

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](#)

SERIES OF BRIEFS

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

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Science of Reading and the
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BRIEF #3

Lower and Upper Elementary
Attending to Both Sides of the
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BRIEF #4

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BRIEF #6

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BRIEF #7

Role of Parents In Advocating
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BRIEF 8

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

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