

# Leveraging American Rescue Plan Funds to Advance Literacy

## *A Step-by-Step Guide for States and Early Reading Advocates*

With the significant infusion of dollars now available to both states and school districts, we have a unique opportunity to finally reduce high rates of illiteracy, particularly in populations which have been traditionally underserved by an inequitable system of education. Instead of a third of all children entering 4th grade still unable to read at a basic level, the application of evidence-based instruction can reduce that number to as low as 5%. That's a challenge that no school, district, or state can afford to continue to ignore.

There are ample opportunities to use funds available through the newly passed American Rescue Plan to improve and advance student literacy outcomes.

- Districts can use 20% of their Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief funds (ESSER) and states can use 5% of their ESSER funding for the following purposes to address learning loss:
  - ✦ Purchase high quality curriculum to support evidence-based literacy instruction (see, for example, the list of approved curricula from [Colorado](#) and [Arkansas](#));
  - ✦ Incentivize the most effective teachers to deliver high quality afterschool or summer school programming;
  - ✦ Train tutors in the science of reading to provide high-dose, personalized or small group instruction focused on literacy;
  - ✦ Develop, purchase, and implement diagnostics and formative assessments based in the science of reading to understand and assess students' current reading abilities ([see here for a list of recommended surveys and assessments](#)); and
  - ✦ Provide professional development to teachers in scientifically based early reading instruction that includes use of high quality materials and analysis and application of assessment data ([see here for recommendations on strong PD providers](#)).
- The remaining 80% of district ESSER funds can be spent entirely at the discretion of the LEAs with states permitted to dedicate 2.5% of their ESSER funds to discretionary spending, allowing both to consider activities such as the following:
  - ✦ Any of the above items;
  - ✦ Teacher training and professional development on evidence-based literacy instruction ([see Step 7 below](#)); and
  - ✦ Work with families to ensure parents understand the importance of evidence-based literacy instruction, and how to support their children's literacy.

This document lays out specific policies that states and reading advocates can pursue to ensure that American Rescue Plan funds deliver as intended. Any funds used to support these activities are allowable uses of ARP funds.

## STEP 1

**Does your state have *standards* requiring teacher prep programs to prepare early childhood, elementary, and special education teacher candidates in evidence-based reading instruction?**

- *If you don't know*, these regulations are generally found in state code under preparation standards.
- *If the answer is no*, it's a good place to start. Having the right standards puts an important stake in the ground. [Utah](#) and [Texas](#) are strong examples of standards for preparation programs that include the science of reading.
- *If the answer is yes*, consider how well it's enforced. The articulation is important but is it known if programs are meeting this standard? How is their adherence determined? In other words, is the reading coursework required by programs well aligned to the science of reading? *NCTQ is available to help states determine alignment between standards and coursework.*

## STEP 2

**Does your state require early childhood, elementary, and special education teacher candidates to pass a high quality *teacher licensure exam* that assesses teacher knowledge of evidence-based reading methods?**

- *If you either don't know or think the answer is no*, you can find [a complete list](#) here of both strong and weak tests used by states. A strong test needs to be “stand alone,” with the results speaking only to a teacher's knowledge of reading instruction without “muddying the waters,” by including other areas of content knowledge. A good test is an even more important step than adopting standards, because standards have been harder to enforce, requiring a state education agency or other authority to conduct regular oversight of reading coursework.
- *If the answer is yes*, that's great, move on to the next step!

## STEP 3

**Is the score that a teacher candidate needs to achieve on the state's reading licensing test set at the level recommended in the formal standard-setting process?**

- *If you don't know*, you can find the recommended cut scores for a [test developed by ETS here](#), and the actual cut scores [used by states here](#). For tests that are developed by Pearson, the actual cut score for each state is published on the state's testing website, but the recommended cut score from the standard-setting process is not as easy to find. You may be able to get access to the technical report, but it's not always clear whether the state's cut score from that report is

the one recommended by the standard-setting process or if it's just the one the state chose.

- *If the answer is no*, the state should consider revisiting the score that is used. What looks like small differences in cut scores of only a few points translates into *major* differences in pass rates. Policymakers often lower the score needed to pass these tests out of a concern that too many candidates will fail and not be able to teach. The more appropriate response by states is to insist that programs teach the relevant material. If the material is actually taught, a state should not have to worry about high fail rates and teacher shortages.
- *If the answer is yes*, that's great, move on to the next step!

## STEP 4

### **Does your state consider programs' pass rates on reading tests when renewing its approval of programs?**

- *If you don't know*, every state has to list the factors it considers in order to identify a program as "at-risk" or "low-performing" under [Title II, Section VIII](#). Since the 2020 Title II report was abbreviated due to COVID, examine the previous year state report for this information. Some states have additional processes or data points they take into account for program renewal, typically found in state law related to teacher preparation programs.
- *If the answer is no*, the case needs to be made that the state should consider this valuable source of objective evidence. Tennessee looks for a specific pass rate on reading tests in their program accountability standards and during the program renewal process, requiring a 90% best-attempt pass rate.
- *If the answer is yes*, how is it considered? Does the state set a standard for how many candidates must pass? Does the state only examine the "best-attempt" pass rates or does it also look at first-time pass rates or the average number of attempts needed to pass? All of that additional data speaks to the efficiency of the program and its alignment to evidence-based reading instruction.

## STEP 5

### **Do the teacher educators in your state have the knowledge they need to prepare teacher candidates in the most effective methods to teach children to read?**

- *If you don't know*, you're not alone. No state has a handle on this issue, though some are beginning to address this problem.
- *If the answer is no*, look to [Mississippi](#) and [Arkansas](#), two states which have started to provide professional development to teacher educators.

## STEP 6

**When a teacher candidate becomes a teacher of record, how likely is it that the school district will be using an evidence-based curriculum that will yield the highest number of successful readers?**

- *If the answer is “not at all likely,”* states are ideally situated to influence the curricula selected by districts, given the large amount of state funding districts receive. Look to the state of Colorado as a role model for navigating a way forward. In spite of its proud tradition as a local control state, Colorado was able to establish a [new list](#) of just eight allowable programs for early literacy. Student Achievement Partners’ resource “[Implementation Guidance for Literacy Acceleration](#)” can also help you identify next steps. [Arkansas](#) also identifies “curriculum programs that are supported by the science of reading and based on instruction that is explicit, systematic, cumulative, and diagnostic,” as part of the amended Right to Read Act of 2019. *This is an excellent area for applying new stimulus funds, and crucial to getting both newer and experienced educators on the same page when it comes to teaching literacy.*
- *If the answer is “highly likely,”* then we applaud your state’s commitment to evidence-based literacy instruction.

## STEP 7

**Have all teachers, not just teacher candidates, been provided the professional development needed to teach children to read using the most effective methods?**

- *If the answer is “not likely,”* then consider requiring training and support to help teachers implement proper reading instruction. Mississippi appropriates \$15 million each year to pay for professional development and literacy coaches who regularly visit the classrooms of elementary teachers. [North Carolina](#) recently passed a law requiring all elementary teachers to receive training in the science of reading.
- *If the answer is “highly likely,”* then we applaud your state’s commitment in doing its part to ensuring teachers are equipped with the tools they need to help all students learn to read with proficiency.

## STEP 8

**Celebrate success stories!**

Success breeds success especially when we acknowledge exemplary achievement. States may want to identify educator prep programs, individual schools, charter systems, and/or school districts that have demonstrated a strong commitment to evidence-based literacy instruction and are posting measurable gains in their outcomes.