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LEADING ON READING: A FRAMEWORK FOR STATE ACTION



Aligning Policy with the Science of Reading

Nearly two-thirds of students across the country are failing to meet grade-level reading expectations. Research shows that children who cannot read proficiently by third grade are more likely to struggle academically, drop out, and face limited life opportunities. High school graduates who are not proficient in reading are at higher risk for unemployment, living in poverty, and encountering the criminal justice system. To address this, reading instruction must be grounded in the science of reading. When states align teacher training, materials, and interventions with this evidence-based approach, reading outcomes improve significantly.

What is the Science of Reading?

The science of reading refers to rigorous research, developed over the last 50-plus years, that tells us how children learn to read. Based on this research, we now know that effective reading instruction should include a focus on five elements: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

Systems for Strong Policy Implementation

Today, most states have disparate data systems that are functionally siloed off by education level, like early childhood or K-12 or higher education. Meaningfully connected and well-governed data systems make it easier to see the relationships between metrics like early-grade reading scores, high school graduation, and wage data. Disaggregated outcome data about the youngest learners up to young adults provide invaluable insights for policymakers, researchers, and parents.

National Reading Data Snapshot

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), known as the Nation’s Report Card, is the largest ongoing, nationally representative assessment of what U.S. students can do. This chart shows 2024 reading scores. They have steadily declined since 2017, predating the COVID-19 pandemic. The lowest-performing students slipped the most, including children from low-income households.

NAEP - Grade 4	NAEP - Grade 8	NAEP - Grade 12
<p>30%</p> <p>The percentage of fourth graders nationwide who earned a score of proficient or above on the 2024 assessment.</p>	<p>29%</p> <p>The percentage of eighth graders nationwide who earned a score of proficient or above on the 2024 assessment.</p>	<p>35%</p> <p>The percentage of 12th graders nationwide who earned a score of proficient or above on the 2024 assessment.</p>

Literacy Achievement Strengthens State Economies

Life outcomes improve for residents of states where reading proficiency rates increase. In states where governors focused on literacy and NAEP scores grew by 10 points or more, college enrollment and annual earnings rose. Those same states saw a decrease in teen motherhood, incarceration, and violent crime arrests.

Voters Support Strong Reading

Regardless of political affiliation, eight in 10 Americans believe that literacy skills give students better opportunities, and seven in 10 Americans wish their governor made literacy a top priority, according to a poll by the Bipartisan Policy Center.

GEORGE W. BUSH INSTITUTE'S READING FRAMEWORK

Strong policy efforts should focus on these four categories:

Educator Preparation:

Ensure teachers are ready to teach reading from day one.

- The state has established comprehensive reading standards that educator preparation programs are required to implement.
- The state holds sole authority to approve and renew educator preparation programs.
- Educator preparation programs are required to use a structured literacy framework, encompassing explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.
- Educator preparation programs provide explicit instruction on meeting the needs of English learners and struggling readers.
- State licensure requirements for elementary teachers include a reading assessment aligned with the science of reading.
- Educator preparation programs publicly report licensure exam pass rates – both first-attempt and best-attempt – and those data are made available by the state education agency.
- Educator preparation programs inform and train their instructors on the science of reading.

High-Quality Professional Learning and Development: **Help current educators understand and apply the science of reading in the classroom.**

- All elementary teachers are required to complete training in evidence-based reading instruction aligned with the science of reading.
- Middle-grade teachers are required to complete training in the science of reading, particularly as it applies to adolescent literacy and content-area instruction.
- The state reviews and identifies high-quality professional learning programs in reading instruction and either mandates or recommends their adoption by school districts.

High-Quality Instructional Materials:

Ensure that educators have access to instructional materials that align to the science of reading.

- The state promotes curriculum quality by reviewing materials – or endorsing third-party reviews – for alignment with the science of reading and state standards, and either recommends, incentivizes, or mandates the adoption of vetted programs by districts.
- The state provides districts with tools and guidance to support curriculum selection, such as evaluation rubrics aligned to state standards and criteria for assessing the quality of support for English learners and struggling readers.
- The state collects and publicly reports district-level data on adopted reading curricula or requires districts to publish this information.

Screening and Intervening:

Identify struggling readers early and provide aligned support.

- Students are assessed using a universal reading screener three times per year in grades K-3 and in higher grades for struggling readers.
- The state requires schools to notify parents if their child has been identified as at risk of a reading difficulty.
- Students who have been identified as having a reading difficulty receive an individual reading plan from their school, which provides them with access to supplemental support such as tutoring.

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