



Essential Practices in Early Literacy

Reimagining how leaders lay the foundation for developing strong readers

We can do more to help students learn to read.

In the U.S., English-language literacy is essential to achievement in every academic subject—and economic opportunities after graduation.¹ The good news is that the education field has never known more about the way that children learn to read or about the importance of early education to lifetime literacy than we do today.

We know that by the end of 1st grade, more than 95% of all children can be taught to read.² 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.³ We know that data-driven, systematic foundational skills instruction is a key component in the work of moving all students toward reading proficiency. We know that “teaching reading is....established science.”⁴

But despite how much we know, only a fraction of schools nationally apply the science of reading to their early literacy instructional programs.

The achievement data we’ve seen in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic has created a new sense of urgency for restructuring early literacy programs based on what research shows works.

Though there has been progress since the 2020–21 school year, fewer students in early elementary grades are on-track to access core early literacy instruction than before the pandemic (i.e., in 2021–22, just 47% of kindergartners, 48% of 1st graders, and 51% of 2nd graders were on track compared to 55%, 58%, and 59%, respectively, in 2019). Disaggregated data show disproportionately adverse outcomes for Black and Hispanic students.⁵ And, in 2022, the NAEP reported that only 33% of 4th grade students scored at or above Proficient on its reading assessment; only 17% of Black students, 21% of Hispanic students, and 10% of multilingual learners (MLs)* scored at or above Proficient.⁶

The U.S. Department of Education reported that, even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, MLs—who constitute the fastest-growing student population in the country⁷—were underperforming their monolingual English-speaking peers academically.⁸ Because instruction is often offered exclusively in English, it is nearly impossible for students who have not yet mastered English to keep up with instruction across subjects.

Now more than ever, we need to ground ourselves in what we know works for *all* students, especially students in priority groups, in order to positively influence the literacy and long-term outcomes of our young learners.

*Instruction Partners uses the term “multilingual learners” instead of “English learners” or “students learning English” to acknowledge students’ developing proficiency in a new language while honoring their skills and competencies in their primary language(s).



We are learning and sharing what works to accelerate early literacy growth.

In early 2020, Instruction Partners began an investigation into the research and practice of foundational literacy education to identify the most critical elements of high-quality, effective early literacy instruction, strategies, and structures.

First, we combed the research,⁹ devoting thought and attention to a thorough analysis of the practices and infrastructure that need to be in place to ensure that 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 tested intervention models that produce outsized student gains in early literacy.

We piloted our own model based on everything that we learned about the key moves that need to happen to achieve results after a pandemic. We heard from our partners that they needed more attention to the needs of multilingual learners within their early literacy programs. We amended our focus accordingly and added a lens toward implementing and building early literacy strategies and structures that are responsive to the unique needs of these students.

Finally, we refined and codified our initial hypotheses and recommendations based on what we learned from our shoulder-to-shoulder work with partners in schools.

The result: A set of five essential practices for building effective early literacy strategies and structures and a comprehensive playbook—complete with resources for observing, coaching, and reflecting on the current state of K–2 literacy instruction—to guide leaders through implementing those practices.

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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)



What are the essential practices?

The five essential practices in early literacy capture the systemic factors at the school and system levels that influence early literacy instruction in classrooms and illustrate what needs to be in place for students to reliably read proficiently by the time they leave the 2nd grade.*

These practices are rooted in research on the science of reading, but extend beyond the core tenets of this research in recognition of the fact that 1) the science of reading, in and of itself, isn't fully responsive to the unique needs of MLs¹⁰ and that 2) there are many structures and routines in schools and systems that influence how, when, and with what quality those tenets are implemented.

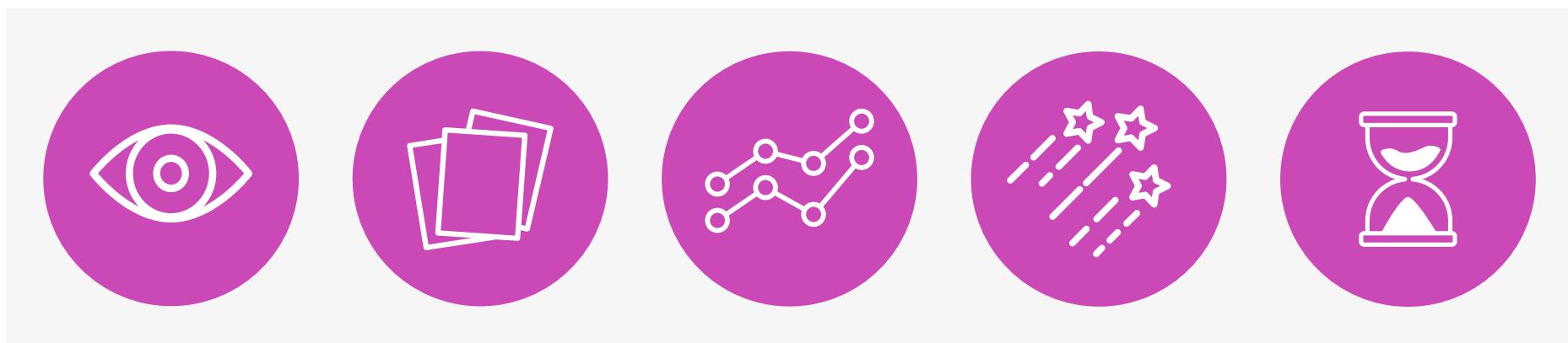
Each essential practice is broken into indicators that illustrate what effective implementation of the practice looks like in systems, schools, and classrooms. Since the initial release of the essential practices in November 2021, we have refined and reordered their corresponding indicators to best reflect what we learned over the course of another year of working in schools and to better respond to the unique needs of multilingual learners.

*Certain circumstances will impact this timeline—for example, primary language literacy, how recently the student was introduced to English, student's language proximity to English (i.e., how close the set of language sounds is between the languages, writing systems)—and might make the end of 2nd grade an inappropriate goal. These circumstances should be considered when building system and classroom practices (e.g., setting individual student goals for progress monitoring).¹¹

How to use the essential practices

The Early Literacy Playbook is the guide to bring the essential practices to life in a school or system. We encourage leadership teams to review all five essential practices to determine which are already being implemented in their school or 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 on the following pages to understand the elements of effective early literacy strategies and structures. Use the self-evaluation tool to gauge the degree to which these elements are already in place.
2. Access the Early Literacy Playbook, which consists of detailed action plans and resources that will help leaders and educators build each indicator from the ground up and/or bolster what they already have in place. Access the freely available playbook [here](#).
3. Review the playbook and begin working through it.





Essential Practice #1

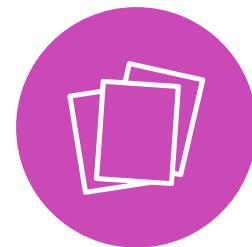
Vision

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:

- **EP1A:** The school/system has a written vision for early literacy that:
 - is anchored in science of reading research;
 - reflects a mindset that every student, especially those in priority groups,* can read proficiently by the end of 2nd grade; and
 - includes a focus on leveraging and building students' linguistic and cultural assets (e.g., primary languages, language dialects, language varieties).
- **EP1B:** All stakeholders have a clear understanding of the vision for early literacy, including their individual role in working toward that vision, which is consistently reflected in team communication, collaboration, and instructional decision making.

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



Essential Practice #2

Materials

Use standards-aligned and coherent curricular materials effectively to facilitate data-driven instruction anchored in the science of reading.

Indicators:

- **EP2A:** Tier 1 curricular materials are anchored in the science of reading and include a systematic and explicit foundational skills program as well as content-rich reading materials that support knowledge building.
- **EP2B:** The Tier 1 curriculum, assessments, and instructional resources in use are closely aligned.
- **EP2C:** When and if appropriate, additional culturally and/or linguistically relevant materials are used alongside curricular materials to support students in making personal connections.
- **EP2D:** Tiered intervention programs in use are structured and systematic; they amplify and accelerate learning from Tier 1 materials.
- **EP2E:** Curriculum-embedded assessments and materials are used seamlessly to design whole- and small-group learning experiences that move every student toward reading proficiency.



Essential Practice #3

Data

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

Indicators:

- **EP3A:** The assessment system in place includes:
 - a universal screener that assesses all students' proficiency on nationally-normed, grade-level benchmarks at least three times per year;
 - progress monitoring tools to determine how students are progressing toward their individual goals and student growth targets based on nationally-normed benchmarks;
 - a diagnostic assessment that pinpoints the specific skills that students have mastered and/or where they need further instruction and practice; and
 - formative assessments (e.g., from the curriculum, anecdotal records) to assess students' mastery of what is being taught.*

*It is important to consider that additional or alternative assessment data may be necessary to yield a holistic picture of students' knowledge and skills, particularly for students in priority groups (e.g., a test given in English may not capture the language skills of a Spanish-speaking student; providing them an assessment in Spanish may offer educators a more accurate picture of their skills and knowledge).

- **EP3B:** Assessment and evaluation honor multilingual learners' (MLs') primary languages and current English proficiency levels. There is a written policy to ensure that MLs are not held back in the curriculum sequence or small-group work based on primary language influence or current English proficiency level.
- **EP3C:** Each student has clear, individual learning goals and learning targets that teachers, students, and families/caregivers understand.
- **EP3D:** There is a clear and efficient data cycle process in place that supports leaders and teachers in collecting and analyzing student data as well as adjusting instruction based on what is and is not working. The process includes:
 - ensuring that all educators providing or supporting early literacy instruction are included (e.g., K–2 and language development teachers);
 - gathering collected data from multiple forms of assessment (e.g., universal screener, progress monitoring, curriculum assessment, teachers' observation notes about skills individual students have and have not yet mastered);
 - collaboratively analyzing data from each form of assessment alongside student goals to determine what is working and what may need to be refined to support students in moving toward skill 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.
- **EP3E:** Student data is disaggregated and analyzed by demographics; team members use this data to ensure that the needs of students in priority groups are centered when making instructional decisions.
- **EP3F:** Families and caregivers are kept up-to-date on their child's progress toward goals and play an active role in supporting their child's journey to becoming a skilled reader.



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:

- **EP4A:** Each school has an early literacy team, composed of (but not limited to) school and system leaders, coaches, teachers, interventionists, and coordinators of special populations (e.g., MLs). A subset of members serve as the early literacy leadership team, which is responsible for ensuring that early literacy initiatives are implemented effectively and continuously improving. All team members understand their roles and responsibilities.
- **EP4B:** Early literacy team members and all early literacy educators have the content knowledge and instructional skill set necessary to use data to move every student, especially those in priority groups, toward reading proficiency.
- **EP4C:** All early literacy team members and educators consistently engage in ongoing professional learning, including training and coaching in the science of reading, best practices for supporting specialized populations (e.g., MLs), the specific curricular resources in use, and relevant classroom observation tools (e.g., [Foundational Skills Classroom Observation Tool](#)).
- **EP4D:** Early literacy team members strategically and collaboratively support Tier 1 whole- and small-group instruction as well as interventions to ensure that students meet their goals.

- **EP4E:** Early literacy team members evaluate the implementation of early literacy strategies through analysis of a variety of data sources (e.g., student assessment, staff surveys) and classroom walkthroughs using an observation tool (e.g., **Foundational Skills Classroom Observation Tool**) to identify trends and areas of strength and opportunity.
- **EP4F:** The early literacy leadership team plans for and provides targeted support based on data collected.





Essential Practice #5

Time

Maximize and direct all available time to continuously improve the effectiveness of instruction and intervention, including ongoing adult professional learning.

Indicators:

- **EP5A:** School and system schedules allocate no less than 120 minutes a day for students to engage in Tier 1 literacy instruction that includes foundational skills, language comprehension, and differentiated small-group instruction.
- **EP5B:** School and system schedules provide the appropriate amount of time for language instruction educational program (LIEP) services such as bilingual education or English language development (ELD) programs and services. This may or may not be state or locally mandated.
- **EP5C:** Members of the early literacy leadership team have protected time to conduct regular, collaborative whole- and small-group classroom walkthroughs, meet and analyze data, and reflect on intervention program effectiveness.*
- **EP5D:** Members of the early literacy team have protected time to engage in weekly, ongoing professional learning.
- **EP5F:** Members of the early literacy team have protected time to engage in the data cycle process.

*The amount of time a school or system decides to protect will depend on local context (e.g., number of classrooms they need to observe).

Resources

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Ready to get started? Access the freely available playbook [here!](#)

If you're looking to talk more about how to implement early literacy strategies and structures in your school, [get in touch](#).

Have feedback on our early literacy resources? Let us know [here](#).

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