



# COMPREHENSIVE EARLY LITERACY POLICY

## *Fundamental Principles* *ExcelinEd Policy Toolkit - 2024*

### SUMMARY

A Comprehensive early literacy policy establishes support and intensive reading interventions for K–3 students to ensure they read on grade level by the end of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. The policy also requires 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students to demonstrate sufficient reading skills for promotion to 4<sup>th</sup> grade. For students severely below grade level and who do not qualify for a good cause exemption, retention provides struggling readers the additional time and intensive interventions they need to catch up with their peers.

### COMPREHENSIVE Early Literacy POLICY FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES

#### SUPPORTS FOR TEACHERS

- **Statewide science of reading training** beginning with K–4 teachers and elementary school administrators
- Ongoing, job-embedded science of reading training and **support for teachers via literacy coaches**
- **Preparation for teacher candidates** to have the knowledge and skills to teach all kids to read through educator preparation program coursework aligned to the science of reading
- **Teacher licensure test aligned to the science of reading** for initial certification
- **Funding** and reprioritization of existing local, state and federal funds for early literacy policy implementation

#### ASSESSMENT AND PARENT NOTIFICATION

- **Early literacy screening** of all K–3 students administered three times per year and progress monitoring as needed
- **Screening for characteristics of dyslexia** administered to all students at the end of Kindergarten and the beginning of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grades
- **Parent notification** when a reading deficiency is identified and continued parent engagement with each progress report

#### INSTRUCTION AND INTERVENTION

- **District adoption of high-quality instructional materials** grounded in scientifically based reading research and aligned to state standards
- **Elimination of three-cueing**, a flawed literacy instructional practice that teaches students to read based on meaning, structure and syntax, and visual cues, which may also be known as “MSV,” in elementary classrooms and educator preparation program coursework and materials
- **Individual reading plans** for K–3 students identified with a reading deficiency and 4<sup>th</sup> grade students promoted for good cause
- **Regular progress monitoring** of reading development and tailored instruction using proven strategies for closing opportunity gaps according to student need
- **Evidence-based interventions** for struggling students and supports for special populations (i.e., ELs, special education, students with characteristics of dyslexia, etc.) during school and before/after school
- **Summer reading camps or approved innovative summer reading programs** provided to all rising 1<sup>st</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> grade students struggling in reading or potentially facing retention
- **Parent read-at-home plan** for families of students identified with a reading deficiency which includes strategies that target students’ needs based on data and are aligned to the science of reading



## RETENTION AND INTERVENTION

- **Initial determinant for retention** at 3<sup>rd</sup> grade based on state assessment
- **Multiple options for promotion** to ensure one test on one day is NOT the sole determining factor for promotion to 4<sup>th</sup> grade (state test, alternative test, portfolio)
- **Good cause exemptions** for students meeting established criteria

## DETAILED FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES

### SUPPORTS FOR TEACHERS

**Provide statewide science of reading training beginning with K–4 teachers and elementary school administrators to ensure all teachers have the knowledge and skills to teach all students to read, including students with learning differences such as dyslexia.**

It is critical that all teachers are equipped with the knowledge and skills they need to effectively teach all students to read, including students with learning differences. States, schools and districts must establish the science of reading as the common language for literacy instruction and provide training to teachers to build their capacity to teach the foundational skills needed for students to become skilled readers and writers.

**Support teachers with ongoing, job embedded science of reading training, feedback, and best practices provided by literacy coaches.**

Literacy coaches are an important support mechanism for teachers in the classroom. School-based literacy coaches work closely with teachers to improve classroom practice and, ultimately, student reading achievement school-wide. As site-based personnel, literacy coaches: facilitate teacher training on evidence-based reading instruction and data-based decision making; demonstrate lessons; co-teach and/or observe teaching and provide immediate feedback. Literacy coaches serve as a stable resource for professional development to build master teachers of reading schoolwide and improve student reading achievement.

**Ensure educator preparation programs are preparing teacher candidates to exit the program with the knowledge and skills to teach all students to read.**

Educator preparation programs must: (1) provide in-depth coursework on current state standards and evidence-based reading instruction; (2) eliminate coursework and course materials that include three-cueing instructional strategies for teaching reading (3) give teacher candidates opportunities to apply such instruction in real classrooms with real students; and (4) prepare teacher candidates to administer reading assessments and interpret data to identify students with reading difficulties.

**Require the teacher licensure test to be aligned to the science of reading.**

To obtain an initial teacher's license for elementary education, teacher candidates should demonstrate their knowledge of reading assessments, curriculum and instructional best practices through a rigorous certification exam.

**Reprioritize existing local, state and federal funds to support policy implementation. If needed, provide new funding to effectively implement the policy.**

The key to the financial viability of a comprehensive early literacy policy is making better use of existing local, state and federal funds. If needed, provide new funding to effectively implement the policy. The primary focus in Kindergarten through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade is teaching kids how to read and building their knowledge. States should, therefore, look for ways to reprioritize existing local, state and federal funds to support reading instruction and intervention



statewide. During the primary grades is the most timely opportunity to ensure each student is a successful reader. After that, it becomes increasingly challenging for students to catch up to their peers. Students who cannot read by the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school, and high school dropouts are not eligible for 90 percent of the jobs in the economy. Additionally, dropouts make up nearly half of all heads-of-households on welfare. Therefore, any cost incurred with an early literacy policy is an investment in child literacy and, ultimately, the economy.

## State Examples

### Florida

When Florida passed a comprehensive K–3 reading policy in 2002, the Governor, the legislature, the State Board of Education and the Commissioner of Education directed the Department of Education to conduct a financial audit. The Department identified federal funds as well as state money that could be repurposed toward early literacy. The federal funds included: Title I funds for at-risk students, Title II funds for professional development, Title III funds for immigrant populations and IDEA funds for students with special needs. Below are examples of some of the ways Florida reprioritized existing funds to effectively support implementation in the first year of the policy.

#### REPRIORITIZED FEDERAL MONEY (PRIMARILY FROM THE STATE SET-ASIDE FOR ADMINISTRATION):

- \$1.6 million in existing federal discretionary funding to start the Florida Center for Reading Research (one-time cost)
- \$2 million in existing federal discretionary funding to create an online reading professional development course
- \$15,000 existing federal dollars for parent involvement including the development and distribution of summer reading kits for parents

The Florida Department was also asked to determine how every division in the Department could support the new priority of early literacy.

#### REPRIORITIZED STATE MONEY:

- \$2 million in continued state funding from the Assessment division for K–3 reading diagnostic tests
- \$36 million in existing state professional development funds (reading professional development had to be the first priority)
- \$41 million in existing state funds from the Supplemental Academic Instruction category reallocated by the legislature to summer reading camps

The second year of policy implementation, Florida was awarded the federal Reading First grant.

- \$45 million per year for 6 years - 5% supported state-level implementation support: assessment system, professional development, Regional Coordinators, FCRR (nationally recognized research center); 95% granted to districts: reading coaches, scientifically-based reading instruction and intervention

### Mississippi

Year 1 – \$9.5 million; Years 2-10 – \$15 million/year

- Procured statewide literacy training - Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS) - for Early Childhood, K–3 Teachers, K-8 SPED Teachers & Elementary Principals; the state currently provides training through AIM Pathways
- Provided regional literacy trainings (Pre-K–12 teachers, administrators, support staff, etc.)
- Deployed literacy coaches to support teachers in lowest performing schools
- Supplied literacy resources to K–3 teachers and parents
- Awarded \$3.8 million in literacy grants to 34 schools to improve literacy instruction
- Launched statewide literacy campaign: Strong Readers=Strong Leaders



## ASSESSMENT AND PARENT NOTIFICATION

### **Administer an early literacy screener in grades K–3 three times per year to identify students with potential reading difficulties.**

Early literacy screenings help to identify students that may have a reading deficiency. A screening assessment is a “first alert” that a student may need extra help to make adequate progress in reading during the year. It also helps teachers tailor instruction to meet individual student needs. The screening should occur as soon as school begins to ensure students receive the instruction and interventions they need immediately. Universal early literacy screeners should be administered three times per year with progress monitoring along the way for all K–3 students.

### **Screen all students in grades K–2 for the characteristics of dyslexia at the end of Kindergarten and the beginning of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grades.**

Screening for characteristics of dyslexia should be administered at the end of Kindergarten and the beginning of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grades for all students. *Note: A comprehensive dyslexia evaluation must be performed by a licensed professional to receive a diagnosis of dyslexia.*

### **Notify parents or families of any student identified with a reading difficulty in K–3.**

Involving parents from the beginning is critical to student success. Parents should be notified within 15 days if their child has been identified with a reading deficiency and be included in the instructional planning to remediate the reading deficiency. Parents should also be provided with support on how to help their child with literacy skills at home. Continue to engage parents by communicating the student’s progress with each progress report.

## INSTRUCTION AND INTERVENTION

### **Adopt high-quality instructional materials grounded in scientifically based reading research and aligned to state standards.**

The materials or core curricula that districts choose for reading instruction greatly impact student learning and teacher practice. High-quality instructional materials (HQIM) should be aligned to the science of reading and to the respective state’s standards. Investing in and adopting HQIM gives teachers access to quality content and quality assignments, significantly reducing the need for teachers to search for lower quality, and sometimes disconnected, assignments online (Opfer et al., 2016). The adoption must be accompanied by professional development that allows teachers to explore the materials, learn about the shifts in practice and increase their knowledge of high-leverage best practices for using HQIM.

### **Eliminate three-cueing from all curricula and instructional materials.**

Three-cueing is a flawed literacy instructional practice that teaches students to read based on meaning, structure and syntax, and visual cues, which may also be known as “MSV.” This instructional model should be eliminated from curricula and instruction because it encourages students to guess, not sound out, words they do not know based on pictures or what they think might make sense given the context of the sentence.

### **Develop individual reading plans with the parent, prescribing research-based reading interventions aimed at addressing the reading deficit.**

Individual reading plans are created, in collaboration with the parent, for any student identified with a reading deficiency. The plan includes the intervention services the student will receive above and beyond regular reading instruction. It should also include strategies for parents to use at home with their child. This provides a tangible document that can and should be adjusted as the student makes progress.



### **Monitor student progress more frequently for K–3 students identified as having a reading difficulty.**

Progress monitoring helps teachers track student progress in reading and adjust instruction to meet student needs in a timely manner. Students identified with a reading deficiency should be monitored more regularly to ensure interventions are working and the student is progressing at an accelerated rate to catch up with their peers. Monitoring the progress of students can take many forms and can be embedded in classroom instruction. If a student is not making progress, then the teacher adjusts instruction based on the data collected.

### **Provide interventions during school and before/after school for students struggling in reading.**

Research conducted by the National Academy Press and the Office of Educational Research and Improvement points to the importance of instructional time with a highly effective teacher. Learning is most likely to “stick” when students work with reading material through a mixture of different learning environments and media. These interactions require additional instructional time, which schools must find ways to create. Providing interventions before/after school gives struggling readers the time they need with targeted instruction to catch up with their peers.

### **Provide summer reading camps to all K–3 students struggling in reading or potentially facing retention.**

Research shows that while academic gaps are relatively constant during the school year, they widen dramatically during the summer. Every summer low-income children lose one to three months of reading skills and two months of math skills while higher income peers make slight gains. The cumulative, disproportionate impact of these losses can leave lower income children more than two years behind by fifth grade. Reading skills that are lost during the summer slows progress toward reading proficiency by the end of 3rd grade.

Summer learning programs that produce the greatest gains for children struggling with reading skills have the following attributes: regular student attendance; individualized instruction; smaller class sizes; parent involvement; highly effective instructors; alignment of school year and summer curricula; and tracking of effectiveness. Summer reading can increase: 1) a student’s reading performance, 2) opportunities for family engagement and 3) a student’s overall motivation to read.

### **Provide parent read-at-home plans for families of struggling students and suggested programs or vetted online resources are provided to parents to support their child at home.**

At-home reading strategies help families support their child’s literacy skill development. These strategies and resources could include a “Read-at-Home” plan outlined in a parental contract, individual reading plan, participation in parent training workshops, and/or regular parent-guided home reading activities. These home reading strategies should be provided once a student is identified with a reading difficulty and/or is at risk of being retained in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade.

## **RETENTION AND INTERVENTION**

### **Retain students unable to demonstrate sufficient reading skills for promotion to 4<sup>th</sup> grade and provide more intensive interventions and a highly effective teacher.**

Retention provides struggling readers the additional time and intensive interventions they need to catch up with their peers. Any student who is unable to demonstrate sufficient reading skills on the test-based options provided – and does not meet a good cause exemption as described below – is retained. These students are severely below grade level (scoring at the lowest achievement level on the statewide assessment) and would greatly benefit from an additional year of more intensive interventions with a highly effective teacher.



Students who are retained in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade need more time with more intensive interventions to catch up with their peers. More intensive interventions should be provided by a highly effective teacher. Such interventions include more dedicated time for daily reading intervention, before and after school tutoring, summer reading camps, more frequent progress monitoring, a reading mentor, and a parent read at home plan. Together, a combination of these interventions can help every student become a successful lifelong reader. It is the last intervention at the end of the K–3 intervention pipeline to ensure students are on the path to learn, graduate, and succeed.

Here are key findings from two recent research studies on Florida’s K–3 Reading policy:

1. **Key Findings from Kirsten Slungaard Mumma and Marcus A. Winters, [The Effect of Retention Under Mississippi’s Test-Based Promotion Policy, 2023](#)**
  - For students who were in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade in 2014–15, being retained under Mississippi’s policy led to substantially higher ELA scores in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade.
  - By 6<sup>th</sup> grade, **students who were retained had substantial and sustained literacy gains in their ELA scores** compared to their peers who were promoted to 4<sup>th</sup> grade.
  - Literacy **gains were especially significant among African American and Hispanic students** in the cohort.
  - Retention under the policy had **no significant impact on other outcomes** in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, including math scores, absences, and special education identification.
2. **Key Findings from Marcus A. Winters, [The Costs and Benefits of Test-Based Promotion, 2018](#)**
  - The threat of retention led to statistically significant and substantial increases in student math and reading performance within the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, prior to the retention decision.
  - On average, treatment under the policy led to significant and substantial gains in 8<sup>th</sup> grade math and reading test scores and increased the probability that students earn a regular diploma.
  - The cost of test-based promotion for both taxpayers and treated students is substantially less than suggested in prior research.
  - For treated students, the expected later increase in earnings due to the policy is greater than the lost earnings due to foregone time in the labor market.
  - The statewide net increase in the expected present value of lifetime earnings associated with the policy far exceeds its costs to taxpayers.

**Allow multiple opportunities for 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students to demonstrate the reading skills required for promotion to 4<sup>th</sup> grade, so one test on one day is not the sole determining factor.**

To ensure one test on one day is not the sole determining factor for promotion, 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students should be provided with multiple opportunities to demonstrate sufficient reading skills for promotion to 4<sup>th</sup> grade. The initial determining factor for promotion should be performance on the statewide reading assessment, but other objective assessment options should be provided. Some examples include the statewide reading assessment, an alternative standardized reading assessment, or a teacher created test-based student portfolio. The portfolio option provides an alternative way to measure student reading performance compared to a typical testing environment. It is administered throughout the school year, untimed, and given like a regular classroom assessment.

**Allow good cause exemptions to retention that recognize the special needs of some students with disabilities, English Language Learners, and students who were previously retained.**

Comprehensive early literacy policies should expect all students to read on grade level by the end of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, including students with disabilities and English Language Learners. When these students are part of the accountability system, educators’ expectations for these students are more likely to increase. In such a system, educators realize that students with disabilities and English Language Learners count and that they can be held to and achieve high standards. Being in special education or an English Language Learner program does not mean that a student cannot learn and reach grade-level standards in reading. In fact, the majority of students with disabilities and English Language Learners should be able to meet those standards if provided with effective instruction and specialized support. However, there should be good cause exemptions that recognize the special needs of some students with disabilities, English Language Learners, and students who were previously retained:



- Students with Disabilities whose Individual Education Programs (IEP) indicate that participation in the statewide assessment program is not appropriate, consistent with state law.
- Students with Disabilities who participate in the statewide reading assessment and who have an IEP or a Section 504 plan that reflects that the student has received intensive intervention for more than 2 years but still demonstrates a deficiency in reading and was previously retained in Kindergarten, 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, or 3<sup>rd</sup> grades.
- Students identified as English Language Learners who have had less than 2 years of instruction in an English Language Learner program.
- Students who have received intensive intervention for two or more years but still demonstrate a reading deficiency and who were previously retained in Kindergarten, 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, or 3<sup>rd</sup> grades for a total of 2 years. No student should be retained twice in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade.

A student who is promoted to 4<sup>th</sup> grade with a good cause exemption shall be provided intensive reading intervention that includes specific reading strategies to meet the student's individual needs. The school district should assist schools and teachers with the implementation of reading strategies that research has shown to be successful in improving reading among students with reading difficulties. Intensive reading intervention should continue until the deficiency is remedied as determined by assessment data.