



Response to Governor Hochul's 'Back to Basics' Plan to Improve Reading Proficiency

The Reading League (TRL) is a national nonprofit organization headquartered in Syracuse, NY. Our mission is to advance the awareness, understanding, and use of evidence-aligned reading instruction. All of the founding members of TRL had been educators in New York State. They taught in its public schools, and they prepared pre-service educators in its public and private universities. As individuals, chance experiences led them to learn about the [science of reading](#) (SoR). As a result, they spent time and effort trying to apply SoR findings in their day-to-day jobs because they had witnessed the potential to close reading achievement gaps when instructional practice is aligned with the evidence base. Little of this was familiar to or accepted by their colleagues in New York State public schools and universities, which made change difficult. Therefore, they created a League.

Since TRL's inception in 2016, the SoR has become more widely known. We are one of the fastest-growing literacy organizations in the nation, with chapters in 33 states. Our expertise has been sought by multiple state education agencies, national education organizations, and educator preparation programs. We have long-term partnerships with over 70 school districts across the U.S. as they align practice and policy to the scientific evidence base on reading. As a result of this work, we have gained valuable insights into conditions that facilitate positive change, as well as common obstacles.

We are cautiously optimistic about Governor Hochul's announcement. This moment holds promise for the children of our home state if executed well, and we want it to be successful. We hope that New York State--as well as states across the country that are embarking on similar journeys toward evidence-aligned instruction--leverages the lessons TRL has learned to create significant outcomes for our students.

It is in this spirit that we offer the following feedback:

1. The term "Back to Basics" may contribute to a narrative that could negatively impact New York's effort before it begins. It implies that New York is returning to a time when the science of reading was widely known, understood, and applied in its schools. There has never been such a time. In 1967, researcher Jeanne Chall wrote about the already-existing reading science, lamented the lack of attention it was getting, and warned educators to take heed. It is now 57 years later, and the field's most foundational findings remain largely unnoticed and untapped by teacher preparation programs and schools. New York is actually only now *moving forward*. These findings are not new, and we have yet to implement them fully to benefit our students.



2. “Back to Basics” also implies that the SoR is exclusively about phonics. To quote TRL’s [Defining Guide](#), the SoR is a “vast, interdisciplinary body of scientifically based research,” with findings in areas such as oral language development, background knowledge, dialectical variation, and much more. If educators are led to believe that the crux of the SoR is phonics, they will likely apply a “phonics patch,” wherein they supplement existing instruction—which may not be aligned to the evidence base—with a phonics program. This will not transform broader instructional practices and assessment systems. While phonics is often at the forefront of conversations about reading due to many approaches’ failures to provide adequate phonics and phonemic awareness instruction, we encourage Governor Hochul and NYSED to elevate the importance of other facets of evidence-based reading instruction in its messaging.
3. We encourage Governor Hochul and NYSED to invest in long-term, ongoing professional development for New York’s educators and not move too quickly toward adopting new curricula as an end goal. Even a well-aligned curriculum is unlikely to produce desirable results when teachers lack adequate training to implement it properly. A transformative approach to reading instruction, rather than an additive approach, is critical; that is to say, before hastily spending school funding on new curricula, first ensure that educators and administrators fully understand the reasoning behind certain instructional approaches and how various curricula support (or undermine) reading development. A primary focus on curriculum eclipses the importance of building professional knowledge. Knowledge building must begin first so that educators and administrators become critical consumers of instructional materials and approaches. Additional factors to consider can be found on the Administrator and Policymakers/State Education Agencies pages of The Reading League’s web-based [Compass](#).
4. NYSED announced that it will vet curricula for alignment with the SoR in 2024. The Reading League has already developed a highly regarded, comprehensive evaluation tool, the [Curriculum Evaluation Guidelines](#) (CEGs). It is used by schools, districts, and educator preparation programs to determine if a product is aligned with the scientific evidence base. State education agencies have either recommended it to their districts and/or used it as a statewide selection tool. The unique strength of the CEGs is its focus on revealing “red flags” in curricula, making it the only tool to identify practices that could *prevent* students from developing skilled reading.

In the spring of 2024, TRL will publish, on The Reading League [Compass](#) website, the first series of curriculum reviews in a massive project that it has been working on for over a year. It will present reports on several of the most widely used name-brand curricula in the nation. Expert teams meticulously reviewed all instructional materials against the components of the Curriculum Evaluation Guidelines.



New York has access to these free TRL resources. A rushed rollout of guidelines may inadvertently lead to the approval of instructional materials that include components in conflict with the SoR. This will impair efforts to advance literacy outcomes.

5. On January 10, 2024, regional BOCES sites facilitated the NYSED announcement about their Literacy Briefs, and it is unclear how well this event was coordinated with the Governor's announcement. TRL received comments from some district leaders who attended their BOCES events. They reported that the facilitators did not demonstrate expertise in the SoR yet were expected to lead conversations and professional learning about this vast body of research. Related to this, a handful of BOCES sites still offer training on programs that are not aligned with the most basic findings of scientific research, including the Fountas & Pinnell Leveled Literacy Intervention, Lucy Calkins's Units of Study, and Reading Recovery. It is critical to vet the credentials of professional development providers to ensure that they have demonstrated attainment of expert knowledge and a track record of success.
6. Microcredential programs will help to elevate awareness of the foundations of the SoR. This is a wonderful first step. However, true transformation of statewide reading instruction will require more comprehensive learning than what is possible through a microcredential program. Evidence-aligned reading instruction should be at the center of educator preparation programs, not a peripheral certificate.

We are proud that The Reading League is headquartered in New York State. We hope that the expertise and insights we have garnered through our work with schools, reading scientists, chapter leaders, and many other stakeholders from across the country are leveraged as New York embarks upon this important initiative. We believe that the free resources we have produced, along with our other programs, can provide direction and support for successful outcomes.