



# Table of contents

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

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<b>Executive summary</b>	1
<b>Science of reading</b>	3
<b>Literacy assessment</b>	6
<b>Findings</b>	8
<b>Recommendations</b>	18
<b>References</b>	23

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# Executive summary

“ When I started teaching in 2005, I had no background in how kids learn to read. I did the best I could with what I knew at the time. I happened to work in a school with a literacy intervention program that was grounded in the science of reading. Despite the strong curriculum, district leadership was lacking and the curriculum was thrown at us without any explanation and little training. As soon as I started using the materials, I needed to learn the ‘why’ behind what I was doing. I started to learn about the research on how kids learn to read and it made sense to me.

I was eager to know more. I did not have a coach or leader I could turn to for support—the only person I could talk to was my mom who was a teacher. I read, did my own research, and later completed a two-week training program. Later on, I was able to translate what I had learned to my own kindergarten classroom. By the end of my first full year of teaching kindergarten, nearly all of my students were at or above grade level in reading. It wasn’t necessarily the specific curriculum I was using that made a difference, it was the knowledge I had about the science of reading and how I used that knowledge to guide my teaching.

I think a lot of teachers are in the same place as I was. At Northeast College Prep, we are at a turning point. We’ve provided important support to our teachers, including coaching, observation and relevant data to drive instruction. All of our teachers have a coach, a thought partner, someone to bounce ideas off of. And our teachers are really invested in doing what works. They are willing to try new things. They are good at looking at data and the story behind it. All of this is helping to set us up for a big change in how we teach reading.

— Laura Pastor, Northeast College Prep

**At Great MN Schools**, we believe that every student deserves grade-appropriate curriculum and strong instruction, provided by teachers who are engaged, prepared and supported. Students deserve a learning experience that meets their academic, social-emotional, and cultural needs.

**Great schools are the cornerstone of a just & thriving community**



Effective literacy instruction is core to our vision. National research and local data demonstrate the importance of literacy in a student's educational trajectory. **Reading is one of the most crucial academic skills because it's the foundation for learning.** Students who do not achieve reading proficiency in elementary school fall further and further behind, as the majority of classroom instruction is taught through reading.

**Reading proficiency by the end of third grade is one of the most important predictors of later success in school and college.<sup>1</sup>**

In Minneapolis and St. Paul, less than one-third of Indigenous, Black, and Latinx students are reading at grade level, compared with more than three-fourths of white students; about one-fourth of low-income students are reading at grade level.<sup>2</sup>

The research is clear: All students can learn to read when they are explicitly taught with the right instructional methods.

**In fall 2020, we commissioned a needs assessment focused on elementary literacy instruction in grades K-5 in Minneapolis and St. Paul.**

To better understand the needs of students, teachers and schools, we invited local schools to participate in a project designed to capture strengths, challenges, and potential areas of support.

To focus our learning, we developed specific evaluation questions [see sidebar] with the goal of understanding the needs of students, teachers, and schools as a whole.

<sup>1</sup> Lesnick, J., Goerge, R., Smithgall, C., & Gwynne J. (2010). *Reading on Grade Level in Third Grade: How Is It Related to High School Performance and College Enrollment?* Chicago: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

<sup>2</sup> Minnesota Department of Education. (2019). *Test Achievement Levels, Test Results and Participation [Data Dashboard]*. Retrieved from <http://rc.education.state.mn.us/>.



## EVALUATION QUESTIONS

### Student outcomes and experience:

- How are students experiencing literacy instruction? What is working well and what challenges do they face?
- What student needs are currently being met? What needs remain unmet and why?

### Teacher preparation and support:

- To what extent are teachers equipped to teach students literacy?
- What do teachers experience in teaching literacy? What is working well? What challenges do they face?

### School factors:

- To what extent does school leadership support and prioritize literacy in the school?
- To what extent does the school's approach to literacy align with the research on reading instruction?
- To what extent is literacy instruction standardized across grades and classrooms?
- How does the literacy curriculum support effective literacy instruction?
- To what extent is data available to drive continuous improvement in literacy? How are teachers and school leaders using the data?
- To what extent does the school engage families in literacy efforts?





In order to be a skilled reader, students must have both strong foundational skills that allow them to decode written words and knowledge-based competencies that allow them to make meaning of what they read.

## The research on how children learn to read is clear

Advancements in cognitive science have demonstrated that our brains are not naturally wired to read. Rather, reading is a complex set of skills that must be explicitly taught.

Unfortunately, some approaches to reading have adversely affected instruction and student learning for decades. For example, one misconception is that learning is a natural process, like the process of learning to speak; if children are given enough time and access to books, they will naturally learn the skills. Research shows that this “whole language” philosophy is not true. Brain science has demonstrated that reading involves a complex set of mental processes that allow our brains to connect spoken language and the words we see on a page and translate them into meaning.

Effective reading instruction addresses two types of competencies:

1. **Foundational reading skills**—a finite list of skills that early readers need in order to understand how letters, sounds, and words function. They include concepts of print, phonemic awareness, phonological awareness, phonics, spelling and fluency, also known as “decoding skills.”
2. **Knowledge-based competencies**, which help students create meaning from text. They are life-long and developmental, grounded in overall language comprehension. They include vocabulary, background knowledge, oral language skills, and reading comprehension skills.

The simple view of reading is one model<sup>3</sup> that succinctly summarizes this research: **Word Recognition x Language Comprehension = Reading Comprehension.**

The simple view explains that reading requires word recognition (learning to read each word accurately and fluently) and language comprehension (comprehending the meaning of the text). **The formula intentionally multiplies the two factors, as opposed to adding them, because a child cannot read if one of the competencies is missing.** If a student has good language comprehension skills but zero decoding skills, her reading comprehension will be zero; the inverse is also true. Both foundational reading skills and knowledge-based competencies are critical, and both must be strong for a student to be a skilled reader.

Extensive research continues to demonstrate that the simple view of reading is what works. About 40% of children will learn to read regardless of the quality of reading instruction. In order for all students to learn to read, we must provide high-quality instruction grounded in the research. Early reading instruction needs to address foundation skills and include:

- Explicit instruction in phonemic awareness.
- Systematic phonics instruction.
- Methods to improve fluency.

However, foundational skills are not enough. Students need strong vocabulary and background knowledge. Studies have shown that prior knowledge of a topic has a greater impact on reading comprehension than general reading ability. Some falsely assume that building knowledge is not developmentally appropriate for our youngest learners or that students who are behind cannot learn complex content. In fact, teaching knowledge is an equity issue. When we teach vocabulary and knowledge, students are able to understand texts regardless of their backgrounds and experiences outside of school.

<sup>3</sup> Other, more complex models that offer additional insights include Scarborough's Reading Rope (<https://dyslexiaida.org/scarboroughs-reading-rope-a-groundbreaking-infographic/>) and the Active View of Reading (<https://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/rrq.411>).

<sup>4</sup> Dickmann, G. (2018, July). *The Ladder of Reading*. eXaminer, 7(3).



Reading instruction needs to explicitly address knowledge-based competencies and include:

- Systematic and intentional teaching of vocabulary and knowledge.
- Extended classroom time spent reading, listening to and discussing multiple texts on the same topic.
- Texts that offer rich and robust content including facts, ideas and vocabulary words.
- Writing instruction that is embedded into reading instruction and writing tasks that are grounded in the text.

Moreover, there are practices that hinder learning to read, and these practices are still widely used.



# Science of reading

“Whole language” is a discredited philosophy that assumes that learning to read is a natural process and that if children are exposed to enough books, they will develop the skills to read. “Balanced literacy” is another philosophy that is deeply rooted in whole language but adds phonics instruction to create a “balance.” However, the term “balanced” is misleading as the approach does not give adequate time and attention to teaching the skills that are essential to becoming a skilled reader. The whole language philosophy is still central to balanced literacy, and its faults undergird the approach. For example, balanced literacy materials often emphasize the use of context clues for word recognition and rely on leveled reading texts. Research shows that leveled texts can stunt reading growth and prevent students from building knowledge and vocabulary. And practices like using context clues

for word recognition pull students’ attention away from the specific sequence of letters in a word. Because balanced literacy and whole language approaches assume that children come to school with well-established knowledge, vocabulary and decoding skills, they fail to teach those skills and only widen learning gaps.

## All students can learn to read with the right instruction and supports.

When reading instruction is explicit, sequential, and systematic in the foundational skills and knowledge-based competencies, all students can become skilled readers.



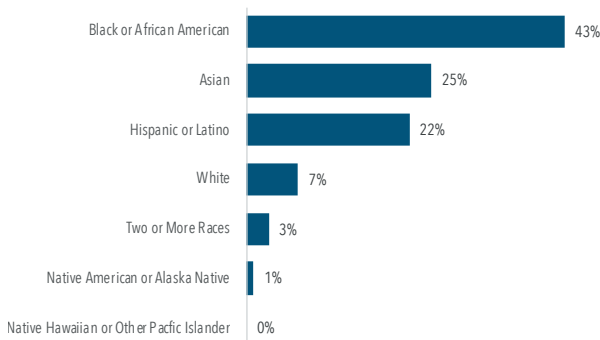
## Seventeen schools participated

Participation was optional, and schools received a \$250 stipend to recognize their time commitment. Most schools that opted in had an existing relationship with Great MN Schools; 15 were charter schools, and two were independent schools.

Participating schools had a diverse group of students, as shown in Figure 1. Across the

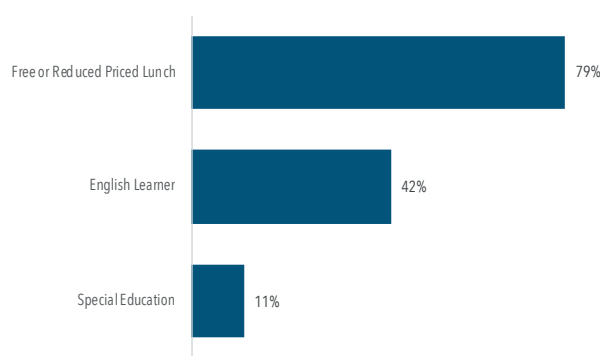
schools, 94% are students of color, with the largest proportion (46%) identifying as Black or African American. Figure 2 shares additional information about the students at these 17 schools. Over three-fourths qualified for Free and Reduced-priced Lunch, and 41% were English learners; 10% of students received special education services.

Figure 1. Majority of students identify as students of color.



Note: Demographic data only includes 15 of the 17 schools because the two private schools do not have data available through the Minnesota Department of Education.

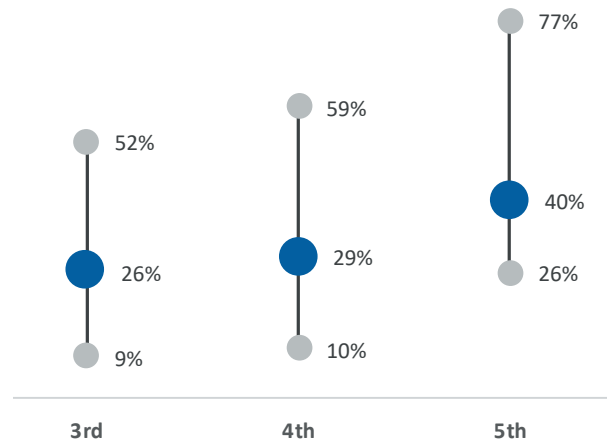
Figure 2. Most students come from low-income families and nearly half are English learners.



Note: Demographic data only includes 15 of the schools; data for the other two schools was not available. For Free and Reduced-priced Lunch, data for two additional schools was not available and data for three schools was estimated because the exact numbers were suppressed for privacy reasons. For English learners, data was not available for two additional schools.

Student achievement in reading at the schools demonstrates the need to improve literacy instruction. The most recent publicly available data is 2019 MCAs because administration in 2020 was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Across the 11 schools with available data, 31% of students in grades 3-5 scored proficient. Figure 3 displays the percent proficient for each grade, showing that proficiency rates were stronger in the higher grades. The range between the highest performing and lowest performing was large (about 40 to 50 percentage points). Because this data is two years old, it may not reflect the current reality at the schools.

Figure 3. Proficiency rates are higher in the higher grades.



## Qualitative methods allowed us to go deep

This needs assessment was conducted during the pandemic. As a result, the evaluation design was adapted to allow for virtual data collection and reduce the time commitment required by schools and teachers. We relied heavily on qualitative methods to answer the evaluation questions, as they provided in-depth information about school

leaders' perspectives, the quality of literacy instruction, and the experiences of teachers. Our quantitative methods were significantly limited because of the lack of student assessment data available due to the pandemic. Table 1 outlines the data collection methods used.

Table 1. Data collection methods.

Methods	Participants	Sample
School leader interviews	School leader, typically the principal	17 school leaders
Literacy lead interviews	Staff member who leads literacy efforts, typically an academic coordinator or coach	15 literacy staff members
Teacher focus groups	K-5 teachers who teach or support literacy	27 teachers from 11 schools
Curriculum and material review	N/A	6 sample lesson plans from each school representing grades K-5; 9 literacy curricula reviewed by EdReports <sup>5</sup>
Literacy achievement analysis	Students in grades K-5	1,545 students in grades 3-5 with 2019 Reading MCA data

We developed a rubric grounded in reading research to analyze the interview data, curriculum, and lesson plan samples. The rubric consisted of 35 quality indicators across nine domains:

1. literacy philosophy
2. literacy skills (i.e., foundational skills, knowledge-based competencies, writing)
3. level of literacy content
4. instructional practices
5. data utilization
6. teacher preparation and support
7. literacy alignment
8. support for struggling students
9. family engagement

For each item, schools were given a score of 0, 2, or 4, where 0 = quality indicator is not present; 2 = quality indicator is somewhat present; 4 = quality indicator is mostly present. Interview data was coded for themes not captured in the rubric and data from the teacher focus groups was coded separately since they were not school specific, and the themes from the teacher focus groups were analyzed together with the themes from the interviews.

<sup>5</sup> [EdReports.org](https://edreports.org/) is an independent nonprofit committed to ensuring all students have access to high-quality instructional materials. They publish free reviews of K-12 instructional materials, using an educator led approach that measures standards alignment, usability, and other quality criteria.



## The pandemic significantly impacted literacy instruction

The majority of schools were providing virtual instruction when data collection occurred; a few schools were utilizing a hybrid model. Many schools reduced the amount of time dedicated to literacy instruction during virtual instruction. The average amount of literacy time per day was 106 minutes across the 17 schools, with the maximum amount at 150 minutes and the minimum at 60 minutes. A key theme that surfaced from the interviews was insufficient time dedicated to literacy; 11 of the 17 schools identified this as a challenge. One leader shared, *“Even with 90 minutes, time is never enough. We could spend all day on literacy.”* Other challenges related to the pandemic included data collection, family engagement, and student attendance. School leaders struggled to administer their typical student assessments; in some cases, they were unable to administer the assessments in the virtual setting, and in others, they were not

confident in the data they collected. Additionally, several schools experienced student attendance and engagement issues during virtual learning. Family engagement suffered as well. Schools needed to be more focused on coordinating the logistics of virtual learning with families than on engaging them in literacy.

Despite the challenges resulting from the pandemic, the needs assessment provided valuable information about schools’ literacy efforts that can be used beyond the pandemic context. School leaders and teachers shared what is working well, what needs to be changed and what supports they need as students return to in-person instruction. The key themes from the analysis highlight the opportunities to improve literacy instruction and ensure all students become skilled readers.





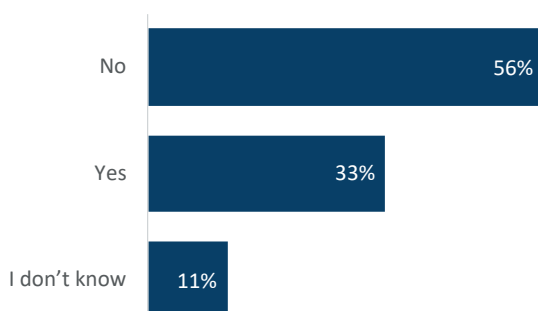
## Schools need to intentionally develop their understanding of research and create clear philosophies that drive decision-making

The needs assessment revealed that one of the challenges to implementing the research are gaps in understanding. School leaders typically understand the importance of foundational skills but need more support with knowledge-based competencies. In the interviews, six schools described only one of the foundational skills—systematic phonics instruction—in the science of reading. Another misconception that surfaced was the belief that knowledge-based competencies should be developed after second grade, once foundational skills are mastered. In truth, knowledge-based competencies are developed starting at birth and need to be explicitly taught in all grades.

The process also revealed that teachers could benefit from an increased understanding of the research.

**The analysis showed that teachers are more likely to receive professional development on literacy curricula, but less likely to receive professional development on effective literacy practices and research.** This was one of the lowest scoring indicators, with an average of 2.1 across schools. In the focus groups, teachers expressed the need and desire for more learning. As shown in Figure 4, only one-third of teachers in the focus groups reported having received training on the brain science of how students learn to read. Moreover, 37% of teachers said they would like to receive training on this topic. A deep understanding of the science is a critical starting point.

Figure 4. One-third of teachers have received training on the brain science of how students learn to read.



Once school leaders and teachers have an in-depth understanding of the science, they can articulate a researched-based philosophy to drive their decision-making. Eight schools lacked a cohesive literacy philosophy—a shared understanding of the research on how children learn to read and a corresponding vision of how that philosophy plays out in the school.



“If you asked people at our school, you would get a different answer from each person. As we go through the curriculum review, we need to start with this question. Some people are just learning how kids read. My personal philosophy is that kids need to be taught explicitly how to read and need to engage with complex texts. It is a heated conversation we need to have.

— One school leader when asked about literacy philosophy



## Schools are more likely to explicitly teach foundational reading skills than knowledge-based competencies

The analysis examined whether schools explicitly teach foundational reading skills and knowledge-based competencies. On average, schools were more likely to provide direct instruction on the foundational skills, with phonological awareness scoring the highest (3.9). Fluency was the foundational skill that scored the lowest (3.3). For knowledge-based competencies, reading comprehension was mostly commonly addressed (3.6) while vocabulary was the least likely (2.8).

Figure 5. Schools scored higher on foundational reading skills compared to knowledge-based competencies.



## Groves partnership helps support foundational skill instruction

Ten schools have a partnership with Groves Academy, likely contributing to strong scores on foundational skills. Groves partners with schools to share its evidence-based teaching methods to advance literacy instruction in foundational reading skills. Schools that work with Groves receive access to the Groves Method Literacy Curriculum, professional development on the science of reading, and regular coaching on effective literacy practices and curriculum implementation.

One teacher expressed the positive impact of Groves on her school: *“This is our third year of the Groves literacy partnership. It is such a great program. We receive regular professional development and coaching in the science of reading. They are keeping us up to date. We were doing Action 100—it was terrible, with three-cueing and the whole language approach. Things used to be ‘look at the picture and guess what the word is.’ We don’t do this anymore.”*

Because Groves partner schools identified the partnership as a core component of their literacy strategy, we compared the data of those schools against those that don’t. It’s important to note that these two groups may not be equivalent and that there may be important differences between these groups that affect the quality of literacy

instruction outside of the Groves partnership. As a result, causal inferences about the impact of Groves cannot be made. Groves partner schools had on average more time dedicated to literacy instruction, with an average of 116 minutes compared to 93 minutes per day. In addition, Groves partner schools had a higher average score on the quality indicators, with an overall average of 3.3 compared to 2.8 for the non-Groves schools.

Table 2 lists the quality indicators where Groves partner schools scored on average more than one point difference on the scale. Almost all of the indicators directly align with the services provided by Groves. For example, schools that work with Groves use AIMSweb assessments to monitor student progress; they meet with their Groves coach to examine and discuss the progress monitoring data on a regular basis. The data is then used to create small groups where students receive individualized support. It is therefore not surprising that these schools scored high on the corresponding quality indicators regarding data (i.e., A, D and G). The only indicator in Table 2 that is not addressed through the Groves partnership is C. The Groves program is focused solely on foundational skills and does not address background knowledge.

Table 2. Items where Groves partner schools had greater than one point difference.

Quality Indicator	Difference
A. Teachers have data to monitor student progress.	+2.3
B. Literacy instruction across grade levels is aligned.	+1.3
C. Literacy instruction covers background knowledge.	+1.3
D. Teachers and/or staff meet to discuss literacy data.	+1.2
E. Teachers receive professional development on effective literacy practices and/or research.	+1.2
F. Literacy instruction includes systematic phonics instruction.	+1.1
G. Small groups are created using student data.	+1.1
H. Literacy instruction is consistent across classrooms in the same grade level.	+1.1

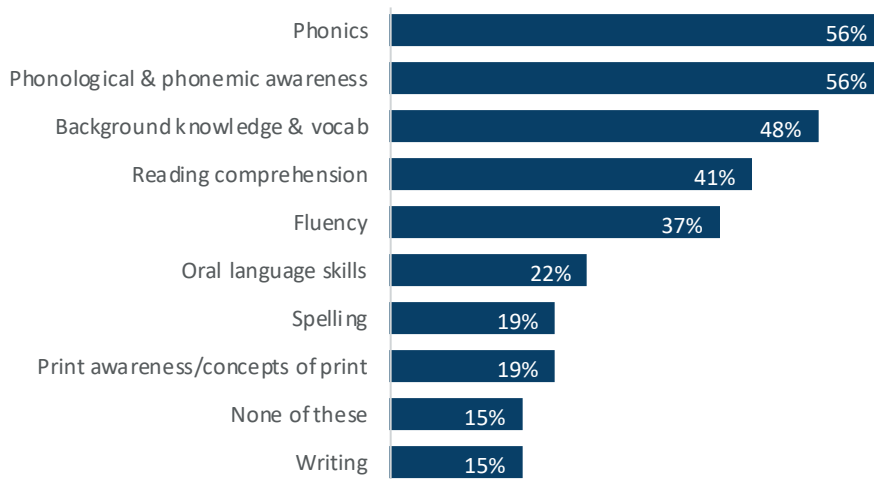


## Groves partnership helps support foundational skill instruction (continued)

While the Groves partnership focuses on foundational skills and provides important resources for schools (e.g., training, coaching, data), **it does not directly support schools with the other half of the equation: Knowledge-based competencies. Not only were schools less likely to provide explicit instruction on knowledge-based competencies, but teachers**

**were less likely to receive training in them as well.** Figure 6 shows the topics in which teachers who participated in the focus groups have received training. With limited support and training in this area, instruction on knowledge-based competencies relies heavily on the quality of the curricula.

Figure 6. Teachers are most likely to receive training on early foundational skills.



## Schools are addressing grade-level skills, but texts need to be at or above grade level

One of the key practices that fosters knowledge-building is giving students access to content that is at or above grade level. Students should have extensive opportunities to work with grade-level texts and should be exposed to material that is two to four levels above their instructional level. They need to be adequately challenged and engaged in texts that are of quality, rigorous, and at their frustration level. The needs assessment showed that literacy instruction is aligned to state standards and exposes students to grade-level skills. However, the texts that students are engaging with are often at their instructional level, as many schools are using leveled reading groups as part of literacy instruction. Leveled texts are not effective and can stunt reading growth; additionally, this practice limits knowledge building.

The interviews uncovered a tension between the desire for more of a skill-level focus and the best practice of focusing on grade-level content. When students are struggling, teachers are skeptical that grade-level content is appropriate and effective. One school leader explained: *“EL is very much about being on grade level. The majority of students are not on grade level. Most of our students are not accessing EL because they are not there skill-wise. Sometimes teachers feel like it’s a waste of time.”*

The quality of the curriculum and its structure play a key role in both knowledge-building and access to rigorous grade-level content. The level and quality of the texts in the curricula determine the content and knowledge that students are exposed to. In addition, the breakdown of activities (whole group instruction, small group instruction, one-on-one interventions) and how the time is used affects student learning. One school leader articulated her skepticism: *“Students who acquire foundational skills early [excel], especially with leveled groups. They are placed in a higher level group and continue to excel. They are on grade level or above grade level trajectory. This makes me question every day why we do leveled groups.”*

### One teacher comments on grade-level content:

“ I was intimidated myself teaching 5th graders. We used these higher grade level articles about Native American culture, for example. My students blew me away with how much they got out of it. I thought there was no way, that it was too high level. It showed me how those high-quality texts can push their thinking further. Even this year, we have seen gains across our interim assessments across grade levels, even during the pandemic.

## Curriculum matters, especially when it is not aligned with the research

The 17 schools, combined, use 36 different curricula for literacy in grades K-5. The quality of the curricula varied:

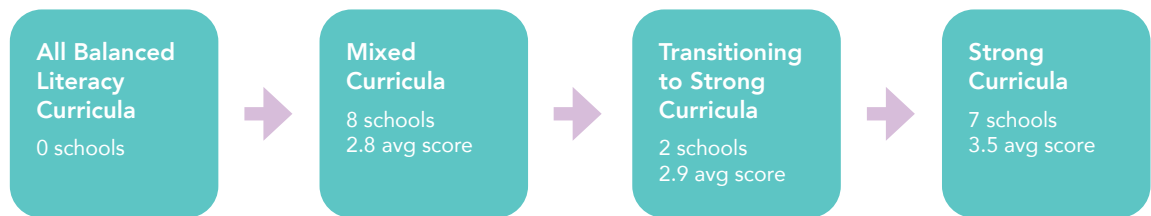
- Four curricula demonstrated evidence of whole language or balanced literacy
- Five partially met expectations according to EdReports
- Three met EdReports' expectations
- The vast majority of curricula (24) were not reviewed by EdReports and could not be thoroughly evaluated within the scope of this project—the most common curricula used across the sample of schools were: Heggerty (11 schools), Groves Method (10), Wit & Wisdom (five), and EL (four)

Figure 7 displays a curriculum continuum along which the schools are located. The continuum reveals that schools with research-based programs scored higher on the quality indicators; they were more likely to exhibit the research-based practices and mindsets. While none of the schools solely used balanced literacy materials, eight did utilize a mix of curricula with differing quality. Of them, five schools had at least one curriculum or set of materials from the balanced literacy philosophy. For example, one school had a high-quality English Language Arts curriculum

for its whole group instruction; however, it utilized a leveled reading program grounded in balanced literacy for its small group instruction. The other three schools in this continuum phase had curricula that were mediocre (i.e., partially met expectations) or curricula that had not been externally reviewed to determine its quality.

Curriculum challenges were one of the most common obstacles cited across interviews; 15 schools discussed their curriculum when asked about the challenges the school faces. The continuum is designed to show that schools in different stages of the continuum face unique challenges and, therefore, need different types of support. One teacher shared her experience of working with low-quality materials: *“Our guided reading library is full of Fountas and Pinnell texts—I wish they had better texts in our library. The texts aren’t super decodable, so it reinforces bad behavior.”* When a school has curricula of varying quality, alignment becomes a major challenge, as one school leader explained: *“One struggle is that we’ve never had a single really solid curriculum that has continuity through the grades. We have had to supplement it and it has become a patchwork.”*

Figure 7. Schools on the Curriculum Continuum





## High-quality curricula require high levels of support

Schools that were intentional about their shift to a strong curriculum attributed much of their success to this shift. As one teacher explained, *“This is our first year of the Amplify ELA curriculum. Students are diving into complex, rich text. The curriculum comes at the texts in an approachable way. It is more rigorous than our past curriculum. And now we are immersing writing into reading instruction.”*

These schools expressed that they need support with implementation. The more robust literacy programs involve a learning curve and require sophisticated decision-making to implement the program within the context of the school. Curriculum adoption is a process that can often take multiple years.

Two schools were in the process of transitioning to a stronger curriculum with a multi-year rollout. The transition requires change management leadership, including an intentional shift away from old curricula and materials and a process that garners buy-in from teachers.

### Perspectives from educators

“ EL is designed for 120 minutes a day and we don’t have that time. Kids are missing most fluency practice. EL is split into main instruction time and small groups on rotation. I have not been able to implement the small group rotations. Maybe it’s because I’m new. I’ve been picking and choosing what to use from this part of the curriculum and I feel like it’s going to show up in the data and skills.

“ Any time we adopt a curriculum, we have a three-year rollout plan. In year one, we implement it and focus on implementation. In year two, we try to make it our own. And in year three, we make modifications for our exceptional learners.

“ We did a lot of work around why curriculum matters. We believe in using high-quality curriculum. It’s non-negotiable. We have buy-in from the teachers. Teachers are saying, ‘this is a lot and I want to do it well—help me.’ Two years ago that was not the case—people used to not believe in curriculum.

## Even with high-quality curricula, gaps remain

Six schools expressed cultural relevance concerns regarding their curricula. Two of those schools are schools with highly rated curricula. One school leader explained: *“We are trying to make the curriculum more relevant for students. It lacks representation of people of color across grade levels and across content. It is not enough to feel relevant to students’ lives. There is maybe one example per grade level that includes people of color, and that is not enough.”* It is critical to ensure that literacy materials are culturally diverse and relevant for students. To do so, schools may need to supplement their curricula in order to fill those gaps.

One school leader explicitly called out the tension between the importance of knowledge building and cultural relevance. He asserted, *“There is no question that [background] knowledge impacts reading comprehension. Give a test for an area they know well and one they don’t know well and it will show you. But what conclusions should we be drawing from that? What background knowledge do we want to build? The knowledge base that has been established is highly questionable.”* Schools and the field as a whole need to grapple with the question of what types of knowledge to prioritize and why.







## Another gap is writing instruction and support for teaching writing

Nine schools identified writing as a major challenge. In some cases, schools do not have enough time dedicated to writing instruction. In other cases, the curricula do not adequately address writing. A school leader explained the gap in her curriculum, *“With EL, it just assumes they know how to write. It doesn’t really teach it. We are seeing a gap there. Also a gap in teachers knowing how to teach writing.”*

Across the board, teachers need support in how to teach writing. Of the teachers who attended the focus groups, only 15% have received training in writing. Training in how to teach writing was the most requested topic, with 85% of teachers reporting that they would like training in this area.

## For students, we need to move forward

As we sought out to identify effective high-quality literacy instruction, across the sample, most schools demonstrated that they're providing explicit instruction in foundational reading skills. Their instruction is aligned to the state standards and gives students access to grade-level skill building. Elements that were associated with higher scores on the quality indicators included the partnership with Groves, a high-quality curriculum, and an intentional focus on implementation. Participants also identified small group and one-on-one interventions with a teacher as a strength.

Because this was a needs assessment, the primary focus was on gaps and areas of support. During the process, we asked both school leaders and teachers if they could change one thing about their literacy efforts, what would they change.

We have developed recommendations for action to align with the common challenges and desired changes that surfaced. These recommendations are designed for schools and organizations that support schools in their continuous improvement efforts. For each recommendation, we have listed potential action steps and ideas. These are intended to be a starting point for conversation, brainstorming, and planning.

Table 3. School leaders and teachers generally want to make similar changes.

School Leaders	Teachers
More teacher training/support	Accessible curriculum coaching/guidance Ongoing literacy professional development
Improve curriculum/materials	Full access to curriculum materials (e.g., complete sets for each teacher)
Develop literacy leadership	Greater literacy standardization and alignment School-wide literacy vision and goals
Improve literacy instruction	
Improve or increase interventions	
More and/or better time spent on literacy	

## 1

### Recommendation 1 Literacy leadership and understanding are critical

- Develop school leaders' understanding of the science of reading. Increase understanding of the simple view of reading, especially knowledge-based competencies.
- Directly address misconceptions and misunderstandings about reading and help leaders and teachers unlearn them.
- Encourage school leaders to articulate and formally document a literacy vision, philosophy, and goals including a plan for training and coaching staff in implementation.
- Develop school leaders to build a positive culture and climate around literacy change and improvement.
- Support school leaders in the process of unlearning and removing any balanced literacy and whole language practices, materials, beliefs, etc.
- Support school leaders in developing, articulating and measuring literacy goals for their school, including goals for student achievement and goals for implementation.
- Create a formal (ideal) or informal position to support teachers with literacy curriculum and instruction implementation. This person should be a science of reading enthusiast, a strong ambassador for the school's literacy philosophy, familiar with the curriculum, and available daily for observation, coaching and support for teachers.
- Communicate with families about the school's literacy vision and philosophy including how it aligns with the science of reading.

School leaders, teachers, parents, consultants—all of us—have held or do hold misconceptions about learning to read that hold students back.

Table 4. Misconceptions about learning to read that hold students back

Misconception	Truth
Learning to read is a natural process	Students need to be explicitly taught
Students just need culturally relevant books and then they will learn to read	Culturally relevant texts greatly enhance the learning process but alone will not create readers
Once you offer phonics instruction, everyone will learn to read	Students need to develop rich vocabulary and background knowledge in order to make sense of what they are reading—this and phonics are part of the simple view of reading and need to be taught
Students benefit the most from instruction that is at their level	Students benefit most from core instruction that is at grade level or higher—the language comprehension side of simple view should be at grade level or higher (intervention methods should focus on differentiation at the skill level, especially for decoding practice)
Looking at pictures and guessing words is a helpful strategy in learning to read	This is counterproductive—a student is more likely to learn to read if the focus is on decoding (e.g., “sounding it out”)
Decoding should be the focus of K-2 and comprehension should be the focus of 3-5	Decoding should definitely be taught in grades K-2 but it should continue into grades 3-5 for students who still need it (likewise, language comprehension skills and strategies need to be taught starting in K)
Literature is the best content for students	The best approach to building language comprehension skills is to offer students high-quality, rigorous fiction and nonfiction text—many schools and home libraries put far too much emphasis on fiction texts which leave huge gaps in vocab and background knowledge development for students
Students just need to love reading	Developing a joy of reading is an outcome of learning to read; however, it's often presented as a means or strategy for learning to read

## 2

### Recommendation 2

#### Provide teachers with additional literacy training and support

- Ensure all schools have a robust science of reading training for ALL staff. It should be ongoing and address how to remove balanced literacy practices and materials.
- Emphasize both parts of the simple view of reading and support all K-5 teachers in implementation of both parts.
- Provide teachers more training and support on how to teach writing and how writing and reading connect.
- Ensure that every school has a robust, ongoing system for teacher coaching and observation in literacy.

## 3

### Recommendation 3

#### Develop a strategic structure for literacy instruction that is aligned and grounded in the research

- Ensure that instruction aligns with the simple view of reading and provides all K-5 students access to both sides of the equation in a high-quality way.
- Coach school leaders through a schedule audit to determine the best use of literacy time. Analyze the English Language Arts block to determine if the time is used strategically and effectively (i.e., students receive adequate whole group instruction, instruction covers both foundational skills and knowledge-based competencies, students spend minimal time on independent reading with texts they have already mastered, small group transitions are as efficient as possible, etc.).
- Improve writing instruction and ensure adequate time is spent on writing; help schools embed writing into their reading instruction.
- Focus on strong implementation of tier 1 literacy instruction (this will help reduce the number of students requiring tier 2 and tier 3 supports).
- Ensure that students are receiving enough content that is at grade level or above. Help schools find the appropriate balance between grade-level and skill-level content and when to strategically address each.
- Develop a family engagement plan that explicitly includes literacy and is aligned to the science of reading research. For example, focus on the research-based elements of literacy that families can help build (e.g., background knowledge, vocabulary, oral language).



## 4

### Recommendation 4 Improve curriculum selection, quality, and implementation

- Ensure all schools have high-quality curricula that explicitly teach foundational skills and knowledge-based competencies.
- For schools that are using ineffective curricula, help them transition to a high-quality option. Streamline and reduce number of curricula.
- For schools using an effective curriculum, help them focus on teacher support and implementation. Help teachers strategically and intentionally apply the curriculum to their school structure and context.
- Ensure that materials are culturally diverse and relevant; support teachers to supplement materials where necessary.
- Provide a seamless, aligned experience pre-K through 5. If using multiple curricula, ensure they are aligned and work together so students can progress smoothly through grades.

## 5

### Recommendation 5 Improve and/or increase interventions provided to struggling students

- Develop a systematic approach to tiered instruction that includes a strong emphasis on tier 1 fidelity and provides access and appropriate scaffolding for students in need of tier 2 and 3 support.
- Ensure that progress monitoring data is being used to regularly check on students' learning in tiers 2 and 3 and determine when they can matriculate back to tier 1.
- Ensure that school has the instructional capacity to meet the demand of tier 2 and 3.
- Help teachers develop a toolkit of specific literacy interventions for small group and one-on-one interventions and help them differentiate in those settings, e.g., select the best interventions for students based on their strengths and gaps.
- Provide the same science of reading training to all support educators (e.g., EL teachers, SPED teachers, paraprofessionals, EAs, etc.).
- Build systems and processes for teachers and support staff to better communicate and coordinate their instruction.

## Potential actions for systems-level change

These are designed for organizations that work across schools and systems and have the power to change institutions, resources, and policies that impact schools.

- 1. Train leaders in the field about the science of reading and the importance of unlearning misconceptions.** Share the results of the needs assessment to demonstrate that schools are still on their journey. The schools in this sample are likely more knowledgeable compared to average school because of their existing partnerships with external providers (e.g., Groves, ANet). Help create a movement by leveraging a variety of stakeholders to create a culture shift (e.g., parents, institutions of higher education, MDE).
- 2. Leverage COVID relief funding to drive resources to this effort.** Use funds to provide intensive professional development and on-site coaching to teachers. Reading coaches can support and reinforce ongoing professional development.
- 3. Create learning communities of schools.** Teachers and leaders expressed a desire to collaborate and learn from each other. For example, schools with the same curricula can share experiences and lessons learned.
- 4. Develop a recognized list of high-quality curricula and materials** and encourage the MDE, districts, schools, partners and trainers to promote the list. Create a list of materials that need to be removed because they have whole language or balanced literacy embedded in them.
- 5. Identify (or develop when needed) supports for schools that specifically target the gaps** identified in this report: training and coaching on knowledge-based competencies; support for foundational skill development for grades 4-5; training and coaching on how to teach writing.

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