



CHAMPIONS OF LITERACY

A RESOURCE GUIDE FOR ALASKA SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS



CCNETWORK 
Comprehensive Center Network

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The body of work referred to as the Science of Reading is not an ideology, a philosophy, a political agenda, a one-size-fits-all approach, a program of instruction, nor a specific component of instruction. It is the ***emerging consensus*** from many related disciplines, based on literally thousands of studies, supported by hundreds of millions of research dollars, conducted across the world in many languages.

DR. LOUISA MOATS

Developer of the Lexia LETRS Suite

Our *Champions* of Literacy

Your leadership guides our districts North to the Future.

Literacy in the English language is, as Dr. Tracy White-Weeden writes, a moral imperative: “All children must be equipped to read in the language of power, write in the language of power, and express their ideas in the language of power. ... When children are taught the English language in a structured, systematic, explicit, and cumulative way, access to words can positively transform their future.”¹

You represent every single public school student across Alaska: from Nuvuk to Nome, you make a difference every day for our 131,212 students statewide.² The decisions that your board makes in support of literacy have the undeniable power to transform the future of our students, communities and state.

THE POWER OF PROFICIENCY

Reading proficiency is the cornerstone of a successful life for many Americans. It is the skill that enables students to pursue futures beyond their wildest dreams. Yet it’s also the skill that hides in plain sight: many of us are reading nearly every minute of every waking hour. In reading this document, *you* demonstrate the power of reading proficiency in shaping our knowledge, convictions, and actions.

Proficient readers are more likely to both graduate high school and attend college.³ Future educational attainment can be predicted as early as third grade, as students who are not yet reading at grade level by the end of third grade are nearly a third less likely to graduate high school and attend college than those reading at grade level.⁴

Reading and the Brain

Language is an inextricable part of the human experience. The languages that we speak go beyond representing the reality that we perceive: they construct our reality to correspond to the ways of knowing and understanding that our languages offer.

The human brain thrives on language⁵ and is “naturally wired to speak.”⁶ Reading and writing, much like speaking, activate various parts of the brain and strengthen and sustain patterns of neural connectivity.⁷ Yet there’s one fundamental difference: our brains aren’t naturally wired to read and write.⁸

It’s no wonder, then, that literacy expert Louisa Moats writes that “teaching reading is rocket science.”⁹ Becoming a skilled reader¹⁰ and writer is a complex process that requires explicit, direct, and systematic instruction.¹¹

Proficient readers are also more likely to have higher earning potential in the workforce.¹² Literacy in English is foundational to our students’ ability to advocate for their communities, access knowledge, and participate in the workforce nationwide.

READING AND EQUITY

Because reading provides fundamental access to full participation in society, equity and inclusion cannot be accomplished when students are deprived of access to high-quality literacy instruction.

Students with specific learning disabilities that impact sound-symbol correspondence and other areas of reading, such as dyslexia, are among the most impacted by reading approaches that fail to incorporate phonological awareness and phonics and word decoding.¹³

Without intervention, struggling readers often fall further and further behind: the “Matthew Effect” — *the rich get richer and the poor get poorer* — is just as true for an investment in reading as it is for the stock market.^{14,15} Ultimately, literacy instruction for students with disabilities is effective literacy instruction for all students.¹⁶

Structured literacy is the approach championed by the International Dyslexia Association as the “most effective approach for students who experience unusual difficulty learning to read and spell printed words.”¹⁷ Structured literacy is based in the Science of Reading, an ongoing field of study that examines the last 50 years of research¹⁸ in reading instruction.

Instructional approaches and curricula grounded in the Science of Reading provide systematic, explicit instruction on phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.¹⁹ Although implicit, immersive approaches often work well for acquisition of spoken language proficiency,²⁰ research consistently demonstrates that explicit, teacher-led instruction is the key to transforming reading outcomes for the 25% of early learners identified as struggling readers nationwide.²¹

Start with Why

Our students are our *why*. They are the future of our families, communities, and state. They are central to the mission and vision of your districts, our state education agency, and organizations like the Association of Alaska School Boards and Region 16 Comprehensive Center.

DESIGNING FROM THE MARGINS

More than 6,700 students across Alaska have a specific learning disability. Specific learning disabilities “are characterized by a persistent impairment

in at least one of three major areas: reading, written expression, and/or math.”²² About 80% of students who have a specific learning disability have an impairment in reading.²²

Early intervention can provide students with disabilities with the supports they need to become proficient readers. But students with disabilities are far from the only students who benefit significantly from evidence-based reading instruction. For multilingual students learning English as a second — or third, fourth, or fifth — language, intensive language development, coverage of the five essential elements of reading, and tailored instruction are key to helping students build reading proficiency in English.²³

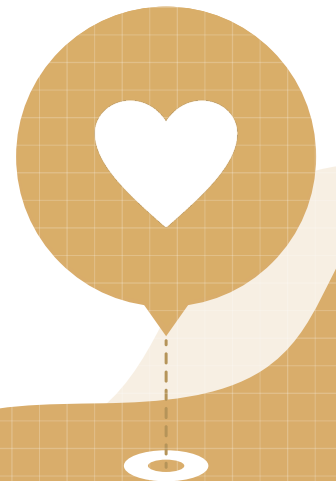
The National Literacy Panel on Language Minority Children and Youth found that “instruction that focused on enhanced teaching of particular literacy components (e.g., decoding, spelling, writing, comprehension, fluency) was generally beneficial with second-language learners (as they are with native English speakers).”²⁴

The many identities that our students hold should not be seen as a barrier to proficiency in reading. Ultimately, research “has shown that approximately 95% of students can be taught to read at grade level:”²⁵ when we design from the margins,²⁶ we begin to close the opportunity gap and make meaningful progress toward equity, inclusion, and access.

WHAT LEADERS NEED TO KNOW

School board members need to know where to access:

- Reading assessment data for students in your district
- Literacy performance levels for your student body and demographic subgroups
- Curricula and programming used to teach reading
- Your district’s plan to address inadequate instructional practices for teaching reading



GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. What is the *why* for your district?
2. What data do you have that lets you know whether reading is a strength or an area of concern?
3. What is the percentage of students at the district level and school level that meet or exceed proficiency on all elementary English Language Arts AK STAR assessments?
4. How many students at each school have a below-proficient reading level?

Come Together

COLLECTIVE IMPACT

The collective impact of support staff, teachers, school leaders, district leaders, families, and community members is essential to transforming outcomes and closing opportunity gaps. Ultimately, we must align our endorsement and implementation of evidence-based reading approaches: we cannot afford a division between state, district, and school leadership on one hand and classroom practice on the other.

As the Independence Institute writes in their guide for Colorado school board members, “All stakeholders, especially those who directly engage with literacy, must deeply engage in the Science of Reading.”²⁷ Stakeholders must:

- Develop an understanding of the Science of Reading
- Learn evidence-based practices
- Support ongoing training and feedback

- Use data to inform instruction

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. Who might you bring together to support student learning in your community?
2. What literacy training and support is provided for administrator guidance?
A principal’s role in increasing literacy should be a focus. It is often the case that principals assume their leadership positions without having the proper training or background to effectively lead their schools. For instance, it is very common for elementary principal positions to be filled by someone who has spent their career as a middle school science teacher or high school English teacher. Many elementary school principals have little to no knowledge about early literacy.
3. Which district elementary principals have received training in the Science of Reading?
4. Does the district offer Science of Reading training to community members?

Create a Plan

Your board’s “primary function is to provide each student with an education of the highest quality in keeping with his/her capacity to learn.”²⁸ You fulfill that function through your “specific responsibilities to determine curriculum, employ a superintendent, and approve a budget.”²⁹

As such, your role as a school board member is fundamental in selecting, planning for, implementing, and evaluating curricula, interventions, and assessments aligned with evidence-based strategies for teaching reading.

FROM PLANNING TO IMPLEMENTATION

Given the life-altering impacts of reading proficiency, the selection and implementation of new curricular materials for reading is inherently tied to ensuring equitable access to education. Take action to ensure equity in student learning by “setting high instructional standards based on the best available information about the knowledge and skills students will need in the future.”³⁰

In 2023, that “best available information” points directly toward implementation with fidelity of reading programs based on the Science of Reading. Incorporate plenty of training opportunities for staff, families, and community members into your planning to help focus all efforts on effective strategies for helping students learn to read.

WHAT LEADERS NEED TO KNOW

School board members and other district leaders must ensure they have a firm understanding of the following as they research, select, implement, and evaluate curricular materials:

- **Literacy performance levels for all students (including subgroups of students)**, as indicated in local and state assessment data
- **Programming used to teach reading**, especially for kindergarten through third grade, the most critical grades for learning to read
- **District plans to address inadequate reading instruction**, from the school to classroom and individual student levels
- **Resources and training required to understand and support each student**, including through individualized reading intervention

As part of these cycles of researching, selecting, implementing, and evaluating curriculum, any resources used for core, supplemental, and intervention instruction that do not follow the Science of Reading should be abandoned.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. What data will you gather to create a plan based on your students’ needs and strengths?
2. What is the process to ensure curriculum materials explicitly and systematically follow the Science of Reading? Do they have explicit, systematic scope and sequence? Do they include all of the Big 5: phonological

awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension?

3. How is the implementation of materials supported by professional learning over time?
4. Do your early learning programs include an emphasis on developing oral vocabulary?
5. What reading programs and interim assessments are being used at district schools in K–3?

Deepen Our Commitment

You are uniquely positioned to become a champion for literacy in Alaska. As a school board member, you can deepen your commitment by:

- Learning about your district’s literacy curricula
- Visiting classrooms
- Hosting community training sessions in evidence-based reading instruction
- Monitoring data
- Asking questions of educators, school leaders, and families

As you strengthen your knowledge in evidence-based reading instruction through resources like *Alaska’s Reading Playbook* and *Alaska’s Literacy Blueprint*, you will better be able to set “high instructional standards”³¹ and hold the schools in your district accountable for implementing approaches based in the Science of Reading.

Just as the superintendent and the school board must be the strongest proponents of literacy at the district level, a building principal must be the master teacher at their school site, “the strongest instructor of literacy in the building.”³² As the Independence Institute writes:

Effective instructional leaders must possess the skills that enable them to provide useful, structured feedback to teachers, with the goal of motivating them to refine their practices. ... [A] principal must participate

in learning the Science of Reading, whether through the pathways recommended for teachers, or another path that will ultimately get them the same result: deeply engaging with the Science of Reading to impact student learning.³³

School leadership is the second-most influential school-level factor on student outcomes.³⁴ This influence extends indirectly to student learning through “direct impact on school conditions, teacher quality and placement, and instructional quality.”³⁵ Research over the past two decades indicates that highly effective principals can “increase annual student learning in math and reading by almost three months.”³⁶ Principals “who are literacy leaders develop the capacity of their faculty to work collaboratively to achieve the goals of effective literacy teaching and learning for all.”³⁷ Support principals in the following areas to impact student literacy growth:

- Cultivating relationships
- Providing instructional support to teachers’ classroom instruction
- Developing skills that transcend schools (e.g., data, resource allocation)
- Engaging in instructional-focused interactions with teachers
- Building a productive school climate
- Facilitating professional learning communities
- Managing personnel and other resources strategically
- Understanding the implementation of the Science of Reading

In particular, effective school leaders engage in instructional-focused interactions with teachers, build a productive school climate, facilitate professional learning communities, and strategically manage school resources.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. To what extent is the district funding reading instruction?

2. What opportunities might encourage your community to deepen its commitment of focusing on student achievement?

Sketch It Out

Sketch out your board’s plan for supporting literacy for current and future generations of students. In pursuit of equity in literacy instruction, ensure that:

- All reading materials are aligned with the Science of Reading, include an explicit, systematic scope and sequence, and target the Big 5 essential components of reading
- Reading instruction is linked to both assessments for learning and assessments of learning
- Consistent, ongoing professional development is available to support implementation with fidelity of reading curricula
- Every student has the supports they need to be successful in the least restrictive environment

The Big 5

After reviewing more than 100,000 studies on reading instruction, the National Reading Panel came to the conclusion that five components are essential to reading proficiency: phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.³⁸

Often called the “Big 5,” these essential components are included in all curricula based in the Science of Reading. Students begin by building phonological awareness and phonics knowledge in grades K–2 and continue to strengthen fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension throughout the rest of their lives.

The Big 5 are the basis for the design of *Alaska’s Reading Playbook*, available at aklearns.org.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. What programming is used to teach reading at PK-12 grade?
2. What is the district's plan to address inadequate reading instruction?
3. What supports are in place for training administrators?
4. How can I become a champion for literacy in my district?

Stay the Course

IMPACT ON CHILDREN

Your decisions today create a lifetime of impacts tomorrow. In Alaska, we have set a strategic, measurable goal to support all children to read at grade level by the end of third grade, because we know that students who receive the support and intervention they need early to become strong readers will have one of the tools they need to thrive in their futures. Among children who do not learn to read by the end of grade 3:

- 15% of children who do not read proficiently in third grade will not graduate high school on time³⁹
- 60% of students who drop out or do not graduate did not read proficiently in third grade⁴⁰

In a state where 80% of our third-grade students are not yet proficient readers,⁴¹ we have significant opportunity in our schools, districts, and states to transform our literacy instruction for the better. As the Association of Alaska School Boards Handbook reminds us:

We need to remind ourselves daily what our job is — to educate students. And we need to remind our communities daily what our job is — to educate students. If we really believe that the hope of the future lies in the young people of our nation, state, and communities, then our vision must reflect that belief. We cannot be sidetracked into issues that are not about

education. Many would have the schools being all things to all people. We do not have the resources to accomplish all things. The way to send that message is to have a vision that focuses students, board members, and the entire community on the task at hand – educating students.⁴²

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. How do school board members access data?
2. What are the literacy performance levels for all students and subgroups?
3. What are you monitoring to inform what needs adjusting?



Our *Resources*

Want to learn more about something we mentioned in this guide for school board leaders? Match the number in the text to our endnotes, below. All endnotes include the information you would need to locate the source.

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The *Big 5*

Dive into the Big 5 essential components for reading.

The National Reading Panel identified the Big 5 in their 2000 report on the results of more than 100,000 studies on teaching reading. These five essential components — phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension — should form the foundation of how your district teaches reading.

Phonological Awareness

WHAT IS PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS?

Phonological awareness is the ability to hear and manipulate the sound structure of language, including at the word, syllable, and phoneme levels.



Students can develop phonological skills in any language.

Students should be given opportunities to develop phonological awareness skills in their first language. The same activities we use in English to foster phonological awareness can be replicated in any of the world languages or Alaska Native languages spoken in our schools. Whether you practice counting words in a sentence in English or Aleut, the goals and skills remain the same.



Letters and sounds connect differently across languages.

Unlike English, Alaska Native languages have transparent sound-symbol correspondence. This means that the letter or letters used to represent a sound almost always remain the same regardless of the position of the sound in a word. This consistency makes Alaska Native languages ideal for teaching reading. Most students will be able to learn to read and spell more quickly in Alaska Native languages than in English.



Phonological awareness instruction shouldn't end in early childhood. Secondary students who struggle to read often need targeted phonological awareness instruction to continue to develop their skills. Phonological awareness is a continuum, which means that skills progress from simple to complex as students increase their phonological awareness.

Phonics

WHAT IS PHONICS?

Phonics is the matching of spoken sounds to written letters and is the key to decoding new words. While we associate phonics instruction with kindergarten through second grade, we can continue teaching phonics to older students by incorporating less common patterns, as well as syllabication, prefixes, suffixes, and common Greek and Latin roots.



Explicit phonics instruction jump-starts reading proficiency.

The National Reading Panel and the Institute of Educational Science recommend systematic phonics instruction for all elementary students. Students are able to develop skills in decoding, spelling, reading comprehension, and reading orally through phonics instruction. Ultimately, phonics instruction is best when it is explicit and systematic, done early, and done well.



Consonants and vowels are the building blocks of syllables.

Syllables, in turn, are the building blocks of words, just as words are the building blocks of sentences. Start by explaining the difference between consonants and vowels: consonants close the mouth and vowels open it. By explicitly teaching the differences between consonants and vowels in early childhood, students

can quickly master one-syllable consonant-vowel-consonant sight words, like cat, run, sit, and let. Teaching sight words in conjunction with phonics builds a solid foundation for reading.



Systematic instruction is the best method for teaching phonics. A systematic approach follows a sequence of instruction from simple to complex concepts. What could this look like? Progress from simple to complex sound-spellings. Start by teaching students short-vowel sounds and then high-utility, continuous consonants (e.g., /n/, /r/, /s/) and short vowels in combination so students can generate words as early as possible.

Fluency

WHAT IS FLUENCY?

Reading fluency is the ability to read accurately, with expression, at a rate that allows for understanding. Fluency is a key ingredient in reading comprehension. As students gain reading fluency, they become more confident, motivated readers.



Accuracy comes first. With early readers, “perfect practice makes perfect”: teachers should guide students through repeated reading exercises after building fluency at the letter, word, and sentence levels. Another key term in fluency studies is prosody, reading with expression. Prosody is harder to quantify than accuracy or rate, but it’s characterized by correct phrasing, recognition of punctuation, and natural inflection.



How do we measure fluency through rate? How do we measure fluency through rate? Jan Hasbrouck and Gerald Tindal’s Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) norms help educators assess and monitor how well students read in relation to their peers. The most recent version of the ORF norms, updated in 2017, is based on nearly 7 million

scores. The National Assessment of Educational Progress scale and Hudson, Lane, and Pullen’s checklist can also be used to support assessment and monitoring of reading rate and reading with expression.



Back to perfect practice. Incorporate a variety of strategies into your classroom to help young readers develop fluency. Readers theater, choral reading, and partner reading are three engaging, interactive strategies for practicing fluency. Avoid round-robin reading, where only one child reads at a time, because it often leaves the rest of the class disengaged and may create anxiety.

Vocabulary

WHAT IS VOCABULARY?

Vocabulary is all the words a person knows, uses, and is able to understand in order to communicate effectively.



Leverage home languages and family support in vocabulary instruction. We need to honor the language in which our students are loved. We must support our students’ oral traditions, cultures, and communities if we aim to support their learning. And we must build on the rich language experiences our students bring to school to teach them the vocabulary of print. In turn, families can support their children’s vocabulary development by asking children questions and discussing the story’s content before, during, and after reading or listening to a story.



Vocabulary words are the building blocks for comprehension. We can imagine each new vocabulary word as a brick to help our students build their comprehension. When we teach words in context, we give children the mortar to hold those bricks together. And the earlier we develop a strong foundation, the better — one of the best ways to build vocabulary is through wide reading and lots of language exposure and experience in

early childhood. Comprehension comes more easily to students who come to school with a rich oral vocabulary, because they already know the meanings of many of the words before being expected to decode them in written text.



When we teach students a new word, we should help them learn it deeply. Students need explicit instructional opportunities to hear a new word, segment and blend it, write it, learn its definition, and get to know it in context. Fast mapping and graphic organizers are two great strategies that introduce students to new words and encourage students to interact with definitions, examples, non-examples, and characteristics. Teaching just a handful of common morphemes — prefixes, roots, and suffixes — can help students unlock the meaning of thousands of words.

Comprehension

WHAT IS COMPREHENSION?

Comprehension is the ability to derive meaning from text. Reading comprehension is an outcome of the abilities to decode (phonics) and understand language.



Reading comprehension is the outcome of other discrete skills. We teach phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, and fluency with one goal in mind: reading comprehension. In the Simple View of Reading, decoding and language comprehension combine to create reading comprehension. We build decoding skills through phonics and phonological awareness and language comprehension skills through listening comprehension. Alaska Native cultures are rich with oral storytelling traditions that build and support these skills.



A new model of reading comprehension. Hollis Scarborough's Reading Rope revolutionized how researchers and educators conceptualize reading. In this model, language comprehension and word recognition intertwine to create skilled reading. Similar conclusions emerge from research across the past few decades no matter the model used: reading comprehension is a complex, active cognitive process that requires significant practice and support from educators.



Seven instructional practices are key for reading comprehension. These practices are comprehension monitoring, cooperative learning, use of graphic and semantic organizers, question answering, question generation, story structure, and summarization. In addition to improved outcomes in reading comprehension, these strategies also help students develop self-monitoring, collaboration, organization, and critical thinking skills.



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