

SCIENCE OF READING IMPLEMENTATION

BRIEF #1

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

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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.

SERIES OF BRIEFS

BRIEF #1

Lessons Along the Pathway to
Implementing the Science of Reading
In North Carolina Classrooms

BRIEF #2

Science of Reading and the
Paraprofessionals in the Classroom

BRIEF #3

Lower and Upper Elementary
Attending to Both Sides of the
Reading Rope

BRIEF #4

Aligning SoR Practices Across
Content, EC, ML, AIG Educators

BRIEF #5

Creating A Master Schedule that
Maximizes the Literacy Block

BRIEF #6

Creating Whole School Change
When Legislative Mandates are
Lacking (focus on charter schools)

BRIEF #7

Role of Parents In Advocating
for Science of Reading Aligned
Instruction in Schools

BRIEF 8

Using the “Science of
Implementation” to Implement
the “Science of Reading”

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