Essential Practices in Early Literacy

Reimagining how leaders lay the foundation for developing strong readers
We know how to teach children to read.

The education field has never known more about the way children learn to read, or about the importance of early education to a literate life, than we do today.

We know that by the end of 1st grade, more than 95% of all children can be taught to read.¹ We know that intervention research has discovered the conditions that need to be in place to enable every child to acquire adequate word-level reading skills in early elementary school.² We know that data-driven, systematic foundational skills instruction is a key component in the work of moving all students towards reading proficiency.

Despite how much we know, though, only a fraction of schools nationally apply the science of reading* to their early literacy instructional program. In 2019, the NAEP reported that only 35% of 4th grade students scored at or above Proficient on its reading assessment; only 18% of Black students, 23% of Hispanic students, and 10% of multilingual learners scored at or above Proficient—and that was before a pandemic that caused nearly two years of interrupted schooling.³

The pandemic created a new sense of urgency for restructuring early literacy programs based on what research shows works. Compared to pre-pandemic data, 50% more students are entering 1st grade well below grade level and are at risk for not meeting reading proficiency benchmarks;⁴ disaggregated data shows disproportionately adverse outcomes for Black and Latinx students.⁵

Now more than ever, we need to ground ourselves in what we know works for all students and do it intentionally and with fidelity across school systems if we want to improve literacy and long-term outcomes of our young learners.

*Instruction Partners defines the science of reading as a systematic and explicit foundational skills program as well as content-rich knowledge building.
We are learning what works to accelerate early literacy growth.

In early 2020, we began our own investigation into the research and practice of foundational literacy education to identify the most critical elements of high-quality, effective early literacy instruction and systems.

First, we combed the research, devoting thought and attention to a thorough analysis of the structures and practices that need to be in place at the instructional and systems levels to be sure early literacy instruction moves students through the continuum of skills that they need to acquire to be proficient readers. We also looked at states and districts around the country that have studied and piloted intervention models that produce outsized student gains in early literacy. Then, we field-tested what we learned, identifying the key moves that need to happen to achieve results after a pandemic. Finally, we refined and codified our initial hypotheses and recommendations based on what we learned in the field.
The result: A set of five essential practices for building an effective early literacy system, along with resources for observing, coaching, and reflecting on the current state of K–2 literacy instruction.

The practices invite leaders and teachers to reimagine how they center early literacy instruction to accelerate students’ development of foundational reading skills, both in the short term by offering creative solutions to address COVID-related unfinished learning and in the long term by codifying the practices that help leaders build a system in which all students are reading proficiently by the time they enter 3rd grade.

- Rooted in a systematic and explicit foundational skills program as well as content-rich knowledge building
- Field tested in schools and systems across the country
- Responsive to learning challenges resulting from unprecedented disruptions in schooling
Teaching reading is rocket science. But it is also established science, with clear, specific, practical instructional strategies that all teachers should be taught and supported in using.

— Louisa Moats (2020, 9)
How to use the essential practices

We encourage leadership teams to review all five essential practices to determine which practices are already being implemented within their current early literacy system and which are not yet fully established. The best way to do this is to:

1. Read through the subcomponents of each essential practice to understand the elements of high-quality systems.
2. Use the self-evaluation tool to gauge the degree to which these elements are already in place.
3. Return to the essential practices to chart a roadmap for intensive action planning.
In 2022, we will release a playbook comprising practical tools and resources designed to support a school or school system in bringing each of the essential practices to life, including considerations for centering multilingual learners.

Our ultimate goal is to provide leaders with a practical, user-friendly tool strategically designed to help schools cross the finish line in building an effective early literacy system.

Leaders will be able to use the playbook to:

• Discover and choose the path that is most efficient based on their system or school context as well as key learnings from the Instruction Partners team
• Understand and strategically prepare for the journey and overcome obstacles along the path
• Reach every checkpoint and cross the finish line
Establish a vision for early literacy instruction that is anchored in both the science of reading* and the belief that all students can and will read independently and proficiently by the end of 2nd grade.

**Indicators**

- The school system has a written vision for early literacy that clearly communicates both a commitment to using the science of reading and the mindset that all students can be readers by the end of 2nd grade.
- All stakeholders have a clear understanding of the vision, including their individual role in working towards that vision, which is reflected in team communication, collaboration, and instructional decision making.

*Instruction Partners defines the science of reading as a systematic and explicit foundational skills program as well as content-rich knowledge building.*
Use standards-aligned and coherent curricular materials effectively to facilitate data-driven instruction anchored in the science of reading.

**Indicators**

- Tier 1 curricular materials are anchored in the science of reading and include both a systematic and explicit foundational skills program as well as content-rich reading materials that support knowledge building.
- Tier 1 curriculum aligns to the assessments and instructional resources used in the school(s) and across the system.
- Teachers seamlessly use curriculum-embedded assessments and curriculum-provided support materials to drive whole-group and small-group instruction and strategically move students towards reading proficiency.
- Tiered intervention programs are structured and systematic; they amplify and accelerate learning from Tier 1 materials.
Essential Practice #3

Data

Use quality data and assessment resources consistently, cohesively, and strategically to drive instructional decision making for all students.

Indicators

- The assessment system in place includes:
  - a universal screener that assesses all students’ proficiency towards grade-level benchmarks at least three times per year;
  - a diagnostic assessment that pinpoints the specific skills students have mastered and/or where they need further instruction and practice;
  - progress monitoring tools to determine how students are progressing against their individual goals and learning targets; and
  - formative assessments from the curriculum to assess if students are learning what is being taught.

- Established data cycles outline how data will be collected, analyzed, and used by teachers and the early literacy team. Data cycles include:
monitoring student progress against their individual goals using data from multiple sources, including universal screener, progress monitoring, and classroom formative data and teacher observation;

determining the effectiveness of instruction and/or interventions and making adjustments as needed to support student mastery; and

adjusting tier placement for students based on clear entry and exit criteria for intervention, with an emphasis on exiting students as flexibly and quickly as possible.

- Nationally-normed, predictive, grade-level benchmarks determine student growth targets and on-grade-level performance.

- Each student has explicit goals they are working towards, and those goals are transparent between teachers, students, and families.

- Student data is disaggregated by demographics to ensure the needs of priority groups* are centered when making all instructional decisions.

- Families and caregivers are well informed of their child’s progress to goals and play an active role in supporting their child in their journey towards reading proficiency.

*Instruction Partners has identified the following four priority groups: students of color, students in poverty, multilingual learners, and students with disabilities.
Essential Practice #4

**Team**

Build a well-trained and specialized early literacy team to facilitate a flexible and equitable early literacy program that systematically moves students towards reading proficiency.

**Indicators**

- Each school has an early literacy team in place. Members include (but are not limited to) district and school leaders, coaches, teachers, interventionists, and coordinators of English language learners and special populations, each of whom understands their role and responsibilities. Leaders at both the school and district levels are responsible for effective implementation.

- Early literacy team members are well trained and have strong content knowledge and a clear understanding of how to productively use data to move all students towards reading and writing proficiency.

- Members of the early literacy team evaluate and refine intervention implementation and resources through data analysis cycles and walkthroughs.

- The early literacy team uses data analysis of interventions in combination with Tier 1 data to plan for ongoing professional learning opportunities, coaching support, and supplemental materials needed for effective implementation.
• Team members from across the school and/or system strategically support small-group Tier 1 instruction and intervention to ensure students meet their goals.

• All adults supporting the early literacy program engage in ongoing professional learning, including training and coaching in the science of reading and the specific curricular resources being used.
Maximize and direct all available time to continuously improving the effectiveness of instruction and intervention, including ongoing adult professional learning.

**Indicators**

- School and system schedules provide no less than 120 minutes each day for students to engage in Tier 1 literacy instruction and receive necessary tiered interventions.
- The schedules of the early literacy team regularly allow them to conduct collaborative whole-group and small-group instruction walkthroughs, meet and analyze data, and reflect on intervention program effectiveness.
- All adults who support the early literacy program allocate time to receive weekly, ongoing professional learning.
- Teachers, coaches, and leaders reserve time to engage in data cycles.
Resources


5. Linda Jacobson, “One Year into Pandemic, Far Fewer Young Students are on Target to Learn How to Read, Tests Show,” February 24, 2021, https://www.the74million.org/one-year-into-pandemic-far-fewer-young-students-are-on-target-to-learn-how-to-read-tests-show/

6. In addition to the previously cited research, the following research resources informed our development of the essential practices:


Find more early literacy resources on our website: www.instructionpartners.org/early-literacy.

Special thanks to our partners at Haywood Elementary School for allowing us to capture photos of their amazing readers and teachers.