

SCIENCE of READING IMPLEMENTATION BRIEFS

Learning from Educators

Co-Authored by the Science of Reading Fellowship Team: Patricia Albornoz, Kelley Bendheim, Dennis Davis, Alesa Falcone, Kiara Felts, Rebecca Griffith, Rhonda Grode, Micere Keels, Julia Lashley, Kindel Nash, and Paola Pilonieta





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SCIENCE OF READING IMPLEMENTATION

BRIEF #1

LESSONS ALONG the **PATHWAY** to **IMPLMENTING** the **SCIENCE** **OF READING** in **NORTH** **CAROLINA CLASSROOMS**

Co-Authored by the Science of Reading Fellowship Team: Patricia Albornoz, Kelley Bendheim, Dennis Davis, Alesa Falcone, Kiara Felts, Rebecca Griffith, Rhonda Grode, Micere Keels, Julia Lashley, Kindel Nash, and Paola Pilonieta





INTRODUCTION

There is nothing natural about “looking at a series of lines and curves [and ascertaining] the spoken word they represent.” As noted in an article published by the National Federation of Teachers, **learning to read and write the English language is difficult. The complexity and confusion between the spelling and sound of many English words mean that we must be intentional about designing sequenced instructional activities and providing exposure to text based on the science of how children learn to read.**

Children’s brains must be trained to read; the process doesn’t just naturally emerge in the ways that walking and talking develop. For example, [neural pathways need to be developed](#) through carefully designed, explicit and systematic instruction.

The Science of Reading (SoR) highlights the fact that we know how to teach children to read; with effective instruction aligned with the SoR, the overwhelming majority of children can learn how to read. The question is, then, how can we ensure that all educators have the knowledge, tools, and support that enable them to provide effective instruction that aligns with the science of what works in reading instruction?

For many educators, aligning their instruction with the SoR requires [“a seismic shift in how they teach and a complete rethinking of their best practices and beliefs.”](#) At the time of the state’s demand for change, many teachers were using instructional practices that did

not align with reading science. This included coaching struggling readers to use a variety of less effective word identification strategies. One example of an ineffective strategy is the use of the “three-cueing system,” which relies on pictures and contextual clues to guess the word and shifts students’ focus away from decoding (sounding out) unfamiliar words. As detailed in the NC legislation, the [problem with strategies such as three-cueing](#) can hinder the development of learning foundational skills, like developing grapheme/phoneme correspondence (matching letters to their sounds) skills.

North Carolina is one of many states that invested heavily in The Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS) training as the core of its strategy to overhaul how in-service teachers teach reading. NC’s Excellent Public Schools Act, signed into law in April 2021, [requires every K-5 teacher to complete the intensive, 2-year LETRS training program, costing the department \\$54 million to implement and takes about 160 hours for each educator to complete.](#) Between the fall of 2021 and the spring of 2024, [over 44,000 NC educators completed LETRS training.](#)

[LETRS implementation doesn’t look the same in every district and can also look different from one school to the next within each district.](#) The state paid for and continues to support funding for ongoing training, has provided funds to each district to support the training, and has developed a central hub of a plethora of resources and guidance on best practices.

How districts and schools will implement what they learn in training is locally determined. [Reports indicate that there is huge variation](#) in implementation. A few examples of how districts implemented their training:

- Some districts are providing paid planning time or teacher workdays so that teachers have time during the workday to complete the program.
- In other districts, teachers have to do it during their off hours.
- Some are offering anywhere from \$300 to \$2,000 in supplemental pay.
- In some schools, instructional coaches joined teachers and did the training alongside them.
- In other schools, professional development time is being used very intentionally to aid teachers in deeper learning and implementing the new concepts into their teaching.
- There are schools where teachers feel alone in the process of implementing what is learned in their curriculum and lesson plans.

All of this means that some districts and schools will have teachers who are more supported and invested in learning and adjusting their instruction, and in others, teachers will likely feel unsupported and will have low levels of investment in changing their instructional practices.

NCECF'S SOR FELLOWSHIP TO FACILITATE MUTUAL LEARNING AND STRENGTHEN IMPLEMENTATION

The implementation, or what comes after educators complete LETRS training is where NC's Excellent Public Schools Act has received some criticism. Experts have asked: [“Once the teachers go to their training, and they're back in the classrooms with their own students, who \[will be\] there to really assist them in transferring what they learned from the theory to practice?”](#)

In Mississippi, for example, where LETRS training was key to improving early literacy scores, placing literacy coaches, particularly in the lowest-performing schools, was also essential to improving outcomes. Here in North Carolina, funding has been allotted for each district to hire an [Early Literacy Specialist to support instructional coaches, teacher leaders, and other staff in sustainability and implementation.](#)



Research informs us that teachers need a lot of assistance with implementation, it takes time, practice, and coaching support to translate new learning into effective classroom practices: [“Research on professional development for early childhood educators illustrates that training teachers to effectively implement new pedagogical approaches designed at increasing the quality of their literacy instruction is a complex and challenging endeavor, with many interventions taking up to 2 years to produce meaningful teacher change.”](#)

To contribute to this learning and implementation process, the North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation (NCECF) facilitated the nine-month Science of Reading Implementation Fellowship during the 2023-24 academic year. This professional learning community of six educators and five literacy experts worked collaboratively to deepen their understanding of SoR-aligned instructional practices, surface hidden implementation challenges, and now share key insights and lessons learned across the state.

The fellows represent a range of professional roles (literacy coaches, kindergarten teacher, pre-k teacher, and structured literacy specialist), and counties (Alamance, Forsyth, Mecklenburg, Orange, Robeson, and Wake). The Fellowship was guided by NCECF, four North Carolina professors who are literacy experts, and NC Department of Public Instruction's Assistant Director of Early Literacy.

This document is the culmination of the North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation's Science of Reading Implementation Fellowship, which brought together months of collaborative work to surface real-world insights and share successful, research-informed strategies that support teachers in effectively implementing the Science of Reading in their classrooms.

SCIENCE of READING and the PARAPROFESSIONALS in the CLASSROOM

Co-Authored by the Science of Reading Fellowship Team: Patricia Albornoz, Kelley Bendheim, Dennis Davis, Alesa Falcone, Kiara Felts, Rebecca Griffith, Rhonda Grode, Micere Keels, Julia Lashley, Kindel Nash, and Paola Pilonieta





INTRODUCTION

As discussed in brief number 1, North Carolina’s Excellent Public Schools Act requires that all pre-K to fifth-grade teachers in traditional public schools complete Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS) training and outlines plans for how the state can build the capacity of classroom teachers to align their instruction with the science of reading (SoR). Much less attention has been given to whether and how to build the capacity of paraprofessionals in the classrooms, such as the teacher’s aide. This is important because during many parts of the school day, teachers rely on paraprofessionals so that individual or small groups of students can receive targeted instructional support.

Building the reading instruction capacities of all staff working in elementary classrooms is vital to achieving the ‘all hands on deck’ approach that is necessary to ensure that students have the best opportunity to become proficient readers. Although the paraprofessional’s role is not planning curricula or primary instruction, they need a strong understanding of the SoR and aligned instructional practices to effectively implement designated teaching and other support tasks that increase opportunities to learn for individuals or groups of students who need more support.

During the 2023-24 academic year, after all pre-K through fifth-grade teachers at one school had completed LETRS training, one of the school’s pre-K teachers recognized

that because instructional assistants did not receive any SoR training, there was increasing inconsistency between the reading instruction strategies used by the teachers and their paraprofessionals. Teachers were unable to maximize the use of instructional assistants to support struggling readers because there wasn’t planning time for the lead teacher to train instructional assistants and without a curriculum that provided a scope and sequence of resources and materials for aligning instruction with the SoR, teachers were unable to maximize the use of instructional assistants in supporting struggling readers.

PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

How can we create on-the-job learning opportunities and quick information bites to enable instructional assistants to provide struggling readers with individual and small group reading instruction aligned with the SoR?

This problem of practice was selected because the best outcomes occur when struggling readers receive immediate intervention during the earliest grades. Additionally, building the capacity of instructional assistants in the pre-K department was within the Fellow’s locus of control.

During the 2023-24 academic year, this pre-Kindergarten teacher engaged in twice-monthly meetings as part of the Science of Reading Implementation Fellowship. The Fellowship was guided by the North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation, four North Carolina university professors who are literacy experts, and NC-DPI's Assistant Director of Early Literacy. The Fellowship enabled her to tackle this problem of practice by providing examples of engaging instructional practices aligned with the science of reading that she could have paraprofessionals learn through observation one week and then repeat with students the following week. Because the paraprofessionals did not receive any SoR training, these instructional practices need to be ones that could be learned and implemented effectively without having a comprehensive understanding of why particular literacy concepts were being taught using specific strategies. She also learned from other Fellows about building capacity among school staff by including SoR info bites in the weekly staff newsletter.

Through consistent engagement with this problem of practice, the primary change is that in the middle of the academic year, intentional steps were taken to build the capacity of paraprofessionals to use SoR-aligned practices when they were engaged in student instruction. This school's pre-K department produces a weekly newsletter with resources and reminders about due dates, support, and updated information. The Fellow added a section titled "LETRS/Heggerty", which provided teachers and paraprofessionals with opportunities to watch videos, read articles, and attend webinars related to the SoR.

This addition to the newsletter was vital to strengthening reading instruction during a year when the pre-K Department didn't have a director or a

reading instructional coach. Through the newsletter, paraprofessionals gained access to the same information as teachers to increase consistency in the instructional practices that students experienced. The Fellow noticed that the paraprofessionals in her classroom became more interested in trying the recommended lessons and learning games with students. Additionally, during nap time, while the Fellow worked on compiling student assessment data, paraprofessionals could now include their observations of student growth and development based on their use of SoR-aligned lessons and individual interventions.

SCHOOL CONTEXT

This problem of practice was taken up in a pre-K to fifth-grade school that has a student body of about 400 students. The school was 40% Black, 30% Hispanic, 20% White, and has a growing population of multiracial students, with 71% of students economically disadvantaged. The percentage of Multilingual Learners (multilingual) has increased in recent years, and currently, 28% of the student population has a multilingual status. Most of the teaching staff (82%) have worked at the school for over ten years, coupled with a group of beginning teachers (18%) with less than four years of experience. Administrative and teacher turnover has increased in recent years, with teachers moving within and leaving the district entirely.

The Fellow teaches an inclusive pre-K classroom with typically developing students and students with Individual Education Plans (IEP). Most pre-K classrooms have one lead teacher and one instructional assistant with up to 15 students ages four to five; inclusive classrooms have one lead teacher and two instructional assistants with up to 12 students ages three to five, with varying degrees of developmental support needed. There are only four other inclusive pre-K classrooms in the district. Inclusive classrooms give typically developing students the opportunity to learn about and with different types of learners, and students with IEPs have the opportunity to learn with same-aged peers who can model expected school behaviors.

Each inclusive classroom in the district is unique. However, all follow the [Tools of the Mind curriculum, a Vygotskian-inspired, play-based approach with strong evidence for developing children's self-regulation.](#)



[academic and social skills, and a lifelong love of learning](#). The literacy components of the curriculum include letter identification activities and a scaffolded writing process called play planning. This curriculum is aligned with the SoR. For example, it uses a letter chart that focuses on the initial sounds in words, which builds students' foundational reading skills. However, it doesn't provide teachers with enough background information on the science of teaching letter sounds to enable them to diagnose early reading challenges and adapt the curriculum to help struggling readers.

RESEARCH-INFORMED UNDERSTANDING OF THE PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

Research informs us that [paraprofessionals may be particularly important in supporting reading instruction in inclusive classrooms](#) where special and general education students learn together. Paraprofessionals are part of the instructional team working under the guidance of the lead teacher; they modify or adapt learning materials, content, and instructional practices to meet students' needs. [Paraprofessionals can best support reading instruction when they are provided with explicit instructions](#) regarding which research-based practices to use with which child or group of children. This guidance is needed because they may not have enough teaching experience to make pedagogical decisions. The classroom teacher, department chair, or another administrator must have enough planning time to supplement the instructional plan with notes for the paraprofessionals.

Research conducted in North Carolina schools found that [paraprofessionals are a cost-effective way of improving student achievement, especially their reading test scores](#). Additionally, the positive benefits of instructional assistants on reading learning were largest in higher poverty districts. Even more promising is evidence that [reading interventions delivered by paraprofessionals can help two out of three struggling readers to improve their reading skills significantly](#). The lead teacher largely determines the effectiveness of paraprofessionals because they [determine whether teaching assistants supplement instruction and deliver individual interventions](#), or simply copy materials, grade assignments, and decorate bulletin boards. This means that lead teachers need guidance on how to effectively utilize and build the capacity of their paraprofessionals.

CONVERSATIONS THAT CREATED CHANGE

This school was invested in having staff use SoR practices for literacy instruction, starting with pre-K, even though the Excellent Public Schools Act only requires it of kindergarten through fifth-grade teachers. The previous pre-K Director wanted to include all staff in transitioning to using SoR-aligned practices, introduced [Heggerty's evidence-based reading curriculum](#), and encouraged everyone to share thoughts on implementing SoR.

During the first year of LETRS training at this school site, several teachers expressed concerns about paraprofessionals not being part of the required training. The following school year, several paraprofessionals were asked to step in as substitute teachers for most of the year since several classrooms lacked a full-time certified teacher. This highlighted the importance of paraprofessionals completing LETRS training to enable them to take on the lead teacher position when needed.

In response to instructional inconsistencies that the Fellow observed between the teachers and paraprofessionals, she began to facilitate discussions and share knowledge that would increase the capacity of all staff members to use SoR-aligned practices. Discussions with her two paraprofessionals included creating opportunities for them to share their perspectives on the curriculum, behavior management, and daily structure of the classroom. This helped to develop the high level of trust and collaboration needed among the staff in an inclusive classroom to meet students' diverse needs.



The Fellow broadened the learning opportunities she provided to her paraprofessionals to the whole pre-K department during monthly professional learning community meetings. This included brief reviews of practices learned from LETRS training to remind teachers and instructional assistants of the importance of continuing to advance the implementation of SoR-aligned practices.



FOSTERING CHANGE IN THE COMING ACADEMIC YEARS

Many conversations are needed in this district and across the state to identify missed opportunities to ensure that children receive developmentally appropriate, play-based, early literacy instruction during their pre-K year. This would serve the aim of increasing the number of children entering kindergarten ready to learn to read. One missed opportunity is not including pre-K staff among those receiving support from the literacy instructional coaches assigned to each school. Coaching would foster intentional vertical literacy planning and alignment, and assist pre-K staff in completing required transition meetings, reports, and lessons to scaffold students' transition to kindergarten.

North Carolina expects pre-K paraprofessionals to complete a specific number of annual training hours; requiring a set number of these hours to focus on SoR would increase the overlap in knowledge and consistency in instructional practices used by teachers and paraprofessionals. One recommended area for

joint professional development is the course “Early Literacy: Print Awareness, Phonological Awareness, and Alphabet Knowledge.” This course would give teachers and paraprofessionals the same information at the same time to help keep everyone informed and teach students with SoR concepts in mind.

Another opportunity for ongoing collective learning on the SoR is during the school’s monthly pre-K department professional development meeting. In the past, these have functioned as staff meetings that provide information about programmatic updates and requirements. The previous director was able to carve out time to incorporate SoR information into each meeting. Once a new pre-K director is hired, it might be possible for the new director to attend North Carolina Department of Public Instruction’s SoR Community of Practice webinars and bring ideas and resources to the pre-K staff so that SoR can be highlighted throughout the school year.

[Fewer young adults are getting an education degree](#), and more [teachers are leaving the field](#). Given this, it might be in the best interest of school districts to review their budgets to identify opportunities for paraprofessionals to attend professional development aligned with the SoR. It has become increasingly clear that teachers need paraprofessionals to do more small-group and individual instruction so that struggling readers don’t fall behind. Paraprofessionals are also relied on to assume responsibility for the classroom when lead teachers are absent and substitute teachers are unavailable.

RESOURCES FOR BUILDING THE CAPACITY OF PARAPROFESSIONALS

- [5 Ways to Support Paraprofessionals in the Literacy Classroom](#)
- [Paraprofessionals: The “Sous Chefs” of Literacy Instruction](#)
- [Training Paraprofessionals to Effectively Work With All Students](#)
- [How Teaching Assistants Can Support and Champion Dyslexic Students](#)
- [Reading remedies: This Alabama school battled COVID reading woes through teacher support, training](#)

SCIENCE OF READING IMPLEMENTATION

BRIEF #3

LOWER and UPPER ELEMENTARY — ATTENDING to BOTH SIDES of the **READING ROPE**

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INTRODUCTION

There are many things that beginning readers need to learn on the pathway to becoming proficient readers. These things are often described as a [two-stranded reading rope](#) of skills that twist together to create a skilled reader. [Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling \(LETRS\)](#) training is aligned with the two sides of this [reading rope](#), one strand providing the components of word recognition and the other strand providing the components of language comprehension.

LETRS Units 1-4 highlight the strategies that build word recognition (phonological awareness, decoding, sight recognition), and LETRS Units 5-8 highlight the strategies that build language comprehension (background knowledge, vocabulary, language structures, verbal reasoning, literacy knowledge). During students' kindergarten through second-grade years, teachers focus on word recognition. Then, during third- through fifth-grade, the focus often transitions to language comprehension. However, the science of reading informs us that students need instructional exposure to both sides of the reading rope from pre-K to fifth-grade.

North Carolina's [Excellent Public Schools Act](#) legislation requires that all pre-K to fifth-grade teachers complete LETRS training, but it is at the discretion of individual districts and schools as to whether and how classroom teachers are supported in implementing what they've learned into their classroom practices.

However, coaching support is an essential part of what all teachers need to improve their classroom practices. [“The difference in effectiveness between teachers with instructional coaches and those without can be equivalent to the difference between novice teachers and teachers with five to ten years of experience.”](#) In the school profiled in this problem of practice, the school's literacy instructional coach was responsible for supporting kindergarten through fifth-grade teachers in implementing their learning from LETRS training.

During 2023-24 academic year, after kindergarten through fifth grade teachers completed LETRS training, the literacy instructional coach began to see that although upper elementary (third to fifth grade) teachers recognized the importance of phonemic awareness and phonics (concepts usually taught in lower elementary classrooms), but they found it challenging to make time for it in their daily instruction. Similarly, lower elementary (kindergarten to second grade) teachers were beginning to recognize that language comprehension contributes to children's learning of basic phonemic and phonics skills, but weren't adapting their instructional practices to include comprehension skills.

Throughout LETRS training, participants are reminded that becoming a proficient reader is the product of word recognition and language comprehension.

PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

How to increase lower elementary teachers' understanding of the benefits of providing instruction on language comprehension to complement their focus on word recognition, and upper elementary teachers' understanding of the benefits of providing instruction on word recognition to complement their focus on language comprehension?

This problem of practice was further narrowed to focusing on encouraging third-grade teachers to continue attending to word recognition while preparing students for end-of-grade exams. This was selected because traditional test preparation focuses on reading comprehension strategies, leaving little time to continue strengthening foundational phonological skills. Research suggests that it doesn't have to be either-or; teachers can develop reading comprehension by working with morphemes and strengthening sentence comprehension skills. As the teachers in this school shifted to test preparation, the literacy coach demonstrated how instruction could be done differently by working with a select few students on building vocabulary and sentence comprehension using LETRS resource materials that had yet to be utilized by the teachers.

During the 2023-24 academic year, the literacy coach engaged in twice-monthly meetings as part of the Science of Reading Implementation Fellowship. This Fellowship was guided by the North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation, four North Carolina university professors who are literacy experts, and NC-DPI's Assistant Director of Early Literacy. The Fellowship enabled her to tackle this problem of practice by providing a deeper understanding of how teaching word recognition in third-grade can be much deeper than just teaching the six syllable types. She also developed a deeper understanding of the vocabulary assessment measure within mCLASS, which enabled her to have productive data-focused conversations with teachers to pinpoint where students were struggling and the

instructional strategies that would be most helpful in building their lagging skills. Learning about the benefits of having vertical conversations among teachers and the importance of having teachers understand the literacy standards in the grades before and after their own helped structure conversations that the Fellow facilitated among the teachers.

The primary change that resulted from consistent engagement with this problem of practice is that in the next school year, third-grade teachers will begin utilizing a district resource that provides lessons focused on six syllable types during core instruction to continue third graders word recognition development across the district. Once these lessons have been completed, teachers can use formative checkpoint data to determine small group intervention instruction for students who continue to struggle with basic skills. Additionally, third-grade teachers in this school have begun discussing how to be more intentional with their vocabulary instruction, such as developing vocabulary journals and interactive vocabulary walls.

SCHOOL CONTEXT

This problem of practice was taken up in a pre-K to fifth-grade school of about 650 students with a student body that is 61% White, 20% Hispanic, 12% Black, 13% Multilingual Learners, and 33% economically disadvantaged. The overwhelming majority of the staff (92%) are experienced teachers. The school is located in a suburban area and includes students bused in from a nearby city. Students attending this school follow a year-round calendar where the school is in session for nine weeks, followed by a three-week break. Teachers meet in weekly professional learning communities during which student support teachers, such as Intervention, Multilingual Learners, Special Education, Academically and Intellectually Gifted, Instructional Facilitator, and the Literacy Instructional Coach attend as needed.



This is a school and school district that values the SoR, integrating learning from LETRS training, and has also invested in creating additional professional development that encourages teachers to view the current curriculum through the lens of structured literacy to help staff understand the reasoning for instructional activities and to identify when curriculum materials need to be supplemented. The principal would use feedback from professional learning community meetings to identify what materials are needed to teach reading with SoR activities, and find ways to provide grade-level appropriate materials.



RESEARCH-INFORMED UNDERSTANDING OF THE PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

Research informs us that it is important for lower elementary teachers to [begin building students' comprehension skills](#) and for upper elementary teachers to [continue developing basic word recognition skills](#). Throughout LETRS training, participants are reminded that becoming a proficient reader is the product of word recognition and language comprehension. This indicates that both domains must be strong for proficient reading to develop.

In Unit 4 of LETRS Volume 1, the authors share research which indicates that “because systematic phonics instruction helps students learn to identify words, it increases their ability to comprehend what they read.” The authors continue and share that “reading words accurately and automatically enables students to focus on the meaning of text. Gains made as a consequence of such instruction are typically maintained and generalized to better reading proficiency overall (LETRS

Volume 1, p. 325).” Another key note found in Unit 4 of LETRS is that “to consolidate reading skill, students should be able to decode longer words using a reliable decoding strategy by the end of the third-grade (LETRS Volume 1, p. 253).” Each of the points above indicates the importance of continuing word recognition instruction through third-grade.

The case for spending instructional time on language comprehension in the lower elementary grades is detailed in Unit 6 of LETRS Volume 2. In this section, the authors share research indicating that [the most common cause of reading comprehension difficulty is due to difficulty reading the individual words](#), which is based on foundational skills built in the earliest grades. Specifically, they state that “development of academic language comprehension in the primary grades, through oral language interactions, direct teaching, and text reading, lays the foundation for success in higher grades (LETRS Volume 2, p 73).”

CAPACITY BUILDING & CONVERSATIONS THAT CREATED CHANGE

The Fellow was present at professional learning community meetings for all grade levels, which allowed her to engage in many coaching conversations related to SoR implementation. During professional learning community meetings that focused on ELA instruction, she was able to discuss learning from the Science of Reading Fellowship meetings with school teams and share effective ways of using student data. One example is that the vocabulary measure found in the [mCLASS Benchmark assessments](#) is a good predictor of whether third-grade students will demonstrate reading proficiency on the end-of-grade exams. Grade-level and school-wide data discussions were also critical components of getting buy-in.

The conversations were broadened as data discussions led the district’s academic team to wonder if the upper-grade teachers needed instructional support to include word recognition along with language comprehension into their ELA instruction. This notion was also partnered with the knowledge of an inconsistency in how many syllable types each second-grade team across the district taught. The academics team wanted to create a resource that gave students a core overview of each of the syllable types and also incorporate connected text. In addition, third-grade teachers across the district indicated a need for materials that addressed word recognition. The Fellow also demonstrated the benefits of attending to word recognition

among third-grade students by volunteering to work with small groups of struggling readers as determined by multiple data points such as NC Reading Check In Scores, report card grades, and the mCLASS Vocabulary score.

FOSTERING CHANGE IN THE COMING ACADEMIC YEARS

Demonstration of the benefits of having a literacy and reading expert present across a broad range of kindergarten to fifth grade classrooms will be increased in the coming academic years because the SoR Fellow's position will change from Literacy Instructional Coach to a Reading Specialist teaching reading focused classes on the rotation schedule shared by art, music, media, and PE teachers. This will enable the Fellow to further change by collaborating with kindergarten through fifth-grade teachers and sharing instructional practices that address reading skills found on the Reading Rope's word recognition strand and the language comprehension strand. She will work with each class, weekly, focusing on words to support student discourse with science content and building background knowledge while using cooperative learning strategies; lessons will also incorporate word study and text comprehension. This instructional collaboration will enable her to share successes and reflections on the lessons, encourage teachers to identify where SoR-aligned instructional practices can support ELA, math, social studies and science curriculum, and reflect on overall implementation.

RESOURCES FOR ATTENDING TO BOTH SIDES OF THE READING ROPE

- [The Reading Rope: Breaking it all Down](#)
- [Teaching Reading is Rocket Science](#)
- [The Reading League Curriculum Evaluation Guidelines 2023](#)
- [The Reading Rope The Reading Rope | Help Pinpoint Reading Struggles](#)
- [The Interconnectedness of Reading and Writing Ropes](#)

SCIENCE OF READING IMPLEMENTATION

BRIEF #4

ALIGNING SCIENCE of READING PRACTICES ACROSS EDUCATORS TEACHING CORE CONTENT, EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN, MULTILINGUAL, and **ACADEMICALLY** and **INTELLECTUALLY GIFTED** **STUDENTS**

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INTRODUCTION

Struggling readers receive a range of targeted services and are often pulled out of class or receive small-group, in-class support by someone other than their primary teacher. One implementation challenge that can arise with meeting North Carolina's expectation that students receive instruction that is aligned with the Science of Reading (SoR) is getting all professionals supporting students, especially those supporting struggling readers, using the same research-based approach for literacy instruction. These professionals include core content, exceptional children, multilingual, and academically and intellectually gifted program teachers.

North Carolina's [Excellent Public Schools Act](#) requires that all pre-K to fifth-grade teachers in traditional public schools complete [Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling \(LETRS\) training](#). It is at the discretion of individual districts and schools as to whether other staff members complete training. As shown in this implementation case study, when only one category of professionals, specifically classroom teachers, involved with reading instruction have completed LETRS training, there can be inconsistencies in the use and alignment of instructional practices and curriculum materials. Exposure to inconsistent and sometimes conflicting instructional strategies can make it harder for struggling readers.

During the 2023-24 academic year, after all pre-K to fifth-grade core content teachers completed LETRS training, the literacy instructional coach began to see inconsistencies in the use of SoR instructional practices. This is a school where the full instructional leadership team, including the principal, assistant principal, and instructional coach, completed the training. The principal completed the less comprehensive LETRS leadership training, and the instructional coach completed the full comprehensive training as classroom teachers.

Training the entire certified staff has allowed for substantial professional learning community conversations, including alignment to research-based practices. However, during discussions regarding reading difficulties among Exceptional Children and Multilingual Learner students who received pull-out services, a trend emerged indicating inconsistencies between the instructional strategies and curriculum materials used by core teachers and those providing pull-out and intervention support.

Student outcome data show that multilingual students greatly benefit from collaboration between classroom teachers and specialists available throughout the school day. Communication is vital for this collaboration, and having dedicated collective planning time is crucial for success.

PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

How can a school get all professionals supporting struggling multilingual students (core teachers and those who provide pull-out and inclusion services) to utilize a similar set of SoR-aligned instructional practices?

This problem of practice was selected because the district did not yet have clear guidelines for curriculum expectations within the multilingual department, and no formal alignment between multilingual and core instruction. Multilingual students are those whose native first language is not English and are learning English as their second or third language. To address the lack of alignment, the school is taking intentional steps to work with the multilingual teacher to improve instructional strategies and collaboration across all the staff who provide core and supplemental reading instruction. Alignment is crucial as all students, including multilingual learners, must take the state-mandated literacy assessment. Currently, 28% of the school's population receives multilingual services, and approximately 32 students per grade level (K-3) are pulled out of core reading instruction to receive multilingual services.

During the 2023-24 academic year, this literacy coach engaged in twice-monthly meetings as part of the Science of Reading Implementation Fellowship. This Fellowship was guided by the North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation, four North Carolina university professors who are literacy experts, and NC-DPI's Assistant Director of Early Literacy. The fellowship enabled her to tackle this problem of practice by providing time to connect with colleagues and brainstorm. She collected valuable research to present to her school's administrative team and learned applied teaching and planning strategies to take back to coaching meetings with teachers.

The primary change that resulted from consistent engagement with this problem of practice is a school-wide shift toward greater alignment in providing reading instruction grounded in the SoR as students move across grade levels and various pull-out supports. Teachers increased their use of data from weekly professional learning community meetings to identify which students need supplemental support. These meetings were changed to include the multilingual teacher to ensure that individualized interventions align with the SoR and with core classroom instruction.

SCHOOL CONTEXT

This problem of practice was taken up in a kindergarten through third-grade school with a student body of 5% White, 28% Hispanic, 44% Black, 14% American Indian, and 10% multiracial. In the school, 76% of students are economically disadvantaged. The percentage of Multilingual Learners has increased in recent years, and currently, 28% of the student population has EL status. The majority of the staff (81%) are experienced teachers.

As noted above, this school is committed to aligning instruction with the SoR. This school was included in the first cohort of educators who completed LETRS training in 2021. They immediately adapted their reading curriculum to align it with the SoR and are currently in their second year of implementation. Each K-2 teacher has a one-hour structured phonics block dedicated to tailoring reading instruction to meet the needs of all students. The school aims to train teachers to analyze data, discuss it, and use it in planning daily classroom instruction. School administrators are actively engaged in daily discussions and activities with classroom teachers. Daily walk-through data shows that most teachers monitor reading instruction using formative assessments that provide immediate feedback, allowing them to customize instruction daily.

The school's instructional leadership team meets weekly to review data, support teachers, and review current goals and expectations. Each team member also supports and coaches teachers within grade-level team meetings in addition to weekly professional learning community meetings. These initiatives have improved the teaching practices and staff commitment to using SoR-aligned instructional practices. Every teacher has a road map to

the different phases of reading, which is discussed weekly with the Instructional Leadership Team. During these discussions, decisions are made regarding whether each student's small group reading support assignment should be changed based on their needs and whether additional resources and interventions are needed. Additionally, rubrics and notes are reviewed to determine the next steps for whole-class and individualized instruction. It is important to note that there are gaps in the instructional leadership team's abilities to identify deficits in reading and guiding teachers in their use of SoR because the LETRS leadership training is a limited version of the comprehensive training that teachers receive. This limits school administrators' abilities to support implementation.

RESEARCH-INFORMED UNDERSTANDING OF THE PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

Research informs us that there are [benefits to alignment across core teachers and those providing pull-out intervention](#). Student outcome data show that multilingual students greatly benefit from [collaboration between classroom teachers and specialists available throughout the school day](#). Communication is vital for this collaboration, and having dedicated collective planning time is crucial for success. Schools with collaborative structures that enable administrators, classroom teachers, intervention specialists, and other professionals to engage in shared decision-making can quickly implement practices supporting multilingual students. Routine communication across all stakeholders and collective examination of student data are essential to creating a shared understanding of multilingual students' needs.

Research also shows that [data-based decision-making practices that are recommended for native English speakers should also be used for multilingual students](#). This is because, like native English speakers, not all multilingual students have the same learning challenges when struggling with reading. For example, some multilingual students have good knowledge of words in their native language but don't yet have word decoding skills in their native language or in English, and other multilingual students have both a strong vocabulary and can decode words in their native language. Both groups of children may struggle to read English, but need different interventions.



Even though the specialists who provide pull-out services for multilingual students are not required to complete LETRS training, their exposure to SoR-aligned instructional practices is just as important. [They benefit from explicit teaching of literacy components, such as phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and writing](#). Multilingual students need to learn how to map spoken sounds to written letters and develop phonics skills to improve decoding, just like native English speakers.

The use of assessments to understand multilingual students' intervention needs cannot be overstated. [Many multilingual students require practice with English phonemes that may not exist in their native language](#). These students can only progress to the phonological learning stage once familiar with all English sounds. Providing systematic SoR-aligned instruction is effective for multilingual learners. The more they struggle to read, the more likely they are to spend time with multilingual specialists who, as noted above, are not required to complete LETRS training, and less time with their primary teacher.

CAPACITY BUILDING & CONVERSATIONS THAT CREATED CHANGE

During professional learning community meetings, conversations occurred at both the administrative level and the level of classroom teachers and instructional coaches. In administrative discussions, research articles on the SoR and LETRS training facilitated meaningful conversations to establish the urgency of aligning teaching practices across the various professionals who support students.



As the school began to prioritize analyzing data and understanding students' individualized needs, the low performance of multilingual students prompted more educators to consider changing their current practices for these students. As they examined [mCLASS](#) data to pinpoint students' areas of struggle, there was noticeable misalignment in decoding and vocabulary skills. Other data used with teachers came from the weekly cycle assessments in the Multilingual Education Skills Block.

During professional learning community meetings, guiding questions were developed by the school's leadership team to explore multilingual students and their lagging skills in decoding and vocabulary. These weekly meetings led staff to a solid first step in holding conversations around what students need to support their foundations in literacy. Teachers referred to their resources from LETRS Volume II Session 6 during these conversations. Regarding teaching students of special populations, the multilingual teacher worked with the school to show how [WIDA data \(English proficiency tests for multilingual learners\)](#) aligns with practices learned in LETRS, which helped hesitant staff recognize the daily need for alignment between multilingual students' core and pull-out reading instruction. What emerged from these conversations were clear steps of how WIDA supports the work in addressing oral language and vocabulary needs, one of the alignment areas the school is focused on.

FOSTERING CHANGE IN THE COMING ACADEMIC YEARS

This is just the first step in getting the staff on board with understanding how instructional practices for multilingual learners can be aligned with the SoR across all professionals. There is now a general understanding of why change is needed and the direction to go when working with multilingual students. However, more conversations and training will be needed in the coming academic years to build a cohesive unit between core and multilingual teachers, who are currently two separate departments.

As staff plan for upcoming school years, the following questions can be considered to advance change:

- How can a lesson plan rooted in research-based practices support core and pull-out services?
- Where can the school add small, recurring blocks of time for core and multilingual teachers to come together?
- How can professional learning communities and grade-level planning times be adjusted to facilitate daily and weekly collaborative conversations?

RESOURCES FOR STRENGTHENING AND ALIGNING READING INSTRUCTION FOR MULTILINGUAL STUDENTS

- [BELLA Teacher Professional Learning](#)
- [Navigating the ESL Classroom: A Guide to Push-in and Pull-out Strategies](#)
- [Rethinking Push-In Pull-Out: The Cause for Sheltered Co-Teaching - ELL Strategies](#)
- [Integrating ELL Students in General Education Classes](#)

CREATING a MASTER SCHEDULE that MAXIMIZES the LITERACY BLOCK

Co-Authored by the Science of Reading Fellowship Team: Patricia Albornoz, Kelley Bendheim, Dennis Davis, Alesa Falcone, Kiara Felts, Rebecca Griffith, Rhonda Grode, Micere Keels, Julia Lashley, Kindel Nash, and Paola Pilonieta





INTRODUCTION

School master schedules, which determine the blocking of time during the school day, are tricky and complicated systems to coordinate. Researchers and educators are increasingly learning that these master schedules substantially impact learning because it determines the time spent on instruction and whether key components of instruction are experienced in the optimal order. *[“A well-thought-out master schedule can ensure time for intervention and enrichment to move all students forward in their learning. Thoughtful scheduling also ensures that teachers and teams have time to appropriately plan instruction and intervention.”](#)*

As noted in Brief 1, NC’s Excellent Public Schools Act, signed into law in April 2021, requires that all pre-K to fifth-grade teachers complete [Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling \(LETRS\) training](#). After completion, many aspects of implementation are left to the discretion of school districts and schools. Without additional guidance on how to implement what is learned, there are many decisions that schools can make that can undermine the benefits of strengthening teachers’ knowledge of the practices that can align their instruction with the Science of Reading (SoR). Whether beginning readers receive reading and writing instruction in connected blocks of time is one of those aspects that can be affected by a school’s master schedule, and when blocked correctly, can enhance the effectiveness of strong instructional practices.

During the 2023-24 academic year, when most kindergarten through fifth-grade teachers in the school were completing LETRS training, one of the school’s third-grade teachers began to see that the setup of the master schedule was reducing the effectiveness of the afternoon literacy block. The master schedule created a separation of two and a half hours between the morning one-hour block for teaching foundational reading skills and core reading content and the afternoon 45-minute block for teaching foundational writing skills, writing composition, and targeted small-group support for struggling readers. This separation occurred because reading instruction wasn’t a primary consideration among several other key factors that must be considered when setting the master schedule. Schools have to consider many priorities when developing the master schedule, such as maximizing the use of common spaces across grade levels as well as coordinating support personnel who need to work with student groups across grade levels. Unfortunately, this often results in less-than-optimal reading instruction schedules.



PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

How can the school schedule the literacy block(s) so that reading instruction time is closely connected with writing instruction time? Ensuring there is one extended literacy block that includes clearly identified time for explicit instruction of foundational writing skills, clearly identified time for explicit instruction of foundational reading skills, as well as small group reading and writing support?

This problem of practice was selected because LETRS training highlights and provides guidance on connecting the reading and writing strands of literacy instruction. However, no implementation guidance is provided regarding what to do when a school's master schedule does not enable literacy instruction to be conducted in this way.

During the 2023-24 academic year, the teacher at this school engaged in a series of twice-monthly meetings as part of NCECF's Science of Reading Implementation Fellowship. This Fellowship was guided by The North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation, four North Carolina university professors who are literacy experts, and NC-DPI's Assistant Director of Early Literacy. The Fellowship enabled her to tackle this problem of practice by providing time and space for collective professional development with colleagues who were also thinking about how to influence change beyond their individual classrooms in order to improve literacy instruction. Listening to the multiple voices and perspectives of Fellows (literacy coaches, kindergarten teacher, pre-k teacher, and structured literacy specialist) informed her understanding of the process of creating school-wide impact.

The primary change that resulted from consistent engagement with this problem of practice is that the leadership team that builds the school's master schedule will include maximizing the effectiveness of the literacy blocks in their school-wide planning.

To enable teachers to increase their instructional alignment with the SoR, priority will be given to the following:

- Creating an extended literacy block that designates time for explicit instruction of foundational reading skills
- Core reading lessons
- Explicit instruction of foundational writing skills
- Composition linked to core reading lessons
- Targeted reading and writing groups

During the first year of implementation, first through third-grade classrooms had a literacy block that included core reading, writing, and small group reading instruction, and teachers worked with small groups while other students worked on differentiated independent assignments. The foundational reading instruction block occurred at a different time in the day due to school-wide scheduling needs.

SCHOOL CONTEXT

This problem of practice was taken up in a pre-K to fifth-grade school that has a student body that is 37% White, 19% Black, 23% Asian, 13% Latinx, 8% multiracial, 4.1% Academically or Intellectually Gifted, and 45% economically disadvantaged. The percentage of Multilingual Learners has increased in recent years, and currently, 21% of the student population has Multilingual Learner status. In addition, 95% of teachers are classified as experienced teachers.

As noted above, students received one hour of core reading instruction in the morning, then had specials, math, lunch, recess, and then their afternoon 45-minute writing and targeted small group support block. Challenges quickly become evident with the 45-minute afternoon writing block split apart from the reading block. Four components of literacy instruction need to happen in the same space and time: core writing lesson, independent writing time, targeted small group reading intervention support, and support staff pulling students for targeted ESL or reading services.

There were several challenges with this two-and-a-half hour gap between morning reading instruction and afternoon writing instruction. One challenge, was that when writing about what they read earlier in the

day, several students needed to reread the core text or complete a graphic organizer before beginning their writing response or draft. This created a repeat of the morning's activities and was a less productive use of the limited afternoon time for these students.

The second challenge with this schedule was the requirement that during the 45-minute afternoon segment: (1) the teacher was not available when students needed more guided practice support with writing because of the need to fit in targeted small group reading lessons; (2) students who were part of the targeted small group reading lessons had little time to engage in independent writing skills practice, and (3) students who were pulled out of the class for individual ESL or reading services missed out on critical opportunities to develop their writing skills.

RESEARCH-INFORMED UNDERSTANDING OF THE PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

Research informs us that school and [classroom schedules](#) can be blocked in ways that [maximize reading instruction](#). Most educators are now familiar with the [Reading Rope](#), a metaphor for the types of knowledge and skills that develop together for successful reading acquisition. Growth on one strand or skill affects the growth of other skills or strands. However, there is less familiarity with the [Writing Rope](#), which details the knowledge and skills that are necessary for the development of skilled writing. The writing strands include critical thinking, syntax, text structure, writing craft, and transcription. Instruction in these writing skills also supports and integrates reading comprehension.

The SoR informs us that there is strong integration between reading and writing instruction—students writing about what they read—is important for developing grade-level reading proficiency. From LETRS training, educators learned the importance of establishing writing foundations through direct, explicit, and cumulative teaching with frequent practice in the early grades. Additionally, [the Simple View of Writing](#) highlights that skilled writing results from foundational writing skills and composition skills that then support reading comprehension and content knowledge.



At present, district leaders, campus leaders, support staff, and classroom teachers have easy access to professional development in the language acquisition and word recognition strands of the Reading Rope. This has built awareness at all levels of leadership of the importance of ensuring instructional time for targeting foundational reading skills in kindergarten through third grade. The Writing Rope affords the same importance of establishing instructional time and intention for foundational writing skills in order to support grade-level reading comprehension for all student groups. This would align with the explicit, systematic, and cumulative instructional practices, which have been fortified for foundational reading skills due to LETRS training.

CAPACITY BUILDING & CONVERSATIONS THAT CREATED CHANGE

Regarding this problem of practice, immediate actions could be taken to minimize the impact of the challenge of not having clearly allocated time for instruction in both foundational reading and writing skills. One of these is at the instructional level by embedding explicit foundational writing instruction within composition lessons. For example, this third-grade teacher embedded explicit instruction of encoding by syllable type and sentence-level grammar and syntax, which went deeper than the existing practice of teacher-modeled writing and class discussions centered around mentor text used in the core reading instruction.

Further change has to happen at the administrative level. Individual teachers can't change the organization of their class's daily schedule because it impacts the schedules of other professionals providing individualized student support. Therefore, change was only possible by getting school-wide awareness of the need for a master schedule that connects the reading and writing blocks and includes time for instruction of foundational writing skills. The conversation was initiated with the teacher expressing the struggle to fit explicit instruction of foundational writing skills and writing composition in a way that connects to text read earlier in the day during core reading. During weekly instructional planning professional learning community meetings, the teacher shared the concern with third-grade team members. As a response, the team looked closely at instructional plans to find alignment to LETRS practices, explicit instruction of foundational reading and writing, along with text reading and writing composition. From this closer look, the team agreed that the division of the literacy block into foundational reading with core reading and foundational writing with writing composition, as well as targeted reading groups, was challenging.

Oftentimes, people who hold leadership positions sit at many leadership tables across the school. This creates the potential for the same voices to be at each decision-making table, enabling the tracking of similar decision-making patterns across topics. One benefit is that decision makers are familiar with one another and relationships are well established, which can strengthen the efficiency and speed of decision-making. However, it is essential to couple this efficiency with opportunities to hear from classroom teachers during topics that directly impact instruction. There is value in hearing from staff members who are directly responsible for implementing changes and from those who can provide evidence-based information and solutions to a shared problem.

FOSTERING CHANGE IN THE COMING ACADEMIC YEARS

Continued conversations about the interconnectedness of the Reading Rope and Writing Rope frameworks need to be included when looking at the design, time allotment, and instructional materials for the literacy

block. Understanding how the foundational skills of reading and writing are essential for reading and writing fluency, which in turn is essential for comprehension, is an important grounding point for future decisions about improving literacy instruction at this school.

In addition to developing the most effective master schedule, school leaders, in consultation with classroom teachers, need to discuss the following core planning questions:

1. What processes exist in the district and school to use data to design Tier 1 reading instruction?
2. How can we use DPI's [district-level](#) and [school-level](#) data protocols to improve our use of DIBELS8 screening data to design Tier 1 instruction?
3. What does Language Comprehension Instruction look like in ALL grades, pre-K through to fifth grade?
4. What would it take to get a process in place to ensure the Language Comprehension side of the SVR is being addressed appropriately across all grade levels in your schools?
5. What guidance can the district and state educational office provide concerning the curriculum, instructional materials, and schedule?

SEVEN RESOURCES FOR MAXIMIZING THE LITERACY BLOCK

- [The Power of Innovative Scheduling](#)
- [Considerations for Scheduling Early Literacy Interventions](#)
- [Louisiana Literacy Block Schedule](#)
- [What Does a Structured Literacy Block Schedule Look Like? — The First Grade Roundup](#)
- [How to Create a Structured Literacy Schedule for K-2 Based On the Science of Reading](#)
- [The Writing Rope: the Strands that Are Woven into Skilled Writing | Reading Rockets](#)
- [The Reading Rope: Key Ideas Behind the Metaphor](#)

SCIENCE OF READING IMPLEMENTATION

BRIEF #6

FOSTERING WHOLE SCHOOL CHANGE when LEGISLATIVE MANDATES are **LACKING**

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INTRODUCTION

In 1996, North Carolina lawmakers [authorized the establishment of charter schools](#) to “provide parents and students with expanded choices... available within the public school system.” There are now approximately 200 elementary charter schools in North Carolina, and it is as critical that teachers in these schools provide literacy instruction that is aligned with the Science of Reading (SoR) as it is for teachers in traditional public elementary schools. Testing data shows that [students in charter schools perform similarly to those in traditional public schools](#), so the urgency of improvement in instructional practices is likely to be similar for students in both types of schools.

North Carolina’s [Excellent Public Schools Act](#) requires that all pre-K to fifth-grade teachers in traditional public schools complete [Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling \(LETRS\) training](#); however, it is at the discretion of individual charter schools as to whether their teachers complete the training. The Office of Charter Schools in North Carolina partnered with Lexia Learning and the NC ACCESS Program to provide some funding for LETRS training for charter school teachers and leaders. This resulted in each charter school being allotted only a few licenses for LETRS training. In contrast, all Kindergarten through fifth-grade teachers in traditional public schools were required to complete the training.

Because most teachers are unfamiliar with the principles of SoR and its aligned instructional practices, professional development for as many staff members as possible is an important part of improving student outcomes.

PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

How can we build a collective school-wide understanding of the SoR and alignment in using structured reading practices across the elementary grade levels when only 4 of 100 staff members have completed LETRS training?

This problem of practice was selected because it tackles one of the key implementation aspects of ensuring that the state’s investment in LETRS training can have a positive impact on the reading instruction experienced by all students across the state. Although this charter school has curricula aligned with the SoR and leadership, which value structured literacy, staff are not united in their understanding of SoR and have varying interpretations of best practices for literacy instruction because of large variations in their level of knowledge.



Only four of over 100 staff had completed LETRS training; two are administrators. Administrators assumed that all teachers were using SoR-aligned best practices in their daily instruction in correspondence with the provided curriculum. However, due to the lack of professional development on structured literacy, many teachers were falling back on outdated or ineffective strategies with their struggling readers. These ineffective strategies included using leveled or predictable texts, relying on pictures to guess words, and encouraging memorizing “sight” words.

During the 2023-24 academic year, a kindergarten teacher from this school engaged in twice-monthly meetings as part of the Science of Reading Implementation Fellowship. This Fellowship was guided by the North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation, four North Carolina university professors who are literacy experts, and NC-DPI’s Assistant Director of Early Literacy. The Fellowship enabled her to tackle this problem of practice by reminding her that many educators across the state are trying to ensure that SoR principles are present in every classroom so that all children in North Carolina can become proficient readers. Advocating for school-wide change from the position of a classroom teacher can feel lonely and daunting, particularly in a school where very few staff members have completed LETRS and other opportunities to learn about SoR. The other Fellows encouraged her to connect with others in her school who share a passion for early literacy, and to expand these connections beyond her school.

During the fellowship, she learned about NC-DPI’s Literacy at Home: Digital Children’s Reading Initiative, which offers resources for families to use at home. This was particularly helpful for teachers at her school during parent-teacher conferences, when many caregivers

asked for specific ways to support their children at home. She also learned about free SoR professional development opportunities that she brought back to her administrators, who, in turn, could offer them to teachers.

The primary change that resulted from consistent engagement with this problem of practice is that at the end of the 2023-24 academic year, the school’s Board of Directors and administrative team determined that an introductory SoR course should be required for all Kindergarten through eighth-grade literacy teachers. Staff will complete the free Reading Rockets Reading 101 Modules before the start of the next academic year, and then engage in discussions about the content during the week of back-to-school professional development. Teachers who completed LETRS or recently graduated from an undergraduate program requiring SoR-aligned courses are exempt.

SCHOOL CONTEXT

This problem of practice was taken up in a K-12 charter school that serves approximately 1,000 students. Of the students, less than 15% are economically disadvantaged. Fifty-eight percent of students are White, 14% are Asian, 13% are Black, 10% are Hispanic, and 5% are multiracial. This school has an extended day to accommodate its partial language immersion program: all students receive 90 minutes of daily language immersion. There is a moderate amount of teacher turnover from year to year, and teachers who stay often switch grade levels after a year or two. The teachers represent a range of experience, from non-certified to recently graduated, to nearing retirement. Two teachers hold doctorate degrees in education.

The school’s major priorities during the 2023-24 school year included strengthening the connection between core instruction and language immersion, increasing participation and enrollment in the academically and intellectually gifted program, and building construction. Community engagement, parent involvement, and staff work-life balance are also essential aspects of the school. Each kindergarten through fifth-grade level has five classes of around 21 students each. Each Kindergarten and first-grade teacher shares an instructional assistant with one other teacher, and schedules are staggered so that the instructional assistant can be present for foundational skills, comprehension, and math lessons in both of their classes.

Elementary school teachers use Core Knowledge Language Arts as the curriculum for both foundational skills and comprehension. As long as the teachers within the grade level team follow similar pacing, there is substantial flexibility in how individual teachers implement lessons. The kindergarten team collaborates and shares resources, ideas, strategies, and alterations to the scripted lessons. Nevertheless, the lack of formal training on how to understand, implement, and alter the curricula caused some teams to have difficulty with pacing, and some teachers find aspects of lessons confusing to teach.



RESEARCH-INFORMED UNDERSTANDING OF THE PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

It has come as a surprising realization to many that elementary teachers received little preparation in reading instruction and that many were using practices that were proven ineffective. Research shows that collectively supported professional development, such as study groups, can significantly improve teacher knowledge, self-efficacy, and use of effective instructional strategies. This suggests that study groups are one effective way of building capacity among teachers who did not have the opportunity to complete LETRS training. After reading the same

relevant research articles, small groups of teachers from the same grade level can meet monthly to discuss the research and determine how to apply the new practices they learned to enhance curriculum and instruction.

Research shows the importance of coaching and guidance in helping teachers adapt information learned in professional development into their teaching. When several groups of teachers are provided with the same literacy-based professional development, those who worked together in study groups with a coach showed significantly greater improvements in teaching practice than those who did not have the support of being part of study groups to learn how to put the new information into practice. Additionally, students whose teachers had access to a coach showed greater gains in word decoding than those whose teachers did not have access to a coach.

CAPACITY BUILDING CONVERSATIONS THAT CREATED CHANGE

The kindergarten grade teacher first built deep knowledge of the principles and practices aligned with the SoR, which enabled her to be recognized as one of the school's experts on this topic. Knowledge-building included attending local, regional, and national reading conferences, such as The Reading League's National Conference and Plain Talk. She shared the lessons learned and instructional resources with her principal, mentee, two first- and second-grade team colleagues, and the kindergarten through fifth-grade interventionist. She also responded to a request for volunteers to open their classrooms for peer walkthroughs three times during the school year, which enabled her to demonstrate her use of evidence-based practices. This helped her connect with a few other teachers who were interested in incorporating more SoR principles into their practices.

Although her principal and colleagues engaged with the resources, other priorities, such as fundraising and building construction, seemed much more pressing than making changes in literacy instruction. She continued to build her capacity by engaging in conversations about the SoR in the broader educational community, presenting at a regional conference for charter school teachers, the

Charlotte Literacy Summit, and the Annual Conference of the North Carolina Association for Public Charter Schools. These efforts culminated in her being elected to the board of The Reading League of North Carolina in the Spring of 2024. These efforts increased her ability to have a voice in the school's reading instruction, and she was asked to gather evidence-based curricula materials for the school's Summer Reading Camp for struggling readers entering second through fifth grades.

An opportunity to influence school-wide change occurred in the spring of 2024 when the principal sent the staff a series of surveys requesting input regarding the topics and formats of professional development opportunities they would find helpful. She encouraged her teammates and a few colleagues from other teams to ask for whole-staff literacy training, particularly one that addressed evidence-based practices for supporting struggling students. Additional advocacy for whole-school SoR training came from one of the members of the school's Board of Directors, who is a literacy professor in an elementary education preparation program.

FOSTERING CHANGE IN THE COMING ACADEMIC YEARS

This charter school's requirement that all K-8 literacy teachers complete a SoR training before the start of the next academic year is an essential step in furthering the extent to which all beginning readers will receive effective instruction. During the coming academic years, how teachers will receive support to implement what they have learned needs to be at the forefront of ongoing school-wide conversations. After completing Reading Rockets' Reading 101, classroom practices can be strengthened by creating opportunities for staff to collectively discuss how to implement new practices. Initial discussions should involve all literacy teachers, instructional assistants, and elementary administrators, and should also carry into grade-level professional learning community meetings throughout the year. For example, teams may work together to analyze benchmark data, identify weak areas, and focus on practices to help strengthen those areas. Staff can also determine which students are struggling and set individualized instructional goals aligned with SoR to help each student achieve proficiency



One component of effective implementation involves administrators actively observing classroom practices and ensuring that teachers have instructional coaching support. Classroom observations can provide administrators opportunities to identify teachers who are implementing SoR principles well and, in turn, allow those teachers to serve as models or guides for others who are struggling to apply the information. Administrators would be able to recognize areas of general weaknesses, such as falling back on ineffective strategies for struggling readers, and plan future professional development opportunities.

RESOURCES FOR ALIGNING INSTRUCTION WITH THE SoR

- [Science of Reading | NC DPI](#)
- [Reading 101](#)
- [Structured Literacy Instruction: What to Teach and How to Teach It](#)
- [Course: Assessing, Preventing, and Overcoming Reading Difficulties](#)
- [How to Align Your Instruction to the Science of Reading eBook](#)

SCIENCE OF READING IMPLEMENTATION

BRIEF #7

LIMITS of PARENT ADVOCACY for SCIENCE of READING ALIGNED INSTRUCTION in CREATING SCHOOL-WIDE CHANGE

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INTRODUCTION

In North Carolina, the [Excellent Public Schools Act](#) requires all pre-K to fifth-grade teachers in traditional public schools to complete [Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling \(LETRS\) training](#), a comprehensive professional development program grounded in the Science of Reading (SoR). Charter schools, however, are not held to the same standard; while encouraged to complete LETRS training and develop individualized Literacy Intervention Plans for struggling readers, they are not mandated to do so. Despite receiving per-pupil funding from the state, charter schools can choose whether or not to align their instruction with state initiatives based on the [strategies shown to give students the best chance of learning to read](#).

In the 2023–24 academic year, a structured literacy dyslexia specialist and former NC public school teacher working independently with families noticed troubling gaps in literacy instruction at a local charter school. Through her visits, conversations with teachers, and observations of classroom instruction, it became evident that the school's leadership did not prioritize adopting research-based literacy practices. This disconnect between the state's mandates for traditional public schools and practices at some charter schools raised critical questions regarding whether parent advocacy and district encouragement are enough to motivate charter schools to improve their literacy instruction.

PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

What strategies can parents and teachers use to encourage administrators to invest in the SoR when it isn't a school-wide priority?

This problem of practice was selected because even though the school's average reading proficiency score is above the state-wide average, there are subgroups of students who are significantly less likely to be proficient readers and would benefit from teachers' use of SoR-aligned instruction. Leadership at this charter school disagreed on the importance of SoR, which means that teachers were not united in their approach to literacy instruction, resulting in inconsistent practices, misaligned curricula, and teaching that sometimes does not reflect the content of benchmark assessments.

Because administrative support for SoR was lacking, SoR professional development was determined by individual teachers' level of personal investment. For example, one teacher, motivated by the significant disparity in her students' reading abilities, independently pursued LETRS training. She had to complete it on her own time and find substitute coverage without administrative support. Many interested teachers did not pursue LETRS training due to a lack of administrative support, time, and professional bandwidth.

During the 2023-24 academic year, the structured literacy specialist engaged in twice-monthly meetings as part of the Science of Reading Implementation Fellowship. This Fellowship was guided by the North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation, four North Carolina university professors who are literacy experts, and NC-DPI's Assistant Director of Early Literacy. The Fellowship enabled her to engage in a professional learning community that provided insight into the successes and struggles of implementing SoR in schools across the state. Hearing from the other Fellows working in a range of schools shed light on the barriers to change and provided new ideas for advocating from the outside. These perspectives were invaluable in shaping a more comprehensive understanding of how to influence literacy practices at a schoolwide level.

The primary change that resulted from consistent engagement with this problem of practice was building the knowledge of parents and community members regarding the need for and how children benefit when teachers align with the SoR. The Fellow held community awareness events and met individually with parents, teachers, and administrators. This increased the capacity of parents in the target school to advocate for SoR with other parents and administrators. However, while advocacy from several stakeholders resulted in some progress, there has been little change in the administrators' position regarding the need to engage with the SoR. This experience highlights the limits of individual and parent advocacy in the absence of state mandates. Advocates found that individual efforts, while important, could not overcome the institutional barriers in place when leadership is resistant and there is no accountability structure demanding change.

SCHOOL CONTEXT

This problem of practice was taken up in a Kindergarten through eighth-grade charter school known for its arts-integrated approach. The student population is 70% White, 19% Black, 7% multiracial, and 4% Hispanic. It serves a higher-income student body, where only 10% are economically disadvantaged students. In contrast, 18% of children in the county live in poor households. The curriculum emphasizes interdisciplinary and project-based learning that supports students' cognitive, emotional, and creative growth. However, the school's approach to reading instruction is not aligned with the SoR, and most parents with children who struggle



with reading pay for supplemental tutoring and intervention support. This creates inequities in access to the resources needed to become a proficient reader.

Administrators justified not investing in building teacher capacity to align instruction with the SoR by pointing to the school's average test scores. While the school's average test scores indicate success, disaggregated data show that the educational needs of subgroups of less advantaged students are not being met. A significant percentage of economically disadvantaged students are not reading proficiently. These children often cannot access private tutoring and other external support and rely entirely on the quality of instruction received at school. The school's refusal to adopt SoR-aligned instruction disproportionately harms these students.

As long as charter schools are not mandated to align instruction with the SoR, grassroots pressure for change through parent advocacy will be needed. Parent pressure has been one of the few levers of change at this school and must be sustained through community workshops, accessible resources, and ongoing dialogue.

CONVERSATIONS NEEDED TO CREATE CHANGE

Charter schools operate with greater autonomy than traditional public schools and are not required to adopt the new state-mandated reading initiatives. Innovation and flexibility are essential hallmarks of charter schools; however, when the stakes are as high as a child's ability to read - and there is strong research-backed evidence for effective instructional practices - the freedom of charter schools to deviate from state mandates must be weighed against potential harms to the likelihood that children will become proficient readers.

[Research indicates that parent advocacy is critical in determining whether schools and school districts provide adequate services for children.](#) However, it takes a substantial amount of complex knowledge, social networking, and time for a parent to take on the role of advocate for their own child and for other children. Advocacy groups need to invest in educating a broad tent of stakeholders about the importance of aligning instruction with the SoR.

Only through sustained effort at multiple levels—parent, teacher, and policy—will meaningful change occur in charter schools. Some of the opportunities for advocacy initiatives include:

- It is difficult for parents to know whether their children are receiving instruction grounded in evidence-based practices. Equipping parents with tools to determine whether their child is a struggling reader and whether their child's teacher is using SoR practices can improve the situation.
- Professional development is costly, and because reading is a foundational skill, charter schools need to be included in state-funded training. State-supported training opportunities for LETRS and other SoR-aligned courses should be more accessible to charter school teachers.
- North Carolina legislators need to consider updating education policies to require SoR-aligned instruction in all public schools, including charters. Holding every publicly funded school to the same standard is part of ensuring that every child receives high-quality reading instruction.

Advocates found that individual efforts, while important, could not overcome the institutional barriers in place when leadership is resistant and there is no accountability structure demanding change.

Literacy instruction based on the SoR benefits all children and is most critical for students from lower-income families who don't have the financial resources to pay for supplemental instruction. Knowing what works and choosing otherwise is knowingly leaving too many children behind.



RESOURCES FOR ENGAGING PARENTS IN THE SoR

- [A Guide to Reading Advocacy: Is Your Child's School Getting Reading Right?](#)
- [Parent and Family Advocacy Resources](#)
- [Communicating with Parents About the Science of Reading](#)
- [Reading 101: A Guide for Parents](#)
- [The Right to Read Film](#)

SCIENCE OF READING IMPLEMENTATION

BRIEF #8

USING the SCIENCE of IMPLEMENTATION to IMPLEMENT the SCIENCE of READING

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INTRODUCTION

The urgency of improving reading instruction is highlighted by the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress results, which show that [slightly more than half \(58%\) of North Carolina's fourth-grade students are reading at or above the basic level of proficiency, which is below pre-pandemic levels of reading proficiency](#). When these numbers are disaggregated, it becomes clear that the burden of low reading proficiency is carried by children with fewer family and community resources. [Only 47% of children in economically disadvantaged families scored at or above basic reading proficiency compared to 72% of children in not economically disadvantaged families](#). These disparities highlight the need to ensure that schools and teachers serving children in low-income families have professional development, coaching support, and curriculum tools needed to deliver evidence-based instruction.

The Science of Reading (SoR) implementation case studies shared in Briefs 2 through 6 make clear that improving reading instruction [“requires a culture of shared leadership that engages teachers, specialized personnel, coaches, principals and administrators, families, and the community as partners around a set of common, aspirational values and beliefs.”](#)

Prior to the [2021 Excellent Public Schools Act legislation](#), North Carolina teachers were using an unstructured system that enabled many to utilize ineffective practices associated with the belief that exposure to text, including looking at pictures and guessing the words, would be enough for most children to become proficient readers. Now, the common goals detailed in the [Excellent Public Schools Act legislation](#), requires educators across the state to transition reading instruction practices from an unstructured system that enabled many to utilize ineffective practices associated with the belief that exposure to text, including looking at pictures and guessing the words would be enough for most children to become proficient readers, to a system of structured literacy based on the understanding that reading is learned through [sequenced instructional practices of teaching increasingly complex skills](#).

Common knowledge is being developed through [Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling \(LETRS\) training](#) and ongoing support from the Department of Public Instruction. LETRS training provides NC's early elementary teachers with strong foundational knowledge in research-based understandings of how children learn to read. By the end of the 2024-25 school year, [over 44,000 kindergarten through fourth-grade teachers in traditional elementary schools across the state had completed the comprehensive training on the SoR](#). All new educators who don't have training in structured literacy will also have to complete LETRS training.

Now, teachers and schools need strong implementation plans for making small and large shifts to ensure that all students, especially those from lower-income and lower-educated families, have the best chance of becoming proficient readers.

Becoming a proficient reader requires learning several increasingly complex skills:

- Oral Language, including awareness of words through listening and speaking in a language-rich environment.
- Phonological Awareness, including awareness of speech sounds and the ability to identify the sounds that make up parts of words.
- Phonics, including the ability to match letters with the sounds they represent.
- Vocabulary, including knowledge of words, their definition, and the concrete items they represent.
- Decoding, including the ability to use knowledge of letter-sound relationships, including knowledge of letter patterns, to correctly pronounce written words.
- Fluency, including the ability to read connected text with accuracy, expression, and at an appropriate rate.
- Comprehension, including the complex process of reading text and constructing meaning from text.
- When the components of proficient reading are listed out in this way, it is easier to see that very intentional instruction is needed.

CRITICAL LESSONS FROM THE SCIENCE OF IMPLEMENTATION

Just like there is a science to teaching reading, there is a science to implementing change that can guide North Carolina schools through an urgently needed change process that must be done in ways that are manageable for educators. Implementation is the structured process by which schools and educators can build systems in the state's department of education, each school district, and each individual school to ensure that all teachers use the most effective reading instruction practices.



In the remainder of this brief, lessons from the science of implementation are combined with recommendations from the SoR Implementation Fellows to increase the likelihood that districts, schools, and individual classroom teachers will make sustainable shifts in increasing students' exposure to reading instruction aligned with the SoR. The Fellow's recommendations are particularly insightful because classroom teachers and literacy coaches are the ones who are closest to and familiar with students' needs.

When individual educators make improvements that produce positive outcomes, they can be replicated in other classrooms, scaled up to the building level, and shared across the state.

The science of implementation informs us that it is difficult to make collective change without a shared vision and shared understanding of why aligning one's practices with the SoR will lead to improved outcomes.

Consistent with this, the Fellows recommend that it would be helpful for administrators to complete a more comprehensive training on SoR principles. This training should be almost as in-depth as the one teachers receive. In contrast, the current LETRS for administrators training provides a more conceptual understanding of the issues. Additionally, all teachers and literacy support staff in charter and private schools where LETRS is not offered should receive an alternative comprehensive free SoR training, such as [Reading Rockets Reading 101](#). All students deserve to be in classrooms with teachers who have the knowledge and skills to utilize the instructional practices that have been shown to give students the best opportunities to become proficient readers.

The science of implementation informs us that change plans need to be guided by a clear understanding of the current state of practice in all classrooms that provide reading instruction.

Consistent with this, the Fellows recommend the need for greater administrator engagement with instructional accountability, such as more frequent classroom observation and teacher coaching. The Fellows noted that this is an aspect of implementation where administrators with limited SoR knowledge stumble in the change process. If the principal and assistant principal (the leaders of the building) don't know what to look for to know whether teachers are aligning their instructional practices with the SoR, they are limited in their ability to ensure that students receive the most effective instruction. Fellows pointed out meaningful implementation differences between schools where the leadership completed the more comprehensive versus the brief training.

The science of implementation informs us that ongoing systems of support are necessary for educators to take what they learn in professional development workshops and use it to change their teaching practices.

Consistent with this, the Fellows recommend that training cannot be viewed as a one-and-done process. Teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators need ongoing collective learning and shared feedback on how school systems, such as block schedules, instructional practices, and the use of data to group students for supplemental support, align with the SoR. Ongoing implementation support can come in the form of professional learning community discussions on topics such as research-based methods of enhancing curriculum materials to be responsive to students' needs. Ongoing shared capacity-building experiences are an important part of maintaining momentum.

The Fellows also highlight the need for schools to set aside time for vertical planning across several grade levels. It is not enough for teachers of a particular grade level to know what each other is doing and use similar instructional practices; they also need to know what is happening in the grade before and after. Vertical planning that seeks to align reading instruction across several grade levels can reduce learning gaps. Vertical planning would also

strengthen individual teachers' professional learning by providing exposure to effective instructional practices that have been implemented at other grade levels.

The science of implementation informs us that teachers need strong systems, such as connected reading and writing blocks, and effective tools such as sequenced curriculum materials aligned with the SoR to make improving their instructional practices easier.

Consistent with this, the Fellows stressed the need for stronger guidance from the state and district regarding aspects of reading instruction that should not be left to the discretion of individual schools. One set of needed guidance includes having a very short list of reading curricula and instructional tools with the best evidence regarding effectiveness. Another set includes requirements regarding how the school day should be scheduled to ensure that students in the earliest grades have ample blocks of time for reading and writing instruction, in whole-class and small intervention groups, so that struggling readers don't get left behind. The Fellows noted that in most schools, the administrators who make many of these critical decisions have limited knowledge of the SoR. Without strong guidance from the state and district, individual teachers have to take on the burden of convincing their principals to invest in systems and resources such as updated curricular materials, which is an added weight that classroom teachers shouldn't have to carry.



Additionally, there was much they still had to learn about using new assessment tools and how to match students to targeted interventions. A significant component of effective implementation of the SoR is matching instructional strategies to individual students' needs. Brief standardized screening assessments administered multiple times over each academic year enable teachers and administrators to quickly see whether the whole class and each student is making adequate progress. Individual struggling readers can then complete diagnostic assessments to identify the skills that are lacking and strategically select the instructional intervention that best teaches those skills.

As the Fellows worked to shift their instructional practices to align with what they learned about the SoR, they discovered that implementation is stronger when principals and other administrators also understand the SoR. Many implementation constraints are beyond the control of individual teachers. They learned that they need an ongoing professional learning community after completing LETRS training to become skilled in the new instructional strategies. To achieve greater consistency in the instructional strategies that students experience, the Fellows learned that many more members of the instructional team, such as special education, Multilingual instructors, and paraprofessionals, need a strong understanding of the SoR.. They also learned that no school, including charter schools, should be exempt from being required to use the most effective instructional practices.



The [science of implementation](#) can aid in addressing these and many more challenges that districts, schools, and individual teachers face in helping children become proficient readers. Implementation science research has found that [for schools to solve learning challenges](#), students must receive instruction from

- a teacher armed with an **effective intervention**, such as becoming skilled in instructional practices aligned to the SoR;
- who teach in a school with a **culture that promotes effective implementation**, such as providing them with supports such as reading instructional coaches and phonics-based curriculum materials;
- and for learning to occur within an **enabling context**, such as school schedules that facilitate an extended period of connected reading and writing instruction to maximize learning.

There are strong evidence-based practices that can be used to teach children to read, and we must continue the journey to ensure that children in all classrooms are experiencing the instructional strategies and individualized interventions that will give them the best chance of becoming proficient readers. As educators across the state continue their learning journey, the DPI OEL has a free LETRS professional learning community that works through all units of LETRS and is made to support school-level coaches for use in professional learning community meetings. Educators can utilize these resources individually and collectively as school teams.

- [District PLC Support for LETRS® Training: Volume 1](#)
- [District PLC Support for LETRS® Training: Volume 2](#)
- [District PLC Support for LETRS® For Little Learners](#)

North Carolina has invested in providing teachers with high-quality professional development on effective reading instruction. To ensure that we reap the benefits of those investments, educators need time. They need time to engage in professional learning communities at their school to learn how to implement what they have learned, and they need time to plan small group and individual reading interventions based on the new assessments they are required to administer. They also need supportive resources such as curricula and books that make it easier for teachers to deliver evidence-based instruction.

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