



CHAMPIONS OF LITERACY

A RESOURCE GUIDE FOR ALASKA SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

Published by **Region 16 Comprehensive Center**
210 Ferry Way, Juneau, AK 99801

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The contents of this guide were developed under a grant from the US Department of Education. However, the contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the US Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal government.



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 is, as Dr. Tracy White-Weeden shares, a moral imperative: “Quality of life and literacy are intrinsically tied to one another.”¹ You represent every public school student in 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

Proficient readers are also more likely to have higher earning potential in the workforce.⁵ Literacy is foundational to our students’ ability to advocate for their communities, access knowledge, and launch careers here in Alaska or across the nation.

Reading and the Brain

The human brain thrives on language⁶ and is “naturally wired to speak.”⁷ Reading and writing, much like speaking, activate various parts of the brain and strengthen and sustain patterns of neural connectivity.⁸ Yet there’s one fundamental difference: our brains aren’t naturally wired to read and write.⁹

It’s no wonder, then, that literacy expert Louisa Moats writes that “teaching reading is rocket science.”¹⁰ Becoming a skilled reader¹¹ and writer is a complex process that requires explicit, direct, and systematic instruction.¹²

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

A key approach for students with disabilities is structured literacy, 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 include systematic, explicit instruction on phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.¹⁹ Although implicit, immersive approaches often work well for spoken language acquisition,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, DEED, and organizations like AASB and Region 16 Comprehensive Center.

DESIGNING FROM THE MARGINS

More than 6,700 students across Alaska have a specific learning disability.²² Specific learning disabilities “are characterized by a persistent impairment in at least one of three major areas: reading, written expression, and/or math.”²³ About 80% of students who have a specific learning disability have an impairment in reading.²⁴

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.²⁵

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.”²⁶

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.”²⁷ when we design from the margins,²⁸ we begin to close the opportunity gap and make meaningful progress toward equity, inclusion, and access.

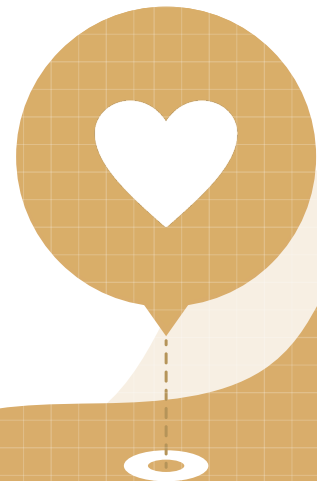
WHAT LEADERS NEED TO KNOW

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
- **Board-adopted** reading programming and curricula
- Your district’s plan to address inadequate instructional practices for teaching reading.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- What is the why and vision for your district?
- Does the data point to any challenges your district has in reading?



- What percent of students at the district and school levels meet or exceed proficiency on all elementary English Language Arts AK STAR assessments?
- How many students at each school are not scoring in the proficient range?

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. 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.”²⁹ This includes:

- Developing an understanding of the Science of Reading
- Learning evidence-based practices
- Supporting ongoing training and feedback
- Using data to inform instruction

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- Who might you bring together to support student learning in your community?
- What literacy training and support is provided to principals as they lead staff?

- Which elementary principals have received training in the Science of Reading?
- Does the district offer Science of Reading training to families and 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.”³⁰ You fulfill that function through your “specific responsibilities to determine curriculum, employ a superintendent, and approve a budget.”³¹

FROM PLANNING TO IMPLEMENTATION

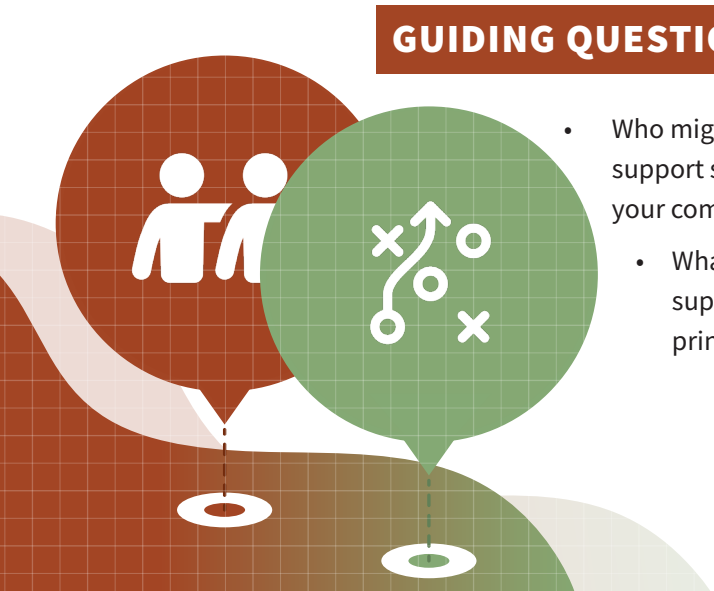
Given the life-altering impacts of reading proficiency, the selection and implementation of new curricular materials for reading is inherently tied to ensuring equitable access to education. Take action to ensure equity in student learning by “setting high instructional standards based on the best available information about the knowledge and skills students will need in the future.”³²

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

- What data will you gather to create a plan based on your students' needs and strengths?
- What is the process to ensure curriculum materials follow the Science of Reading? Do they include the Big 5 (see page 5)?
- How is the implementation of materials supported by ongoing professional learning?
- Do your early learning programs include an emphasis on developing oral vocabulary?
- 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 **and adopting** your district's literacy curricula
- Visiting classrooms and supporting school leadership

- Hosting community training sessions in evidence-based reading instruction
- Monitoring data
- Asking questions of educators, school leaders, and families

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.”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

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- To what extent is the district funding reading instruction?
- What opportunities might encourage your families and community to deepen their commitment to reading proficiency?

Sketch It Out

Sketch out your Board's plan for supporting literacy. 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



- Reading instruction is linked to assessments for and 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

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.

- 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. Students who receive the support and intervention they need early to become strong readers will have one of the tools they need to thrive. Among children who are not proficient readers by the end of grade 3, 15% will not graduate high school on time.³⁹ Of students who drop out or do not graduate, 60% did not read proficiently in third grade.⁴⁰

In a state where 80% of our third-grade students are not yet proficient readers,⁴¹ we have significant opportunity to transform our literacy instruction for the better. As the AASB 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

- What programming is used to teach reading from PK-12?
- What is the district’s plan to address inadequate reading instruction?
- What supports are in place for training administrators?

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- How do you access data?
- What are the literacy performance levels for all students and subgroups?
- 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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