

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](#)

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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