and further build connections for literacy. It is also important to note that the science of reading is derived from international research, thus these instructional practices are not solely based on English linguistics but can be found [worldwide](#).





**NEW MEXICO**

New Mexico offers a wide range of strategic resources from the New Mexico Public Education Department including resources on structured literacy related to students with disabilities and bilingual students, LETRS training materials, administrator walkthrough tools, and available grant funding. New Mexico is explicit in their understanding of the relationship between the science of reading and bilingual students with [The Science of Reading for Emergent Bilinguals in New Mexico](#) resource. This review explores existing gaps in achievement for EL students, possible reasons for poor reading outcomes including limited teacher knowledge, inadequate preparation and ineffective instructional practices, and offers rationale for why the [structured literacy](#) approach provides a strong foundation for emergent bilingual students. Specifically, structured literacy encompasses oral and written language skills by including phoneme awareness, sound-symbol correspondences, letter patterns and print conventions, morphology, syntax, and semantics. The review identifies a list of five key takeaways:

- A SOR framework for emergent bilinguals is needed to address language and literacy needs across Bilingual Multicultural Education Programs.
- Structured Literacy is an effective approach for biliteracy development when linguistic supports and enhanced oral language development are added.
- The Simple View of Reading has broad application for emergent bilinguals.
- Oral language development is the strongest predictor of emergent bilinguals' skilled reading development and requires explicit instruction.
- Attention to metalanguage, translanguaging, and holistic assessment is critical to effective biliteracy instruction for emergent bilinguals.

**VIRGINIA**

In 2024, the [Virginia Department of Education](#) developed three school support networks to target key areas of literacy instruction: Students with Disabilities, English Language Learners, and Tier 1 Instruction or direct classroom instruction.

The Virginia English Learner Network (VA ELN) facilitated by The Hunt Institute, offers direct support to school teams identified on a volunteer or need basis to develop plans to strengthen literacy education for their English Learner students. The VA ELN kicked off with a cohort of 30 schools across elementary, middle, and high schools in the state. Each school is collaborating with a coach from [StandardsWork](#) to develop plans that are responsive to local needs.





## Guiding Questions

1. How do students in your state perform on state, national, and international reading assessments? Are there differences in performance across different student populations?
2. Does your state require that EPPs align coursework with the science of reading? If so, how?
3. Are teachers in your state required to utilize evidence-based reading instruction? If so, how is this policy measured and with what degree of accountability? If not, what rules guide reading instruction in your state?
4. Does your state require that teachers receive professional development aligned with the science of reading? If so, what are those policies?
5. Has your state conducted a landscape analysis to determine if pre-service programs and faculty knowledge are aligned with the science of reading?
6. What are the greatest barriers to implementation of instruction aligned with the science of reading?





4000 Centregreen Way | Suite 301  
Cary, NC 27513 | p: 984.377.5200

[hunt-institute.org](http://hunt-institute.org) | [info@hunt-institute.org](mailto:info@hunt-institute.org)