STATE POLICY LEVERS
FOR IMPROVING LITERACY

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Results of the 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP; NCES, 2019) should trigger action on the part of state-level policymakers. Grade 4 scores dropped in 2019 compared to 2017 in 17 states and stayed the same in 34 states, with only 35 percent of students at or above proficient in 2019 compared to 37 percent in 2017. Mississippi was the only state with a significant increase in grade 4 reading scores—a credit to the success of their K–3 reading initiative. In grade 8, average 2019 NAEP reading scores were lower in 31 states, with 34 percent of students at or above proficient, compared to 2017 when 36 percent were at or above proficient. In both grades, scores were lower at all ability levels, except for students in grade 4 at the 90th percentile or higher, and for all racial/ethnic groups except Asian/Pacific Islander. Although the recent NAEP reading scores are significantly higher than those in 1992 when NAEP began, the dip in trajectory for all students except those at the highest level of ability is a cause for concern. As state policymakers, especially those in state education agencies (SEAs), reflect on their 2019 NAEP reading scores, there are several validated steps to take in prekindergarten through grade 3 to ensure reading success and several implementation questions to address.

Steps to Ensure Grade 3 Reading Success

There are four critical steps to take to ensure students' reading success by grade 3. The first step regarding language instruction in prekindergarten may need to await implementation of policy discussed in the last section. However, SEAs may be able to undertake the other three steps simultaneously, with careful planning and an upfront evaluation plan.

Step 1: Accelerate Language Development for All Three- and Four-Year-Olds

Families' socioeconomic differences are associated with large gaps in children's oral language by age three (e.g., Hart & Risley, 1995). High quality prekindergarten programs can eliminate these differences and have long-term positive effects on life outcomes (e.g., Campbell, Pungello, Miller-Johnson, Burchinal, & Ramey, 2001). Vocabulary scores in prekindergarten predict reading comprehension scores in grade 4 (Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). Therefore, it makes policy sense to focus early childhood programs—whether in private centers, home care, Head Start, or public prekindergarten—on accelerating the language development of *all* children to ensure that they will be able to comprehend the meanings of the words, sentences, and text they learn to read in elementary school.

Step 2: Implement Evidence-Based Practices in K–3 Classroom Reading Instruction

The scientific basis for how children learn to read has been well known for over 20 years

(e.g., Castles, Rastle, & Nation, 2018). The What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) has produced several literacy practice guides that recommend instructional practices based on systematic reviews of the research. The recommendations from the practice guide *Foundational skills to support reading for understanding in kindergarten through 3rd grade* (Foorman, Beyler, et al., 2016) are:

- Teach students academic language skills, including the use of inferential and narrative language, and vocabulary knowledge.
- Develop awareness of the segments of sounds in speech and how they link to letters. This includes phonemic awareness and knowledge of letter names and sounds.
- Teach students to decode words, analyze word parts, and write and recognize words. This means that students are explicitly taught sound-spelling patterns and morphological elements such as prefixes and suffixes. Teach students to encode (i.e., spell) the words they learn to decode so that they can recognize them quickly and use them in their writing.
- Ensure that each student reads connected text every day to support reading accuracy, fluency, and comprehension. Selection of text for classroom instruction will vary depending on the instructional purpose and students' reading ability.

To ensure that all students in grades K–3 are on track to proficient reading performance, classroom instruction needs to be systematic and explicit. Expecting teachers to create their own curriculum is unrealistic. A core reading program can help scaffold instruction for teachers because it provides a scope and sequence of sound-spelling patterns with associated decodable books to provide ample opportunities for students to master the alphabetic principle and gradually become fluent readers of more challenging text. The value of systematic phonics instruction is to improve decoding skill, which only indirectly improves comprehension by making decoding more accurate and, eventually, more efficient. These indirect effects allow students to advance only so far in understanding complex text. Building students' proficiency in language and their knowledge of the world is important to the broader goal of improving reading comprehension.

Step 3: Provide Opportunities to Practice Reading in the Classroom and in Intervention, Summer Reading Camps, and Home Literacy Programs

Quality time spent teaching reading and writing is associated with proficient reading performance (e.g., Foorman et al., 2006; Moats, Foorman, & Taylor, 2006). A 90-minute English Language Arts block with an additional 30- to 45-minutes for small-group intervention in the classroom is common practice. Whole class instruction is appropriate when the vast majority of students need to learn the same skill. Otherwise, differentiating classroom instruction with small groups, pairs, meaningful center activities, and independent work is essential to meet *all* students' needs. Students who need additional time can be served in small-group, pullout intervention (often called Tier 2), and through special education (often called Tier 3). Additional strategies for serving struggling readers are before- or after-school tutoring or summer reading camp. Finally, teachers can provide families with home literacy activities (e.g., Kosanovich, Lee, & Foorman, 2020).

Step 4: Assess for Risk, Growth, and Outcome and Translate Data to Instruction

Data from valid and reliable measures are essential to ensure that students are on-track to reading success. Avoid the pitfall of giving too many tests with data that do not translate to instruction. An efficient assessment approach is to combine screening and diagnosis into one system, with a gating process so that the diagnostic component is administered only to those students predicted to be at risk on the screen. Measuring growth is also important for determining learning gains and is accomplished

through progress monitoring (also called interim) assessments. The outcome—the summative assessment—can be a norm-referenced or standardized test, which compares student performance with national peers' performance, or it can be a criterion-referenced test of proficiency on state standards. Diagnostic assessments may be considered formative assessments if they measure skills that are taught. Another term for assessing learning is curriculum-based assessment. Benchmark assessments typically measure progress on state standards.

Implementation Questions

Under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), state policymakers have levers to enact the validated steps described above. However, SEA leaders want to know where to start with these steps and what steps to implement simultaneously.

Organizing State Education Agencies to Focus on Literacy

SEAs may need to reorganize to focus on literacy, with the early childhood program integrated into the K–3 literacy initiative. Knowledgeable SEA staff must articulate the statewide literacy mission clearly and hire high-quality coaches to provide ongoing and targeted professional development to administrators and teachers. To facilitate communication about the literacy mission, SEA staff can appoint teacher and student advisory councils to make sure that their voices are heard. Don't use local control as an excuse not to implement evidence-based literacy plans to address the national expectations articulated in the NAEP reading framework (National Assessment Governing Board, 2019). SEAs may be able to showcase schools and/or districts whose outcomes confirm that they are successful implementers of evidence-based literacy plans.

SEAs need to provide guidance for the alignment of curriculum, assessment, and professional development. State-approved ESSA plans give SEAs the power to approve and monitor district reading plans delineating the evidence-based literacy practices employed. In Florida, SEA approval of the district reading plan is required before the district receives its reading allocation. Other ways to incentivize adoption of evidence-based curricula and instructional practices are for the SEA to fund grants for the use of effective curricula, to map curricula used to high-quality teaching and data outcomes, and to provide a free rubric to evaluate K–5 literacy curricula whose criteria are evidence based (e.g., Foorman, Smith, & Kosanovich, 2017). Hold curriculum providers accountable to ongoing professional development and link selection of literacy assessments to their data's relevance to classroom curriculum and instruction.

Districts' and Schools' Focus on Literacy

Under ESSA, local education agencies have levers to improve their schools' literacy performance. Districts can approve school reading improvement plans that describe a commitment to K–3 reading as the school's top priority, the creation of a literacy leadership team, adoption of a data-driven instructional plan, and development of a parent engagement program (Coyne, 2016). Districts and schools must coordinate their coaching and professional development plans with the SEA's plans to support administrator and teacher knowledge of reading research and evidence-based instructional practices.

Teacher Preparation and Prekindergarten

Two literacy reform efforts that may take longer to implement because they are not fully under SEA control are the improvement of teacher preparation programs and investment in prekindergarten. State boards of education, in concert with the SEA, can provide oversight of educator preparation programs at Institutes of Higher Learning (IHL) to ensure that

credentialed teachers are effective reading teachers. Through higher education literacy councils, SEAs can partner with IHLs and with individual faculty whose graduates score well on the licensure exam and are effective literacy teachers. In addition, SEAs can provide incentives for other IHLs to improve their graduates' exam and teaching performance.

Investment in prekindergarten may entail a legislative appropriation, closer structural ties between the SEA and the department serving young children, and development of early learning standards. Providing all teachers of three- and four-year-olds with free professional development—whether in public prekindergarten, Head Start, or private centers—is an efficient and equitable way to build knowledge of evidence-based practices. Providers of prekindergarten services can be held accountable by gathering data on kindergarten readiness and mapping it back to provider.

Mississippi's Literacy Initiative

In Mississippi, the legislature appropriated funds for a K–3 literacy initiative. The Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) developed a plan to hire high-quality, statewide literacy coaches whose job was to support the evidence-based practices taught in statewide professional development to all K–3 teachers in low-performing schools. Evaluation was included in the plan from the beginning. Results showed that growth in the knowledge that teachers learned from the professional development modules was associated with implementation of the evidence-based practices in classrooms and with high student engagement (Folsom, Smith, Burk, & Oakley, 2017). Performance on early reading assessments improved and, importantly, significant gains on grade 4 NAEP reading occurred. Based on such demonstrated success, the Mississippi legislature continued to fund the initiative. Currently, MDE is expanding their literacy initiative to lower and upper grades and to IHLs by: coaching early childhood educators in strategies to accelerate the language development of all three- and four-year-old children; providing professional development on evidence-based reading and writing strategies to teachers in grades 4–8 to ensure that reading improvement continues above the primary grades; and partnering with a private foundation and with faculty participating in the Higher Education Literacy Council to align teacher preparation courses with evidence-based practices.

Conclusion

The success of the Mississippi literacy initiative demonstrates the levers that state policymakers can employ to ensure reading proficiency. SEAs can undertake the validated steps to reform K–3 literacy instruction simultaneously, with subsequent extensions to prekindergarten and above the primary grades. Strong leadership from the SEA, with support from the legislature, state board, and governor's office, can articulate a statewide focus on ensuring early literacy success and preventing reading difficulties that will resonate with parents, business leaders, and community stakeholders. Literacy reform can be legislated; however, educator buy-in is essential to implementing literacy reform successfully. The levers and the evidence-based steps are clear for state policymakers to take in reforming literacy instruction, if they can muster the political will and frame the reform as a partnership with educators.

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