

National Association of State Boards of Education

## → Teachers Need Multifaceted Support to Improve Literacy

By Winona Hao

Between 2013 and 2022, 30 states and the District of Columbia had passed laws or implemented policies on reading instruction (see map). These laws typically prescribe pre- and in-service training to ensure that teachers are equipped with an understanding of the science of reading and the skills to apply this understanding to instruction. But simply requiring more training is not sufficient. Teachers need comprehensive support to improve students' literacy.

State boards of education can provide this holistic support through better teacher preparation standards in early literacy; professional development guidance; high-quality literacy coaches and other support professionals; and a one-stop-shop strategy that aids teachers in aligning curriculum, instruction, and their professional development with

the science of reading. Boards can advocate for funding for early childhood educators to receive this support as well.

The term “science of reading” refers to decades of research on how young children learn to read. In 2000, the National Reading Panel summarized the research in the three preceding decades in its landmark report, “Teaching Children to Read.”<sup>1</sup> It identified five components that are key for effective reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary development, and reading comprehension.<sup>2</sup> The understanding continues to evolve as new research is conducted.

### TEACHER PREPARATION

According to the National Council on Teacher Quality, 29 percent of evaluated U.S. undergraduate preparation programs in 2020 provided instruction in all five components identified by the National Reading Panel.<sup>3</sup> A survey of K-2 and special education teachers found that only 11 percent said they felt “completely prepared” to teach early reading

when they finished their programs.<sup>4</sup>

Only 20 states require a licensure test to measure teacher candidates' knowledge of all aspects of the science of reading; 17 others require a test that does not measure all the components. Only 11 states require such a test of their special education teachers, although these teachers work with students who need the most intervention.<sup>5</sup>

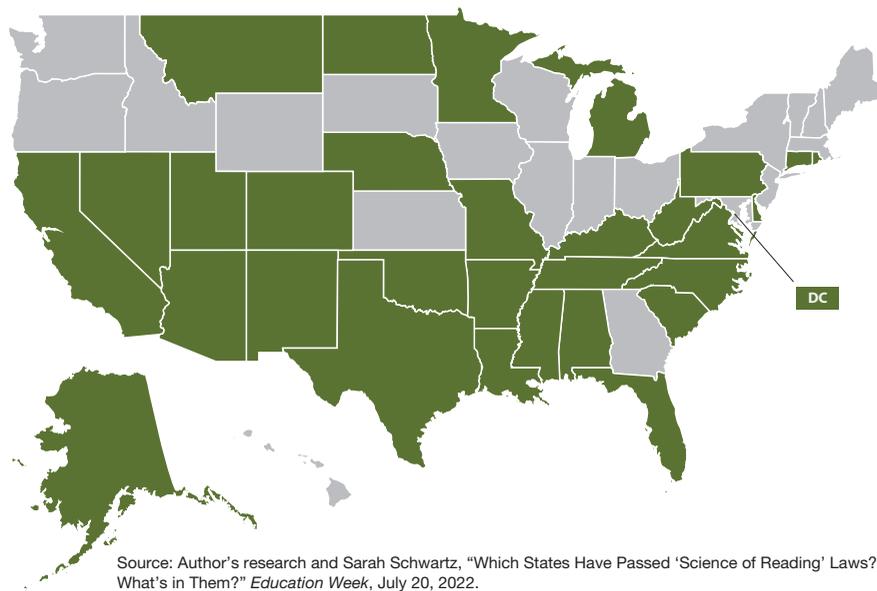
Some state boards with authority over education preparation have taken a close look at reading instruction preparation and have held programs accountable. The **Colorado State Board of Education** in 2022 declined to grant full approval for the University of Colorado Denver's teacher preparation program because of deficiencies in reading instruction. It granted partial approval to university programs in elementary education, special education, early childhood education, and literacy specialization. The university is due for a follow-up review, at which it will have the opportunity to show that changes have been made to meet state mandates on the science of reading.

Recent legislation in **Delaware** requires Delaware teacher preparation programs to provide instruction in evidence-based reading instruction beginning July 1, 2023. It requires the Delaware Department of Education to establish a minimum number of hours of training that instructors in educator preparation programs must complete in evidence-based reading instruction. As a result, the state's Professional Standards Board will amend its teacher licensure regulations, which the Delaware State Board of Education must then approve.

### PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Because state policymakers tend to focus on it, many state reading laws primarily tackle professional development. Although many professional development decisions are made locally, states can provide guidance and require or recommend training in the science of reading. Twenty states have preservice and in-service requirements for teacher training and professional development in literacy,

### 30 States Plus DC Passed Laws on Reading Instruction (2013–22)



Source: Author's research and Sarah Schwartz, "Which States Have Passed 'Science of Reading' Laws? What's in Them?" *Education Week*, July 20, 2022.

ranging from passing an assessment to receiving job-embedded training. Another 20 states have literacy requirements for teacher candidates, and three require in-service professional development related to literacy.<sup>6</sup>

**Mississippi** began a statewide push for training in the science of reading for its K-3 teachers in 2014. Since its revamp of professional development, along with sweeping changes in curriculum, instructional coaches, and assessments, Mississippi has made significant strides in improving literacy outcomes, with average scores on the grade 4 reading assessment administered by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) rising by 8 points since 2011 and remaining on par with the national average in 2022, a year when many states lost ground on NAEP reading scores.<sup>7</sup>

## SUPPORTING ROLES IN CLASSROOMS

There are a variety of professionals that support, expand, and supplement daily reading instruction. They may also provide assessment and sometimes leadership for teachers and students. These roles often have titles such as reading specialist, early interventionist, tutor, and instructional coach. Many state boards oversee the qualifications for these professionals and can develop policies to ensure that the science of learning is embedded in the coursework for candidates.

The coaching model in particular has proven highly effective in advancing reading outcomes. When teachers receive instructional coaching, the quality of their instruction improves, as does student achievement.<sup>8</sup> Literacy coaches provide one-on-one support to classroom teachers, model effective instruction, facilitate collaboration, and provide teachers with updated research and best practices.

Mississippi also provided literacy coaches to individual school districts and regions, and much of the coaching took place through a virtual platform. Literacy coaches themselves received professional development and collaborated to share knowledge and practices.

In **Florida**, literacy coaches must be endorsed or certified in reading. The state education agency's professional develop-

ment for these coaches includes certification boot camps and training in the state's new English language arts standards, with other training determined locally.<sup>9</sup>

## PLANNING AND ALIGNMENT

While more states are adopting curriculum and assessments that align with the science of reading, states need to have a plan to ensure a comprehensive, aligned approach to supporting educators who are making a transition in their instruction. Simply buying new curriculum will not have immediate impact in the classroom. Teachers need professional development, coaching, and time.

The **North Carolina State Board of Education** adopted a statewide literacy plan in 2021 that focuses on syncing professional development, teacher support, curriculum, and instruction. The plan followed a decade of literacy reforms that began with a 2012 law on third grade retention. In 2018, a report found the retention strategy did not produce the expected impact on reading proficiency. Subsequent legislation requires districts to submit to the state education agency explanations of how their selected curricula and resources align to the science of reading.<sup>10</sup> The law also requires K-5 teachers to receive intensive training, schools to develop intervention protocols, and teacher preparation programs to align instruction with the science of reading.

## INVESTMENT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS

Because children begin building their literacy foundation in infancy, support for teachers of the youngest learners demands particular attention.<sup>11</sup> The development of oral language, understanding of the alphabetic principle, story and book comprehension, and knowledge of print concepts are the best predictors of children's future reading skills. Young children who experience rich language environments have greater oral language skills and phonemic awareness.<sup>12</sup> States need to consider how to train and support early childhood educators in developing early literacy competencies.

## CONCLUSION

Many factors contribute to students' success in learning to read. Teacher professional development often receives the most atten-

tion and is critical. To be most impactful, states should ensure that sufficient time and resources are allocated for teachers to participate, through support of release time to attend workshops and conferences, for example, or funding for online training.

But policies must go beyond simply mandating evidence-based reading instruction and requiring teacher training: They must provide holistic support that aligns preparation standards, professional development, classroom support, and curriculum. Designing a fully supportive system for teachers is key to state policymaking that will lead to better literacy outcomes for young children.

*Winona Hao is NASBE's director of early childhood education.*

## NOTES

1 National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, "Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read," 00-4754 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2000).

2 Council of Chief State School Officers, "Third Grade Reading Laws: Implementation and Impact" (Washington, DC: CCSSO, 2019).

3 National Council on Teacher Quality, "Teacher Prep Review 2020: Program Performance in Early Reading Instruction" (Washington, DC: NCTQ, 2020).

4 EdWeek Research Center, "Early Reading Instruction: Results of a National Survey" (2020).

5 Hannah Putman and Kate Walsh, "State of the States 2021: Teacher Preparation Policy" (Washington, DC: National Council on Teacher Quality, 2021).

6 Education Commission of the States, "State K-3 Policies" (September 2020), <https://reports.ecs.org/comparisons/state-k-3-policies-12>.

7 Nation's Report Card, "State Profiles: Mississippi," 2022.

8 Matthew A. Kraft and David Blazar, "Taking Teacher Coaching to Scale: Can Personalized Training Become Standard Practice?" *Education Next* 18, no. 4 (2018).

9 ExcelinEd, "Comprehensive How-To Guide: Approaches to Implementing Early Literacy Policies" (2022).

10 General Assembly of North Carolina, An Act to Modify the Implementation of the North Carolina Read to Achieve Program in Order to Attain Statewide Reading Proficiency by the Third Grade, Senate Bill 387 (2021-8).

11 Dorothy Strickland and Shannon Riley-Ayers, "Early Literacy: Policy and Practice in the Preschool Years," Preschool Policy Brief (National Institute for Early Education, 2006).

12 Catherine E. Snow and Diane E. Beals, "Mealtime Talk That Supports Literacy Development," *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development* (Spring 2006): 51-66, <https://doi.org/10.1002/cd.155>.