

The Long View of Literacy in Mississippi: Major Components That Contributed to Reading Achievement in Mississippi... and Beyond!

by Kelly Butler

Mississippi's improvement in fourth grade reading increased from 49th on the 2003 National Assessment of Educational Progress to 21st by 2022 (NAEP, 2022; see Figure 1). In 2019, Mississippi had reached the national average for fourth grade reading. By 2022, Mississippi's low-income students ranked second behind Florida (see Figure 2), and Mississippi's African American students ranked among the top five states (see Figure 3). How was Mississippi able to climb from 49th place to 21st place on the NAEP report? In this article, the major components that contributed to these leaps in reading achievement are outlined, in hopes that other states can use them as a roadmap for their own improvement.

1. Philanthropy and Business Acumen Applied to Education

Unlike other states, this story does not begin with legislation (although, funded legislation was ultimately critical to enforce accountability). Legislation known as the Literacy-Based Promotion Act was passed in 2013, requiring third-grade students to pass a test in order to be promoted to fourth grade. However, the story began in 2000, the year the National Reading Panel (NICHD, 2000) produced its seminal report on reading research in the U.S. That was the year that Jim Barksdale and his late wife Sally made a \$100 million investment in their home state of Mississippi to establish the Barksdale Reading Institute (BRI) that would work in partnership with the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE). BRI had a singular mission and a single metric: significantly improve early literacy as measured by fourth-grade scores on NAEP.

In Jim's words, "This is an investment that can and must work." A highly successful chief operating officer of FedEx and a former chief executive officer of Netscape, Jim Barksdale brought his business acumen to bear on changing practices in schools. "If FedEx can get a package from the middle of Manhattan to the middle of Tokyo in 48 hours, track it along

the way, and guarantee safe and timely delivery, we ought to be able to teach every child in Mississippi to read." By urging staff to "keep the main thing the main thing" (i.e., third-grade reading), BRI maintained a laser-like focus on improving early grades instruction that would produce good readers.

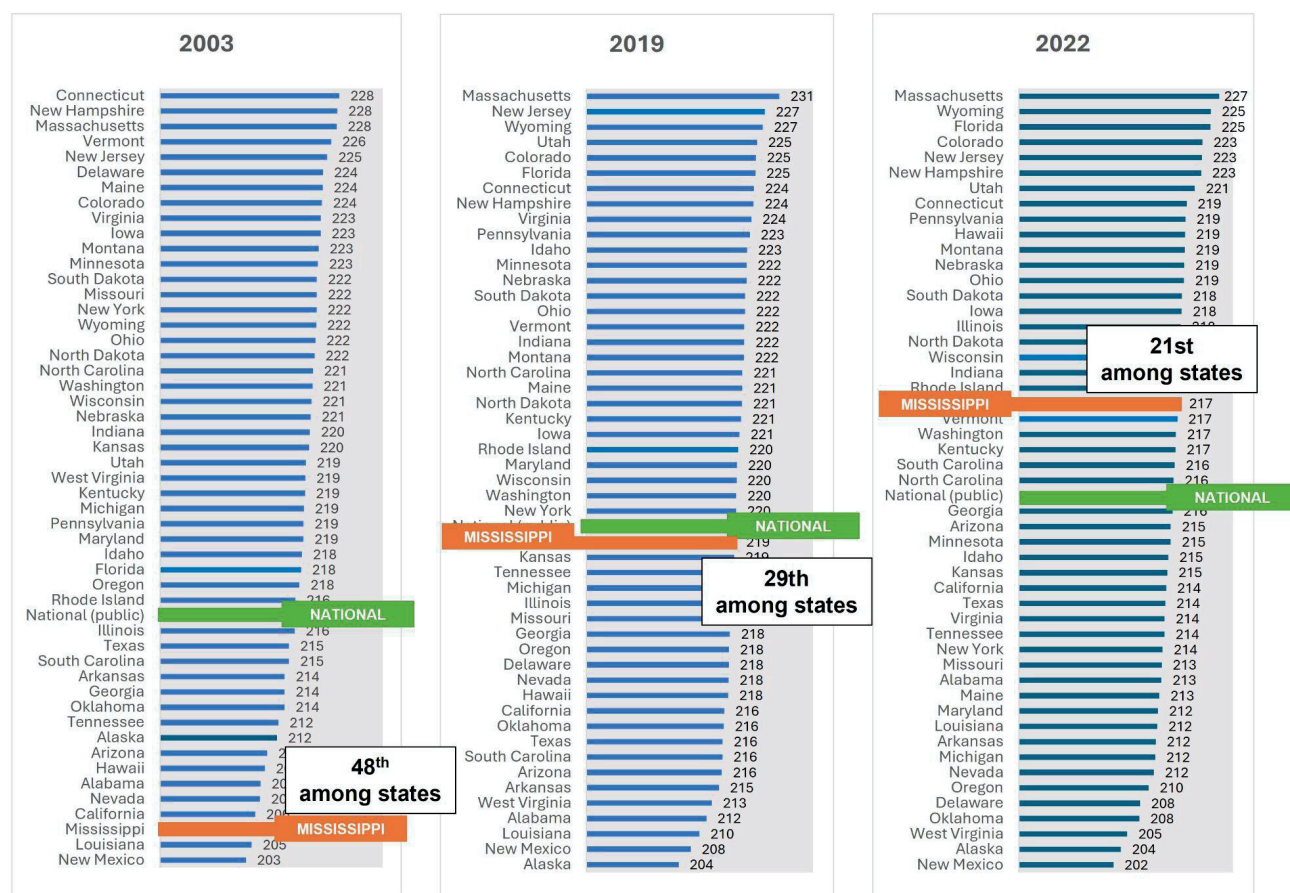
2. The Research and Development Phase: Building a Model That Could Be Scaled

Using the National Reading Panel Report (NICHD, 2000), BRI hit the ground running to introduce evidence-based practices at every level of the system. Over the course of a dozen years, BRI tested a variety of approaches, culminating in a K-3 model that included the following components:

- sufficient time devoted to daily reading and writing instruction
- well-trained reading teachers, interventionists, and paraprofessionals supported by well-trained instructional coaches (instructional coaching is the essential component that brought about the biggest change)
- principals equipped with knowledge to oversee literacy instruction
- high-quality mastery-based curriculum (BRI used ReadWell) focused on direct

Figure 1

Mississippi's Improvement in Fourth Grade Reading: Comparison to National Average and Other States: 2003, 2019, 2022



and explicit instruction in foundational skills

- daily, monitored reading practice (Accelerated Reader and literacy centers) and read-alouds to build fluency, background knowledge, and vocabulary
- purposeful interventions to address specific deficits
- progress monitoring of skills and targeted benchmarking
- weekly peer coaching study teams to support change in practice

This model was vetted in 15 demonstration classrooms in schools across the state. BRI reading specialists served as the reading teachers for the lowest performing K-2 students in the selected school sites. By winter break of year one, these students were outperforming their homeroom counterparts. The mastery-based curriculum produced first-grade readers at a 2.5 reading level by the end of the year.

3. Educator Preparation Program Reviews

Simultaneous with the K-3 initiative, Barksdale targeted educator preparation programs as an

important lever for improving and sustaining change in practice.

Over the course of three years, BRI funded 12 faculty positions in the eight public institutions to incentivize program change. Three key findings from a 2003 review of that initiative were as follows:

- There was inconsistent and unreliable teaching of the five components of reading identified in the National Reading Panel Report (NICHD, 2000).
- Modeling of instruction for candidates was non-existent.
- Faculty largely ignored the National Reading Panel report and had little awareness of the science of reading explicated by it. BRI invited faculty to participate in Foundations of LETRS training in 2010 as another attempt to introduce the science of reading to pre-service programs.

Following the passage of Mississippi's Literacy Based Promotion Act (LBPA) in 2013, BRI replicated the educator preparation program study for all 15 public and private educator preparation programs in Mississippi. Although

Figure 2

Mississippi's Low-Income Student Improvement in Fourth Grade Reading: Comparison to Other States in 2003 and 2022



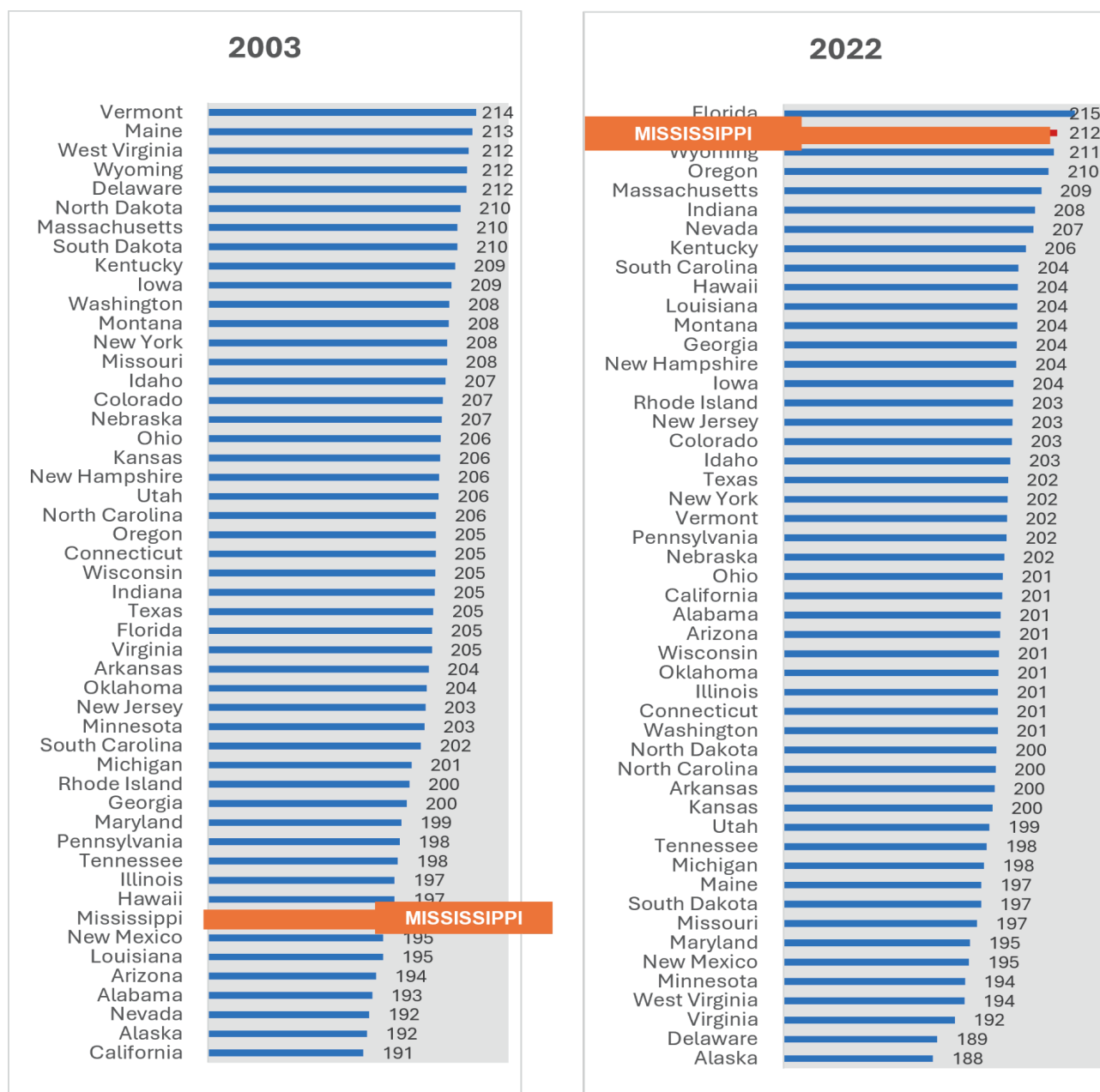
exposure to phonics had increased since 2003, balanced literacy was pervasive.

Finding insufficient improvement in programs, the second study led to the formation of the Governor's Task Force to Strengthen Teacher Preparation for Early Literacy Instruction. Working in partnership with the MDE, the University of Mississippi's Center for Excellence in Literacy Instruction, and the associate commissioner of higher education, BRI designed and executed a professional growth

model for higher education faculty patterned after the K-3 professional development and coaching model. By the close of the institute, more than 50 elementary education, special education, and early childhood education faculty had received training at no cost to the educator preparation programs. Seven of 10 Mississippi programs ranked A or above on the National Council on Teacher Quality's recent 2023 review (see <https://www.nctq.org/review/standardScores/Reading-Foundations>).

Figure 3

Mississippi's African-American Student Improvement in Fourth Grade Reading: Comparison to Other States in 2003 and 2022



Note: Data is missing for African American students in some states due to sample size issues.

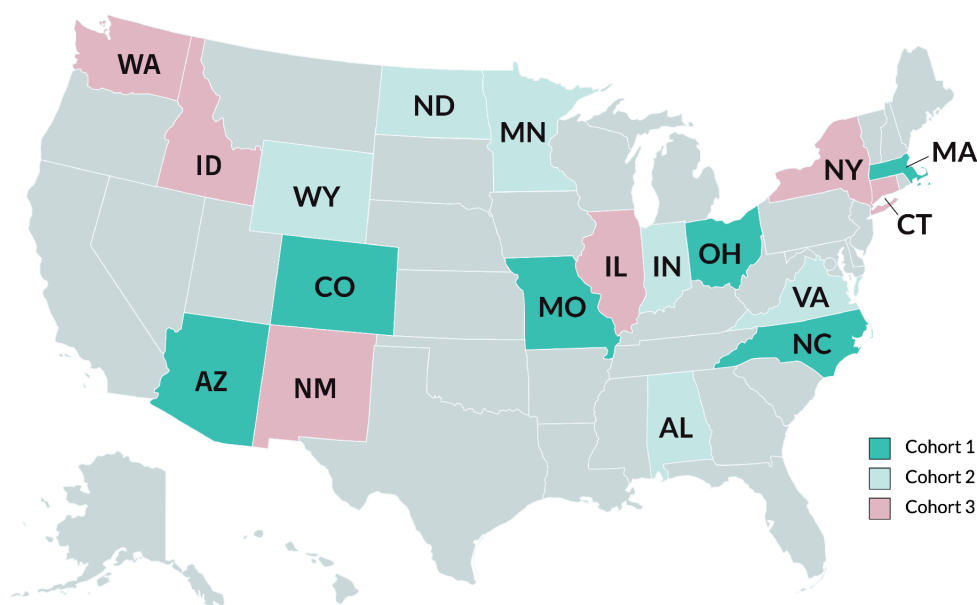
This faculty-only model, known as the Mississippi Momentum Partnership, was featured in American Public Media's *Hard Words* documentary (Hanford, 2018). Subsequently, more than a dozen states inquired about the initiative. This led to the creation of a multi-state initiative to bring state teams together to accelerate change in pre-service curriculum and delivery. Now in its third cohort, The Path Forward is stimulating state-level work in 18 states (see Figure 4).

4. Licensure as a Lever

Following the first BRI study of educator preparation programs, Barksdale approached the State Licensure Commission in 2005 to recommend a minimum requirement of six hours for early literacy instruction for elementary education majors. Working in collaboration with several pre-service faculty members, BRI outlined goals and objectives for Early Literacy 1 (print awareness, phonological awareness, phonics) and Early Literacy 2 (vocabulary, fluency, com-

Figure 4

The Path Forward: A Multistate Initiative to Accelerate Change in Teacher Preparation and Licensure for Early Literacy Instruction



prehension). Albeit a low bar initially, today the Mississippi Department of Education is leading the charge to standardize a 12-hour sequence to include expanded coursework in assessment, dyslexia, English language learners, and writing. Literacy coursework is now required of special education and early childhood majors, as well as school administrators seeking relicensure.

5. Legislative Intent Fostered by Policy, Advocacy, and a Dyslexic Governor

From 2010 to 2016, Mississippi ushered in policies that formed a comprehensive approach to early literacy that included the following:

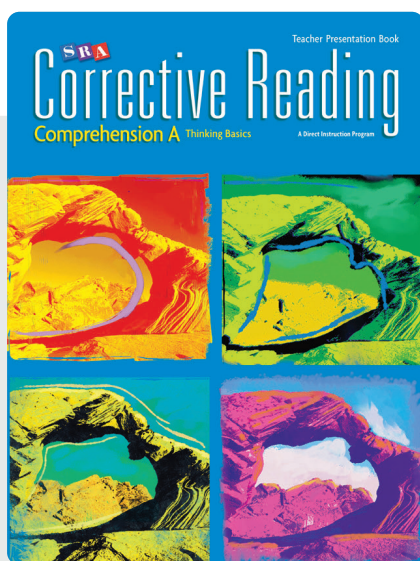
- **College and Career Readiness Standards.** Initially adopted in 2010 by the state board, intensive statewide training became necessary in order to align with the new standards. These were phased-in fully by the 2016 year as reflected in the first bump on NAEP.
- **Early Learning Collaboratives (ELC).** This pilot introduced state-funded collaborations between school districts and public or private early childhood centers to provide access to quality early childhood education and professional learning communities. The legislature has increased its commitment to the ELCs five times to a current level of \$24 million. As of 2023, 25% of Mississippi's 4-year-olds are now served.
- **Literacy-Based Promotion Act (LBPA, 2013).** Patterned after the Florida literacy law and prompted by Governor Phil Bryant's personal struggle with dyslexia and a desire to eliminate "social promotion," the LBPA propelled statewide change by implementing universal professional development for K-3 teachers and administrators in the science of reading, dispatching statewide literacy coaches, and requiring a suite of assessments, including universal screeners and the Mississippi Kindergarten-Readiness Assessment (MKAS). At the governor's request, BRI loaned two senior staff to the MDE to assist in implementation based on the Barksdale model. Since 2014, the legislature has appropriated \$15 million a year to MDE to carry out this work.
- **Overhaul of the Mississippi State Test to Align With NAEP.** In 2015, coinciding with the full implementation of the LBPA, Mississippi overhauled its state test (Mississippi Assessment of Academic Progress or MAAP) to align with NAEP. This was a significant move to enable a more realistic projection of actual performance on the national assessment.
- **Foundations of Reading Assessment (2016).** The LBPA (2013) established a state reading panel that later recommended a literacy instruction assessment of all



Small Steps to Lifelong Success

Accelerate Your Students One Small, Powerful Step at a Time with DI

Rooted in consistent, ongoing review and incremental learning, Direct Instruction (DI) ensures that every student—no matter their background or abilities—has a clear path toward mastery. With over 60 years of proven success, our DI programs are ready to transform your students into confident and highly skilled learners.



Make a Direct Impact with *Corrective Reading*

Built on the DI methodology, *Corrective Reading* provides intensive, accelerated reading intervention for Grades 3–12. These tightly sequenced, carefully planned lessons give students the structure and practice they need to grow into skilled, fluent readers.

Learn more by visiting:
mheducation.com/DIReadingLeague



pre-service candidates as a requirement for licensure.

6. State Education Agency Leadership Critical for Effective Implementation: Focus on Prevention, not Retention

Dr. Kymyona Burk, who was familiar with and saw merit in the Barksdale model, was tasked with early implementation of the law and, subsequently, was promoted to serve as the first state literacy director. She proved to be exceptional at policy implementation, recruiting and overseeing the professional development of 75 literacy coaches, and establishing regional literacy training. Dr. Carey Wright was confirmed as state superintendent the following spring and put in motion a reorganization of the department, which included creating a first ever Office of Early Childhood. Together, these two capable leaders emphasized prevention over retention and focused on changing teacher practice. Operating a top-down, statewide approach to implementation determined when and how professional development would be executed. This resulted in a more consistent and efficient rollout. This blanketing effect statewide proved integral to gaining traction quickly. Reading practices changed; reading achievement followed.

Dr. Burk was later recruited by ExcelinEd to serve as their senior policy fellow for early literacy to support states in implementing a comprehensive approach to K-3 reading. She has built a national literacy network of state education leaders. Dr. Wright retired in 2022 to her home state of Maryland, where she was promptly recruited to serve as interim state superintendent there (see <https://www.baltimoresun.com/2023/10/12/3-things-to-know-about-carey-wright-marylands-interim-state-superintendent-of-schools/>).

Based on earlier research, retention has been ill-advised as a method for remediating deficit skills. One reason for this may be that retention has typically involved repeating a grade with no purposeful change to improve reading instruction. In Mississippi's case, the law prescribed purposeful interventions for students retained in third grade. A recent study by Boston University's Wheelock Educational Policy Center compared the later ELA performance of third-grade students on either side of the passing score. Students who barely missed passing and were retained achieved substantially higher ELA test scores in sixth grade than their counterparts who had achieved a barely passing score (see <https://wheelockpolicycenter.org/high-quality-education/ms-read-by-grade-three/>).

7. Universal Professional Development: Putting a Pause on Local Control

Although local control is a highly valued feature of public education in America, to gain traction on an initiative as bold as lifting a state off the bottom in literacy required a universal application of new procedures. With strong leadership at the helm of MDE and based on BRI's recommendation to select a single provider, LETRS was selected (through a bidding process) for training more than 15,000 teachers and administrators in an 18-month period using a hybrid format (both in-person and virtual sessions). Once a critical mass of K-3 classrooms was benefiting from embedded coaching and rowing in the same direction, reading improvement took hold. While some resisted initially, buy-in among professionals followed as they were required to adopt practices that proved effective. These effective practices—aided by coaching support—yielded results and became self-sustaining.

Had Mississippi waited for each district to select a vendor and determine a timeframe for professional development, it is unlikely that the blanketing effect could have occurred that created statewide movement. Professional development continues annually. Through a subsequent bidding process, MDE switched to AIM Institute's Pathways to Proficient Reading and Literacy Leadership, beginning in 2021.

8. Priority Schools and Statewide Instructional Coaching

Initially, schools were prioritized for coaching support based on historically low performance on the state test. Schools with concentrations of low-income families and African American students received the earliest and longest support. MDE established a competent bench of coaches that, over time, has created a fairly seamless system of support statewide. Newly trained school-based coaches have now been identified in many schools and are helping to sustain change. Mississippi's 2022 post-pandemic NAEP average—one point higher

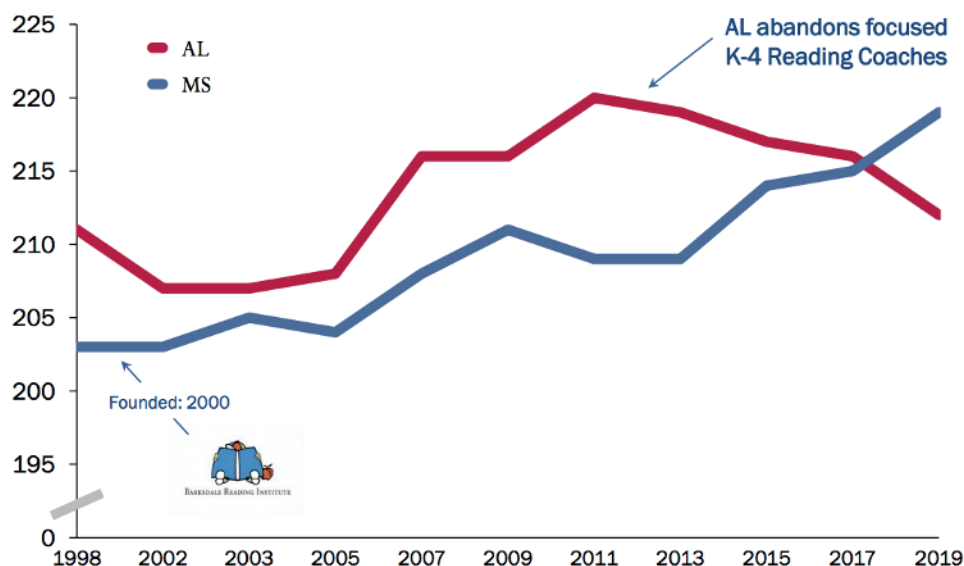
Although local control is a highly valued feature of public education in America, to gain traction on an initiative as bold as lifting a state off the bottom in literacy required a universal application of new procedures.

Figure 5

Comparison of Mississippi and Alabama 4th Grade Reading Scores: The Impact of Instructional Coaching

Learning from Alabama's Experience

MS v Alabama 4th Grade Reading Score – 1992 to 2019
Average Scale Score



The Barksdale Reading Institute

Source: nationsreportcard.gov

than the national average—is a testament to the strong foundation now in place.

Barksdale introduced the coaching model and ReadWell to Mississippi back in 2002 after visiting Alabama Reading Initiative schools. Although many factors contributed to its rise in reading scores, the state comparisons at the 2013 juncture suggest the critical importance of instructional coaching (see Figure 5).

9. Curriculum

While ensuring that practitioners are well-trained in evidence-based practices, high quality curriculum provides essential support and cohesion to instruction. MDE has always refrained from endorsing specific programs (a role that Barksdale was able to fill, as an independent agent). The department has in place a process for vetting materials for creating a “state adoption” list to ensure high quality and for reimbursement purposes. The following are important factors that affected Mississippi’s adoption of new curricula:

- Early Learning Collaboratives supported the adoption of evidence-based curricula to align with early learning standards. The Mississippi Beginnings curriculum (see <https://www.mdek12.org/EC/Mississippi-Beginnings-Curriculum>), adapted from Massachusetts pre-k curriculum, was introduced in 2022 for use statewide.
- The state literacy coaches play an important role in guiding districts to examine curricula for evidence-based practices. As a result, schools are more inclined to purge themselves of the popular but unreliable programs that have been entrenched for decades. Coaches also play a helpful role in minimizing the layering of programs that create conflicting sequencing of foundational skills. Fortunately, many more reliable options are on the market than twenty years ago.
- MDE authorizes an approved list of K-3 reading curricula, as well as a list of evi-

dence-based academic interventions for use in PreK-12.

- Regrettably, when BRI moved out of direct services, schools were quick to abandon ReadWell and other elements of the model, resorting to basal textbooks that promoted balanced literacy. For this reason, the staying power of *legislated accountability and funded coaching* are critical components of Mississippi's plan for sustained growth.

10. Parent Notification and Engagement

MDE leadership designed and initiated several important features beyond the Barksdale model that augment parent engagement. These include effective communication procedures for notifying parents (as required by the law) and plenty of home support, including Parent Read-at-Home Plans and regional parent nights to respond to questions and concerns. Particularly important are summer reading camps through grants to school districts. These are not mandatory for students who are at risk of failure, but this complements a third opportunity to take the third-grade assessment.

11. Assessments

Assessments are an important piece of this puzzle on many fronts. Following are a few assessments that have played key roles in Mississippi's achievement:

- **State Assessment.** The alignment of the Mississippi Assessment of Academic Progress (MAAP) to the NAEP was a significant contributor to instructional rigor and reading improvement.
- **Universal Screeners.** One of the functions of the State Reading Panel (see <https://law.justia.com/codes/mississippi/2014/title-37/chapter-177/section-37-177-5/>) was to review and recommend universal screeners for K-3. With the M-KAS in place, Mississippi now has statewide data for K-2 and beyond. These are reviewed periodically.

- **Diagnostic Assessments.** Drawing on the Barksdale model, literacy coaches provide training for informal diagnostic assessments to identify the lowest skill deficits (e.g., decoding surveys, spelling assessments, etc.).

12. Media, a Partner in Fueling Change

Many rightfully credit Emily Hanford's American Public Media exposé on reading instruction in U.S. public schools for uncovering a national crisis and galvanizing a national conversation that's creating a sense of urgency. Mississippi has had its fair share of this coverage—both celebratory and skeptical. While the state has a long way to go to ensure that every child has a skilled teacher of reading, it is fair to say that when implemented well, the vast majority of our children can become strong readers. It has been demonstrated in the face of poverty and racism. There are no more excuses.

Postscript: The Barksdale Reading Institute ceased operations in June of 2023. Since that time two significant legacy projects have been launched: the Mississippi Reading Clinic to apply lessons learned to 4th-8th grade reading and ReadingUniverse.org, a free web-based service for pre-K through 6th grade teachers of reading and writing. ■

References

- Hanford, E. (Host). (2018). *Hard words: Why American kids aren't being taught to read* [Audio podcast]. APM Reports.
- Literacy-Based Promotion Act of 2013: Senate Bill 2347. <http://www.mde.k12.ms.us/ESE/literacy>
- National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. (2000). *Report of the National Reading Panel. Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction: Reports of the sub-groups* (NIH Publication No. 00-4754). U.S. Government Printing Office.
- U.S. Department of Education (2022). Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), Reading Assessment.



Kelly Butler

Kelly Butler is senior advisor to ReadingUniverse.org, a large-scale legacy project of the Barksdale Reading Institute (BRI), where she served as chief executive officer. The institute contributed significantly to Mississippi's rise in reading scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP 2019, NAEP 2022). During her tenure at BRI, Butler authored three statewide studies on teacher preparation for early literacy instruction, which propelled The Path Forward, a multi-state initiative focused on preparation and licensure. Reading Universe is housed at WETA, PBS's flagship station in Washington, D.C., amidst a suite of award-winning literacy websites.